

Lesson Plan

Understanding Work Ethic



Objective: Students will investigate the concept of work ethic as it relates to workplace readiness.

Workplace Readiness Skill: **Demonstrate work ethic.**

Demonstration includes

- *defining **work ethic***
- *recognizing the importance of having a strong work ethic*
- *demonstrating diligence (e.g., working with persistence to accomplish a task)*
- *maintaining dependability (e.g., being reliable)*
- *accounting for one's decisions and actions*
- *accepting the consequences of decisions and actions.*

Correlations to Other Workplace Readiness Skills:

- Demonstrate creativity and innovation.
- Demonstrate integrity.
- Demonstrate conflict-resolution skills.
- Demonstrate customer service skills.
- Collaborate with team members.
- Demonstrate big-picture thinking.
- Demonstrate career- and life-management skills.
- Manage time and resources.
- Demonstrate professionalism.

Correlations to Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL):

- English: 6.1, 6.6, 6.7, 6.8, 7.1, 7.6, 7.7, 7.8, 8.6, 8.7, 8.8, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 10.1, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 11.5, 11.6, 11.7, 12.5, 12.6, 12.7
- History and Social Science: CE.1, CE.4, CE.14, GOVT.1, GOVT.16, USI.1, USII.1, VUS.1, WG.1, WHI.1, WHII.1

Instructional Steps:

1. **Introduce the concept of work ethic through a quote.** Use one of the following examples, or research a quote relating to work ethic, to launch a discussion of the concept.

"The minute you get away from fundamentals – whether it's proper technique, work ethic or mental preparation – the bottom can fall out of your game, your schoolwork, your job, whatever you're doing." — Michael Jordan

"The harder I work, the luckier I get." — Samuel Goldwyn

"I'm always asked, 'What's the secret to success?' But there are no secrets. Be humble. Be hungry. And always be the hardest worker in the room." — Dwayne ("The Rock") Johnson

"I was never a natural. I got there in the end because I did believe that if you work hard enough, then you can achieve a lot." — Victoria Beckham

2. **Discuss work ethic.** What is it? Is work ethic one specific skill, or is it demonstrated through several behaviors? Make a list of character traits that someone with a good work ethic would possess (e.g., trustworthiness, punctuality, diligence, dependability, self-reliance).
3. **Introduce the class activity. Students will investigate the concept of work ethic through an active reading of an article, "Work Ethic and the Skills Gap," related to the importance of work ethic to employers.** Students should read actively, making notes in the margins and highlighting important concepts, relating to questions such as:
 - a. How is work ethic related to the skills gap?
 - b. What characterizes a person with a good work ethic?
 - c. Why do employers think work ethic is so important?
 - d. What activities might help a person develop a good work ethic?
4. **Lead students in discussing the following:**
 - a. How is work ethic related to self-reliance?
 - b. Why do you think being on time is something that indicates positive work ethic?
 - c. Do you think work ethic can be taught? How might a person improve his/her work ethic?
 - d. How can taking the time to reflect back on performance be a helpful strategy to improve work ethic?
5. **Reflect on the concept.** After introducing the concept, brainstorming ideas, reading about the importance of work ethic to employers, and holding a class discussion, students should be ready to reflect in writing on the concept of work ethic. Ask students to write a journal reflection based on the following prompt:

Your friend, Joy, is preparing to start her first job. It is very important to Joy that she be successful since this job opportunity could lead to career development and advancement that will help her meet key career goals. You and Joy are meeting to see a movie and then to discuss her exciting new job the evening before she starts. Based on what you've learned thus far about work ethic, what advice might you offer to Joy to help her as she enters her new job?

6. **Apply the lesson.** Ask students to break into small groups. Ask students to respond to a set of workplace case studies/scenarios using a four-step process for making ethical decisions at work as explained in activity 22, "Workplace Ethics," on pages 102-105 of [Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>). (The case studies are located on page 104 and a response sheet, "Steps to Solving Ethical Dilemmas," is on page 105.)

Formative Assessment:

- Gauge student understanding of the concept of work ethic during discussion of the article, "Work Ethic and the Skills Gap."

- Use the “Journal Assessment Rubric” to assess student understanding of the concept as demonstrated in writing.
- Evaluate student responses to the case studies (page 104-105) in “Workplace Ethics,” from [Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>). A key with sample appropriate responses is located at the end of this document.

Options for Adaptation/Differentiation:

- To offer scaffolding to students, a whole-group reading and discussion of the article, “Work Ethic and the Skills Gap.”
- To offer an extension option to students, ask them to role-play scenarios in which ethical decisions must be made in the workplace. Use the case studies on page 104 of “Workplace Ethics” in [Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>), or ask students to create their own scenarios.

Suggestions for Follow-up:

- Ask students to design a bulletin board titled “Characterizing Good Work Ethic” highlighting behaviors that are indicative of a strong work ethic.
- Ask students to complete the journaling and extension activities on page 102 of “Workplace Ethics,” in [Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>), from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Teacher Resources:

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol S. Dweck

[Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>), U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy.

[The Ethics & Compliance Initiative \(ECI\)](#)

[Workplace Readiness Skills \(WRS\) Assessment: Virginia Overview](https://www.ctecs.org/virginia/virginia-overview) (<https://www.ctecs.org/virginia/virginia-overview>), Career and Technical Education Consortium of States (CTECS).

[Workplace Readiness Skills \(WRS\) for the Commonwealth: Instructional Resources](http://cteresource.org/wrs/index.html) (<http://cteresource.org/wrs/index.html>), Career and Technical Education (CTE) Resource Center.

Work Ethic and the Skills Gap

hepg.org /blog/work-ethic-and-the-skills-gap



The Blog of Harvard Education Publishing

by Matthew T. Hora on December 7, 2016

In the course of traveling through Wisconsin conducting interviews with business owners and HR directors for our new book, *Beyond the Skills Gap*, I was struck by how often I heard about problems with employees' work ethic. Described as being "dependable," "punctual," "hardworking," and "committed to the company," it was considered the most important competency by the seventy-two biotechnology and manufacturing employers in our study, even more important than technical knowledge and ability. As one CEO said, "If they don't have the work ethic, I don't have anything to work with." These findings are consistent with other research, such as a recent National Association of Colleges and Employers survey, in which 97.5% of respondents rated work ethic as an essential aspect of career readiness.



But what exactly is work ethic? Modern scholars view it as a generalized and multidimensional psychological construct related to work-oriented values. These values include distinct factors such as hard work, self-reliance, morality, and delayed gratification, which suggests that when we talk about a person's work ethic, we're actually talking about a host of their personal traits, beliefs, and aptitudes. This begs the question, can work ethic be taught in a formal educational setting?

The employers in our study were skeptical that such personal, deeply held values could be taught in the classroom, particularly at the college level. One HR director said, "It's too late to learn at the university, because a work ethic is instilled way back from parenting to who they are as a person." A manager at a manufacturing company concurred: "There's some soft skills people have that are just inherent to them, so it's going to be very difficult to train somebody on work ethic—that's just something that's ingrained in them."

Hearing that work ethic is a disposition acquired through enculturation was fascinating to me. It was made even more interesting during a conversation with a representative of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. I was asking about a series of focus groups they had recently held with executives around the state about the widely reported problem with finding applicants with adequate skills for a job opening (i.e., the skills gap), and the issue of work ethic invariably came up:

"One of the folks said, 'You know, what we measure when we're trying to hire somebody is YOTF.' And I said, 'What is YOTF?' And the guy said, 'Years off the farm.' If you think of kids who grew up on a farm in terms of work ethic—you're getting up at six o'clock in the morning, working every night, never getting a day off—they get that, and they get the problem-solving part because if something breaks down on the back forty, you've got to figure out how to fix it."

As someone who grew up as a 4-H kid in rural southern California, this resonated. However, inculcating a strong work ethic in young people doesn't require a farming background. It comes from the values parents or caregivers teach, the role models for work they provide, the cultural and religious milieu in which young people are socialized, and the opportunities for work young people have available to them.

The higher education sector also has a role to play. Despite the skepticism of the employers in our study about how work ethic could not be taught, some educators are striving to integrate into their curriculum and instruction a focus on work ethic and self-regulated learning.

As we visited several of Wisconsin's community colleges and universities, we heard a variety of strategies for cultivating a sense of self-reliance, timeliness, and dependability in their academic work. Some of these strategies involve setting high expectations for turning in assignments on time and attendance, with exceptions granted only in extreme circumstances. For example, one instructor emphasized the importance of craftsmanship and pride in one's work by embedding these principles in his learning goals and grading system that involved keeping tools organized and workspaces clean.

Another approach is to focus less on dependability and attention to detail, and more on students' abilities to monitor their own learning progress (or lack thereof). In her book *Creating Self-Regulated Learners* (Stylus Publishing, 2013) Linda Nilson outlines a variety of strategies that teach students how to become more reflective and proactive learners. For instance, prior to a major assignment or exam, students can write reflective pieces in a journal about their study habits and learning goals. After receiving their grades, students then revisit their approach and assess whether or not they were effective. This deceptively simple exercise teaches students that they are ultimately responsible for their own learning, and also trains them to continually reflect on their performance and seek continual improvement.

We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that a strong work ethic or self-regulation skills are all that young people need to thrive in school, attend and persist in college, and get that first job. Too many children are growing up in poverty, hindered by structural racism, or otherwise face life circumstances that make "working hard" simply not enough. But having these aptitudes can only help students persist and ultimately graduate from high school, technical college, or a four-year university, and then enter the labor market with a stance toward work that many employers seek.

There are many promising strategies available for teaching young people about the world of work within our colleges and universities, such as internships and apprenticeships, problem-based learning, and the techniques outlined above. But a person's work ethic is a deeply cultural and personal issue, shaped by many factors outside the control of college instructors.

Recognizing these facts is an important first step in developing a more nuanced and collective approach to thinking about the future of higher education than is offered by the skills gap narrative, which lays the blame for a struggling economy solely at the feet of a failed higher education system. The issues facing the labor market and our society are far more complex, and in the case of work ethic, will require a collaborative and collective response that involves teachers, employers, parents, and the students themselves.

About the Author: Matthew T. Hora is an assistant professor of adult and higher education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he conducts research on instructional reform in higher education, skills-related policies, and student college-to-work pathways. He is the author, with Ross J. Benbow and Amanda K. Oleson, of *Beyond the Skills Gap* (Harvard Education Press, 2016).

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Journal Assessment Rubric



	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)
Student displays conceptual understanding.	It is obvious from the writing that the student understands various facets that make up work ethic.	The student demonstrates an understanding of most of the facets that make up work ethic.	Student understanding is spotty or unclear; student partially grasps the facets that make up work ethic.	The student did not demonstrate a conceptual understanding of work ethic.
Written ideas are fully formed.	Ideas within the journal are developed and clear to the reader.	Ideas within the journal are somewhat developed and clear to the reader.	Ideas within the journal are incomplete or unclear to the reader.	Ideas within the journal are not developed.
Writing is organized and clear.	Student journal is organized in paragraphs and clearly conveys all ideas.	Student journal is somewhat organized in paragraphs and conveys most ideas.	Student journal requires additional organization and attention to detail.	Student journal is not organized and does not convey ideas.
Student uses good vocabulary and language choices.	Choice of vocabulary is specific, professional, and appropriate to the audience (teacher).	Choice of vocabulary is somewhat specific, professional, and appropriate to the audience (teacher).	Choice of vocabulary needs to be improved so that it is specific, professional, and appropriate to the audience (teacher). Some slang or simplistic words should be replaced.	Choice of vocabulary is not specific, professional, and appropriate to the audience (teacher). Slang or simplistic words replace those that would better convey student ideas.
Student attends to grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.	There are no grammar, spelling, capitalization, or punctuation errors.	There is one grammar, spelling, capitalization, or punctuation error.	There are two grammar, spelling, capitalization, or punctuation errors.	There are more than two grammar, spelling, capitalization, or punctuation errors.

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Steps to Solving Ethical Dilemmas: Sample Responses



("Workplace Ethics Case Studies" can be found on page 103, and "Steps to Solving Ethical Dilemmas" can be found on page 104, of [Soft Skills to Pay the Bills — Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/) [<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>].)

Case 1: LaKeisha is an administrative assistant in the Human Resources Department. Her good friend Michael is applying for a job with the company and LaKeisha has agreed to be a reference for him. Michael asks for advice on preparing for the interview. LaKeisha has the actual interview questions asked of all applicants and considers making him a copy of the list so he can prepare.

Identify the problem or ethical issue:

It is not fair for one applicant to have the interview questions ahead of time when the others do not.

What are the facts?

LaKeisha is a company employee. It is against company policy, and definitely an ethics violation, for her to share internal information, such as interview questions, with someone outside the company.

What are some possible solutions?

LaKeisha could offer to talk about the company in general (without giving away confidential or proprietary information) with Michael so that he goes into the interview prepared and with some background knowledge.

What are you going to do?

LaKeisha should give Michael some common-sense advice based upon her own interview experience, and some general background knowledge about the company. She should not share interview questions with Michael, as that would not be an ethical choice.

Also consider....how will you know if your decision was the right one?

LaKeisha will know that Michael has her support as he interviews, but she hasn't divulged information that would put him at an unfair advantage or jeopardize her employment.

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Case 2: Emily works in the Quality Control Department. Once a year, her supervisor gives away the company's used computers to the local elementary school. The company does not keep records of these computer donations. Emily really needs a computer. Her supervisor asks her to deliver 12 computers to the school.

Identify the problem or ethical issue:

Emily is tempted to take one of the computer donations for herself; the computers are intended to be used by the local elementary school.

What are the facts?

Emily is a company employee who has been entrusted with the transport of computer donations. Taking one of those computers for herself is theft.

What are some possible solutions?

Emily should deliver the computers as she is asked to do. Emily might consider asking her employer whether the company has an agreement with a technology provider to offer employee discounts on computers.

What are you going to do?

Emily delivers the 12 computers to the elementary school.

Also consider....how will you know if your decision was the right one?

Emily did not take something that was not rightfully hers and that was intended as a donation to a local elementary school.

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Case 3: Marvin is an assistant in the Building Services Department. He has just received a new work computer and is excited to try it out. His supervisor has a strict policy about computer usage (for business purposes only), but Marvin wants to learn the email software. He figures one good way to do this is to send emails to his friends and relatives until he gets the hang of it. He has finished all of his work for the day and has 30 minutes left until his shift is over. His supervisor left early.

Identify the problem or ethical issue:

Marvin is tempted to use his new work computer for personal email. This is against his supervisor's policy.

What are the facts?

Marvin's supervisor has a strict policy. Marvin has a new computer. Marvin wants to practice.

What are some possible solutions?

Marvin should send a business correspondence to his colleagues via email to practice with his new computer.

What are you going to do?

Marvin should only use his computer in accordance with his supervisor's policy.

Also consider....how will you know if your decision was the right one?

If Marvin adheres to company policy, he will not be in violation and will not need to worry about a reprimand from his supervisor.

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Case 4: Jennie was recently hired to work as a receptionist for the front lobby. As receptionist, she is responsible for making copies for the people in her office. Her son, Jason, comes in and needs some copies for a school project. He brought his own paper and needs 300 copies for his class. If he doesn't bring the copies with him, he will fail the project. The company copier does not require a security key, nor do they keep track of copies made by departments.

Identify the problem or ethical issue:

Jennie is tempted to make copies for personal use at her workplace.

What are the facts?

Jennie is a company employee entrusted with the use of office equipment and supplies. The copier is for office use.

What are some possible solutions?

Jennie can suggest that her son use a copy provider such as FedEx Kinkos to make copies for his class.

What are you going to do?

Jennie should not use her office printer for personal use.

Also consider....how will you know if your decision was the right one?

Jennie will not need to worry about a co-worker finding out she is making copies for her son or about a reprimand from her supervisor for using office equipment for personal use.

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Case 5: Nonye works in the Customer Service Support Department and spends a lot of his day responding to email. One day he received a message from an email address he didn't recognize. It said, "I'd like to get to know you better, outside of work." Nonye had no idea who sent it, so he deleted it. A few days later, he received another message from the same source. Nonye ignored the message again, thinking they would stop. He mentioned these emails to a co-worker, who responded, "You're lucky to have a fan." The messages continue to come every few days and he's feeling pretty weirded out.

Identify the problem or ethical issue:

Someone at work is harassing Nonye via email.

What are the facts?

The emails seem to be coming from inside the workplace, but Nonye doesn't recognize the email address. Nonye is deleting the emails. They are continuing.

What are some possible solutions?

Rather than simply mentioning the emails to a co-worker, Nonye should discuss the online harassment with his immediate supervisor and the company's human resources (HR) department. Nonye should print each email to show his supervisor and HR.

What are you going to do?

Nonye should formally report the email harassment.

Also consider....how will you know if your decision was the right one?

Nonye's supervisor and the company's HR department should be able to determine the origin of the email, address that individual, and remind all employees about the company's acceptable use policy (AUP).