

Work Ethics and Employees' Job Performance

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In order to attain a desired level of job performance in any work setting, a number of factors are often considered. This paper discussed how work ethic affects workers job performance by evaluating how either strong work ethics (SWE) or weak work ethics (WWE) can contribute to encouraging or discouraging workers job performance. Although instances of excellent performance amidst unethical practices have been recorded however, a sustainable performance can only be achieved through strong work ethics. The extent to which employee encourages integrity, sense of responsibility, quality, self-discipline and sense of teamwork in work discharge determine either strong work ethics or weak work ethics contribute to job performance level. Literature review and theoretical ground point towards the need for workers' to promote ethical practice and discourage unethical acts which can undermine corporate image and excellent performance. This study proposes that strong work ethics results in excellent work performance.

INTRODUCTION

Purposeful actions in a proactive manner are required of contemporary organizations to achieve desired level of performance from workers with cognizance to the acceptable norms and best practices in the industry they belong too and country of operation. In the words of Altham (2002), one of such action known as ethicism is increasing, with work ethics as one of such actions that can bring about the desired performance level of employees job performance, irrespective of the sharp practices and unethical work practices of competitors in the business environment. However, there is perceived decline in work ethic (Tolbize, 2008), an evidence of this is well established in the integrity violations by many employees in our contemporary work organizations. Issues of fraud, theft, corruption, manipulation of information, misconduct, and the likes are well reported now (Huberts, Kaptein, Lasthuizen, 2007). Notable scholars are of the opinion that to remain market a leader or become industry champion, ethical behavior must be institutionalized (Victor and Cullen 1988; & Schminke, Arnaud and Kuenzi, 2007).

Performance is behaviour exhibited or something done by the employee (Campbell, 1990). Attempts at defining individual work performance revealed that it is associated with work behaviors that are germane to organizational goals which are within the individual job holder's control (Campbell, 1994; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2001; Koopmans, Bernards, Hildebrandt, Schaufeli, De Vet & Van Der Beek, 2011), Campbell (1994) admitted that work performance should be defined through behaviour of job incumbents as against the results and must be defined within the context of behaviours that are pertinent to the organizational goals. However, the drive to perform excellently well has made a lot of job incumbents to be solely interested in the results and not minding how it is achieved, 'unfair you will say' but the truth is that colleagues who are well known unethical practices are reaping the dividend without check. Those individuals and organizations that are not ready to follow this unethical ways often face the difficulty of meeting up with targets in a timely manner. Against this backdrop, lots of arguments have been raised on what sorts of work ethical behaviour is expected of employees in the world of work to keep to the expected job performance. Research evidences have shown that strong work ethics contribute to good job performance while poor or low performance result from weak or negligence of work ethics (Ntayi, 2005; Ghorpade, 2006; Mann, 2010; Rokhman, 2010; Meriac, 2012; Linz & Chu, 2012).

Marri, Sadozai, Zaman & Ramay (2012) opine that, work ethics facilitate employees' attitude towards hard work and their organization too. To guarantee employees job performance, such employee must have displayed a high sense of responsibility, integrity, discipline, quality, and sense of team work. Some argue that any of such conducts are limited just to the job description and responsibilities. Others argue, though, that they also have ethical responsibilities towards the organization by ensuring its continued survival. Therefore, this study discusses the effect of work ethics on workers job performance level. The study examined how work ethic affects workers performance and evaluated how either strong work ethics (SWE) or weak work ethics (WWE) can contribute to encouraging or discouraging workers job performance.

The specific issues are:

- i. What is the attitude of workers towards work ethics?
- ii. Can job incumbents uphold work ethics in the face of harsh operating business environment?
- iii. Does the organization promote ethical practices?
- iv. Does the organization appreciate workers with strong work ethics?
- v. Does the method of handling internal workplace issues recognize the challenges of sticking to work ethics?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of 'work' is central to this review. It is a universal phenomenon which varies in usage from formal activities to informal activities whether in the primitive to the contemporary sense. Such definitions have distinct work from other activities as play, recreation, or art (Ogunbameru, 2000). In this context, work is viewed as "a human activity directed to an object, such lecturing, producing soap," Thus, work involves transitive activity existing for the sake of its object which intend to meet needs of people. As Kuper & Kuper (1996) put it, 'any physical and or/mental activities which transform natural materials into a more useful form, improve human knowledge and understanding of the world, and /or provide or distribute goods to others'.

Work from these views intends to serve a number of functions and these functions are for some purposes. The most obvious is the economic function of producing goods and services and in return for this exercise the employee is paid wages for doing the job right. Dessler (1983) suggests that work performance is a measure of how well an employee meets the standards that are required on a specific job. Work performance is the quality and quantity of human output necessary to meet work goals agreed upon between employees and their managers Ivancevich and Matteson, 1996). To achieve the job allocated to a worker, it must have been evaluated as either good or bad if a standard of performance has been agreed upon between employees and their managers.

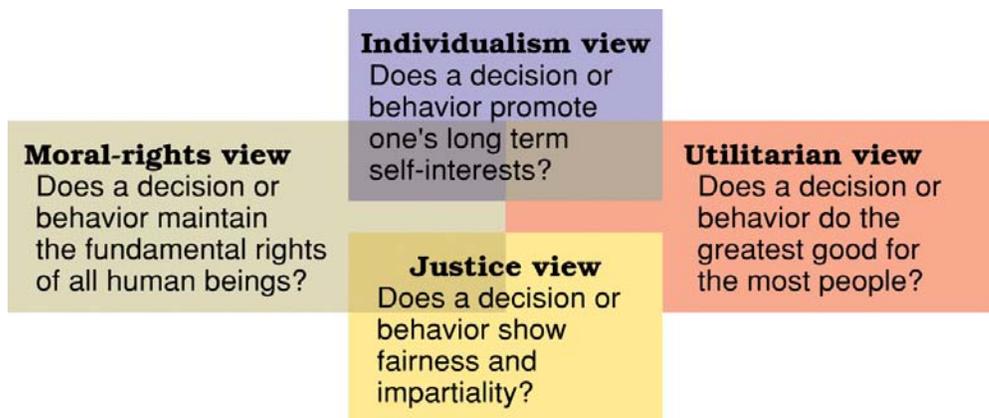
Ethics is derived from the Greek word "ethos" which means character or custom. According to Hubert *et al.* (2007), Ethics is the collection of values and norms, functioning as standards or yardstick for assessing the integrity of individual conduct. It defines what make behaviour to be right or wrong (Fajana, 2006). Ethical behaviour defines within a context or setting what is acceptable or not. In his earlier writings, Pojman (1990) offers four areas which ethic is usually conceptualized: Actions, the act (right, wrong, permissive), Consequences (good, bad, indifferent), Character (virtuous, vicious) and Motive (goodwill, evil will).

Thus, ethics is a field that involves the studies of human behaviour, in relations to what is expected of him/her by others (Malloy, 2003) and because we are interested in his/her work, it involves what is expected of him/her when performing his/her duties at work. Work ethics are the standards of behaviour that guide individual workers in their work and in relationship with fellow workers, customers and other economic agents (competitors, shareholders, suppliers, dealers, etc.). These ethics guide the thinking and decision making with respect to what is good and what is bad (Grace & Cohen 2005). The traditional work ethic stresses that, work is inherently good and by working hard one can overcome obstacles and succeed in life (Yoder & Staudohar, 1982). It is conceived as people's orientation to and expectation from work as informed by their convictions (Pojman, 1990; Norman, 1992). Fajana (2006) opine that, it consists of those principles and practices that are concerned with morals and good conducts in industrial life. Thus, work ethics represent what should or should not be done at work.

Historically, Ethic has a protestant origin but the historical roots of work ethics programs were originally implemented in the defense industry to help organizations comply with the increased regulation following a series of scandals. The whole idea present work as a religious and moral obligation, and is now widely used as a simplified popular version of the concept, especially in the context of explanations for employees' performance, organizational performance and productivity. In the United States, ethic was introduced and diffused by religious groups in the 1930s. The development of work ethic was aided by the country's vast natural resources and the belief in America as the land of opportunity, as well as wartime patriotism (Fajana, 2006). In Western Germany after the end of second world war, the need to survive the effect of war led to gospel of work ethics while in this part of the world, the situation is different, the quest to find the appropriate philosophical and development paths within a minute resulted into less ethical practices and high rate of fraudulent practices (Aina, 2000).

A number of divergent views have been put forward on what constitute ethical behaviours. Anstett & Guest (2007) presented four perspectives of ethical behaviour which are related to this discourse. This is represented figure 1 below:

**FIGURE 1
PERSPECTIVES OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR**



Source: Adapted from Anstett & Guest, (2007)

The utilitarian view considered how things are done. It observes that greatest good is often delivered to the greatest number of people. It tries to assess the moral implications of decisions in terms of their consequences. While it is believed that this view can promote worker's efficiency a factor that is sine qua non for excellent performance, it can result into ignoring the rights of some individuals in the larger society. On the contrary, the individualism view is based on the belief that one's primary commitment is to the advancement of long term self-interests. If self-interest is pursued from a long term view, the argument holds that lying and cheating for short term gain should not be tolerated because if one person does it, everyone will do it, and no one's long term interest will be served (Trivers, 1985; Tullberg, 1996; Grace & Cohen, 2005). The individualism view is supposed to promote honesty and integrity but in work places it may result into 'pecuniary ethics' described by observer as the tendency to 'push the law to its outer limits'.

The moral-right view established the need to respect and protect the fundamental rights of people. The right of people to life, liberty and fair treatment must not be trampled upon. However, this right can create a too formal work setting which many scholars have criticized on the ground that it hinders efficiency. And lastly, the justice view is based on the belief that ethical decisions treat people impartially and fairly according to guiding rules and standard. This approach evaluates the ethical aspects of any decision on the degree to which it is equitable for everyone affected. Justice practice could lead to an attitude of entitlement and reduces productivity.

Considering the above positions, a number of theoretical grounds can be explored to explain the relationship between work ethics and employee's job performance. The Labour process theory which was originally formulated by Karl Marx (translated in 1976) and expanded by Newton and Findlay (1996) argued for how management can move away from the belief in work too job holders' behavior and establish control mechanisms at their disposal. According to them, management is constantly seeking ways to improve the effectiveness of control mechanisms to achieve job performance. This in a way promote what work behavior will bring about desired level of job performance in the form of work ethics. Although the theory fall short in explaining what makes work ethics to be strong or weak. The agency theory clarifies this by asserting that for any organization to experience and enhance its workers performance, the workers activities must be well guided through work ethics. Otherwise known as principal agent theory indicates that principals (owners and managers) have to develop ways of monitoring and controlling the activities of their agents (workers). The theory envisaged certain problematic areas and demand proper clarification of work in terms of objectives and expectation and setting up of feedback mechanism to measure performance. This theory promotes how to ensure compliance of employees to job description, discipline, integrity, team work and quality.

Conceptual Framework

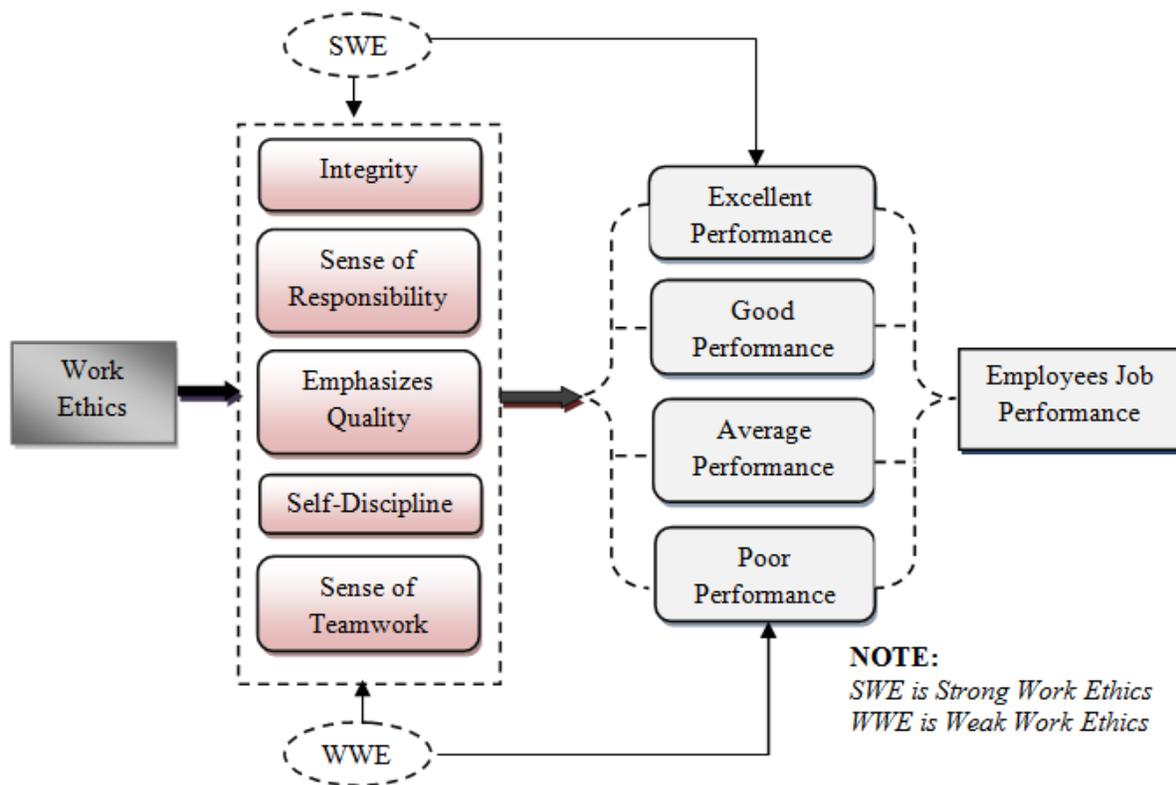
The model below contends that employees with strong work ethics performance excellently well on the job as against employees with weak work ethics.

Based on the review of existing literature related to work ethics and employee's job performance, this conceptual model (Figure 2) is developed suggesting that employee job performance through work ethics is influenced by a number of variables such as integrity, sense of responsibility, discipline, quality and sense of team work. This model posits that work ethics can either be strong or weak with bearing on employee's job performance.

Job performance has been one of the important variables studied for a long decade now (Jankingthong & Rurkkhum, 2012). From the perspective of employee, it is the extent to which employee is able to accomplish the task assigned to him or her. Employee's job performance is the level of individual employees productivity in relations to job related behavior or expectations (Babin & Bolos, 1998), such performance could be judged excellent, good, average or poor when expectations are compared with actual output. Performance in this sense relate to task performance which is behavioural oriented depending on the attitude of job holder towards job (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Werner, 2000), in the words of Aluko (2000), work behaviour refers to 'all human acts which are exhibited in work situations'. He opines that to have a good performance at a micro level there must be interaction between work and

worker. Such interaction involves the behavioural aspect of the work (job content analysis) which if not properly guided could result into deviation from its initial planned activity in the form of poor performance. This guide is called ‘work ethics’. When it is strong, it promotes excellent performance of the job but if otherwise that is weak, poor performance result whether in the short or long run. Job performance is not a single unified construct but a multidimensional construct consisting of more than one kind of behaviour. Austin and Villanova (1992) and Campell (1990) argue that job performance is a complicated and multidimensional factor. A number of studies confirmed that excellent or good performance of an individual employee is related to strong work ethics (Herman, 2002; Mann, 2010 & Meriac, 2012). Individuals with strong work ethics tend to work for a longer hours and spend less time on leisure enjoy higher performance (Linz & Chu, 2012). Herman (2002) admitted that efficient and constructive use of time is consistent with strong work ethics. Delaying or avoiding the execution of a task no doubt contributes to poor performance of job by employee (Van Eerde, 2003).

**FIGURE 2
CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



The concept of employee integrity has significant and direct impact on the quality of job performance (Cullen & Sackett, 2004). However, only few employees appreciate the responsibility of promoting integrity (Baxter, Dempsey, Megone & Lee, 2012), forgetting that employee integrity is a vital component of productive work relationship (Cameron, 2003). Barnard, Schurink & De Beer (2007) defines integrity as the ability to judge and evaluate oneself against universal values and principles. Baxter et al. (2012) defines integrity as wholeness of character, ethical values, identity, consistency, transparency, openness and standing for something. It can be perceived as internalized set of values and principles that function as the norms and standards that one lives by and that direct all ones actions and decisions (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). This view is based on moral compass which Barnard, et al (2007) saw as one of the arm of integrity, the moral campus is having and living according to a core self-values and principles. On the

contrary, the inner drive which is also another arm of integrity is built on motivational forces which drive individual to achieve progress and work harder whether for individual prosperity or organization. Furnham & Taylor (2004) attributed limited or poor sense of integrity to individual workers pursue for personal gains which is often at the detriment of expected job deliverables for the organization. Lastthuizen (2008) describe integrity as the quality of employee's behavior in accordance with the values, norms, rules and obligations of the organization and its environment. It encapsulates self-motivation and drive, moral courage and assertiveness, honesty, consistency, commitment, diligence, self-discipline, responsibility, trustworthiness and fairness (Barnard, Schurink & De Beer, 2007). Park & Peterson (2003) linked integrity to authenticity and honesty. Integrity stretches to all aspects of an employee's job. An employee with integrity fosters trusting relationships with clients, co-workers and supervisors. Co-workers value the employee's ability to give honest feedback. Clients trust the employee's advice. Supervisors rely on the employee's high moral standards, trusting him not to steal from the company or create problems.

There are evidences that employees sense of responsibility to duties contribute to performance (Furby, 1991; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004; Nyborg, 2014). While it is unarguable that the level of responsibility to job by employees varies in terms of effort and time, a higher sense of responsibility affects how an employee works and the amount of work carried out. Lack of responsibility infers poor or low effort and time allocated to duties by employees. In order to promote high sense of responsibility among workers, organizations must establish positive work ethics. When employee feels personally responsible for job performance, efficiency and effectiveness is often the order of the day.

A significant input that cannot be compromised in the recent past in any work system is the quality of output. One major factor responsible for this is the increased level of competition among organizations (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005). Although there is no agreed definition of quality of work (Dahl, Nesheim, & Olsen, 2009), but expectations exist for job incumbents with which performance could be measured. Also, organizations have realised that the direction, intensity and duration of effort expended by individuals influence the quality of their job performance (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1996). Interestingly, some empirical studies have found out that job incumbents can manipulate work quality level for reasons known to them (Tolbize, 2008), such as poor pay, lack of recognition, unfair labour practices, denial of promotion, etc. does a system must be developed to ensure that work are completed error free, product or service comes with minimal waste of time or resources, and in right quality. Thus, quality in this sense represents good work which must employers and managers emphasises on from time to time. In line with this, professional organizations consistently emphasize the importance of quality in their process, products and services. Non-owner employees pay less attention to the quality of work (Kruse, 2002). Although Green (2006) admitted that quality of work has declined due to a number of reasons, that does not mean it should be encouraged or that people still do not appreciate one. Quality is still a cutting edge for a number of organizations in the world today.

A self-disciplined worker stays focused on his goals and is determined to complete his assignments on record time without compromising excellent performance. It takes a certain level of commitment to finish your tasks every day. Workers in this category cherish organization image and show a high level of commitment to the organization values, always ensuring they do their part.

Team work is known to have many benefits like increasing productivity, creativity and performance (Rousseau, Aube & Savoie, 2006). While some individual workers appreciate working with a team others might prefer independence and low level of participation with any team (Buchanan, 1998), in order to tap into the associated benefits of affiliation with a team organizations are expected to ensure team work environment, contrary to this some organizations have not really promoted team work environment (Valle & Witt, 2001). Though it can be the responsibility of management to motivate individual to develop sense of team work (Lembke & Wilson, 1998), job incumbents should know that sense of team work would assist them in achieving their job deliverables beyond what is expected of them if they encourage teamwork due to the inherent benefits such as effective communication, coordination, contributions of team members, mutual support, and solidarity (Hoegl & Gemuenden, 2001). Studies have shown that a sense of team work promote better performance of employee on the job (Buchanan, 1999). Discharging responsibilities in isolation can at time be difficult and time consuming; performance may include the

degree to which a person helps out the groups and his or her colleagues. This might include acting as a good role model, coaching, giving advice or helping maintain group goals (Campbell, 1990). A sense of team work by employee can be of high benefit to its work performance most especially in the area of knowledge and information sharing (Vall & Witt, 2001; Gallie, Zhou, Felstead & Green, 2009). Benders, Huijgen, & Pekruhl, (2001) argued that teamwork enhances job performance through enriched employees knowledge, skills and abilities.

How to Manage Unethical Behaviour in Organization

The management of unethical act in the work place is to ensure a workable system that will promote ethical conduct in order to ensure business continuity, survival and good corporate image. Some of the measures are discussed below:

Leadership

A number of researches justified the need for ethical leadership as a way to manage unethical act in organizations (Davis & Rothstein, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Brown et al. (2005) described ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two- way communication, reinforcement, and decision- making”. Thus, to ensure sound ethical practices in organization, ethical leadership must be ensured as finding of Walumbwa et al., (2008) proved that a relationship exist between ethical leadership and employee behaviour. Top managers have power to shape their subordinate behavioural pattern. They have the major responsibility to use their power in such a way that unethical behaviours will be discouraged. Their day to day conduct must be an epitome of high ethical conduct.

Ethical Climate

Ethical climate refers to the holistic impression that individuals have regarding ethical policies, practices, and procedures within a unit or organization (Mayer et al., 2010; Victor and Cullen, 1988). Providing ethical climate is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the contemporary work setting. When the climate is ethical people tend to comply without any objection seeing act as norm.

Openness

To ensure ethical conduct every individuals must promote openness in operations. Management should promote open culture that can forestall unethical conduct from the top to all rank and files. Within this practice, ethical issues are often raised and dealt with before they get out of hand.

Ethics Socialization and Training

It is imperative for organizations to defreeze inherent behaviour of new employees at the point of entry and inculcate acceptable norms and values of the organization. A way to do this is by ethic socialization and training which will help employees know what makes up ethical conduct of the organization.

Laws and Regulation

Labour unions, the employers, and government can also aid the management of unethical behaviour of individual workers by setting guidelines in the form of law and regulations for ethical conduct and ensure its implementation. However, every aspect of work behaviour must be covered if not it could lead to burdensome legal processes bogged down in interpretations of the law and debatable grey areas (Sacconi, 2004).

Stakeholder Priorities

Increasingly, every stakeholder is motivated to become more ethical because their most important stakeholders expect them to put up good conducts in their dealings. Understanding what causes unethical

practices is important to stakeholders. For instance, customers/consumers are usually the first priority because of the many interrelated business benefits that can be derived from increased consumer/customer satisfaction. Other stakeholders include investors (particularly institutional investors, regulators, academics, and the media).

Whistle Blower Protection

Whistle blower is a person who exposes the misdeeds of others in organization in an attempt to preserve ethical standards and protect against wasteful, harmful, or illegal acts. Indeed Whistle blower face the risks of impaired career progress and other forms of work relations but signs indicate that courts have growing support for him, as legal protection can still be adequate.

Formal Code of Ethics

This is the official written guidelines on how individual workers must behave in situation prone to create ethical dilemma. The code tries to ensure that individual workers behavior is consistent with the historical and shared norms of the work/job. Organizations can also appoint staff member to serve as 'ethical advisers' or create a unit to address such occurrence.

Importance of Strong Work Ethics in Organizations

Keeping to Genuine Performance

Work ethics afford job holders to discharge his/her duties in a more focused and rational sense without fair or favour. Thus, avoiding sharp practices or unethical conduct which although could favour performance in the short run but avoided to uphold corporate image.

Adapting to Changing Conditions

Work is not carried out in isolation but in an environment which is full of uncertainties. The existing conditions at work may change so fast that it becomes difficult to achieve the essence of the work. A detailed code of conduct 'work ethics' will no doubt assist job holder to anticipate, monitor and respond to changing conditions.

Minimizing the Errors

There is no small error at work as they will accumulate and become big problems which ultimately will affect the job performance. A well guided behavior will anticipate the errors and take preventive steps to avoid errors.

Coping with work complexity

An increase in work function may be due to work re-design which can lead to poor performance. In order to meet up with work expectation and exceed it, the code of conduct can assist in performing the task efficiently.

Minimizing Costs

Work ethics helps to reduce time wastages on work and reduce cost incurred on work performance. A well guided action will attack all wastages and losses whether in the short or long run.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This discussion has focused on work ethics from the perspective of employees' job performance. Strong work ethics has been discussed to be capable of creating a long lasting employees job performance while weak worth ethics can only drive for a while but will eventual lead to poor job performance. To attain excellent job performance therefore, it is imperative for employees and organizations to promote good practices in the world of work.

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