

WORK ETHIC IN ACTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF GHANAIAN OFFICE CULTURE

*Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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*Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey

University of Phoenix, Arizona.

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ABSTRACT

Work ethic is often studied through surveys and self-report scales, but these methods cannot capture how work ethic is actually enacted, observed, negotiated, and enforced in the daily flow of organizational life. This ethnographic study addresses that gap by providing a thick description of work ethic in action within a Ghanaian civil service ministry in the Greater Accra Region. The study employed immersive ethnographic methods over six months, including participant observation, field notes, informal conversations, and 25 semi-structured interviews with employees across hierarchical levels. Drawing on practice theory and institutional ethnography, the study examined how work ethic is embodied in daily routines, expressed through interactions, and enforced through unspoken norms and subtle sanctions. Findings reveal that work ethic in this setting is not a fixed individual attribute but a dynamic, context-dependent performance. Four key patterns emerged: (1) temporal work ethic – the visible performance of time (arrivals, departures, breaks) as a primary marker of virtue; (2) relational work ethic – how favor, obligation, and reciprocity shape who works hard for whom; (3) hierarchical work ethic – the differential expectations and enforcement of work ethic across seniority levels; and (4) performative work ethic – the distinction between actually working and appearing to work. Direct quotations and field note excerpts illustrate how employees read, display, and negotiate work ethic in everyday encounters. The study concludes that work ethic in Ghanaian office culture is a socially constructed and socially enforced phenomenon, not merely an individual psychological trait. Implications for human resource management and organizational change are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Work ethic, Ghanaian office culture, ethnography, practice theory, organizational behavior, civil service.*

1. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to have a strong work ethic in a Ghanaian civil service office? How do employees know who is hardworking and who is lazy? How is work ethic displayed, recognized, and enforced in the absence of close supervision? These questions are fundamental to understanding organizational behavior, yet they cannot be adequately answered through questionnaires or laboratory experiments. Work ethic is not merely an attitude or a belief; it is a lived, embodied, social practice. It unfolds in the minute-by-minute interactions of office life (Wilmot, 2020): the nod of acknowledgment when someone arrives early, the raised eyebrow when someone leaves early, the subtle exclusion of a colleague deemed unreliable, the quiet pride of being known as someone who works hard. To understand work ethic in action, we must observe it where it happens: in the office, at the desk, during the tea break, in the corridor conversations. This ethnographic study responds to that need. The findings challenge conventional understandings of work ethic as a stable individual trait. In this office, work ethic was situational, relational, and performative (Hosan, 2020). It was displayed through visible behaviors particularly around time that signaled virtue. It was enforced through subtle social sanctions: gossip, exclusion, and the withholding of favors. It varied systematically by hierarchical position, with senior staff having more freedom to define their own work ethic and junior staff being more closely scrutinized. And it was often performative: employees learned to appear busy even when they were not, because appearing busy was a form of social insurance.

This study contributes to the literature on work ethic by moving beyond self-report scales to capture the lived reality of organizational life. It also contributes to understanding of Ghanaian civil service culture specifically, providing insights that can inform human resource management practices attuned to local norms and practices.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Ghanaian civil service has been the subject of repeated reform efforts aimed at improving productivity, punctuality, and performance. Yet these reforms have often produced disappointing results. One reason, I argue, is that reforms are typically designed based on assumptions about work ethic that do not match the lived reality of Ghanaian office culture (Hinson, 2023). Reformers assume that work ethic is an individual attribute that can be

measured, incentivized, and trained. They assume that if employees have a strong work ethic, they will work hard; if they do not, they can be motivated through rewards or sanctions. But these assumptions ignore the social and cultural contexts in which work ethic is actually enacted.

In Ghanaian office culture, work ethic is not simply a matter of individual choice. It is shaped by hierarchical relationships, by networks of obligation and reciprocity, by the physical layout of offices, by the temporal rhythms of the city, and by unspoken norms that everyone knows but no one articulates (Tristan, 2020). An employee who works hard may be seen as virtuous or as a threat to colleagues who prefer a slower pace. An employee who arrives late may be lazy or may have caregiving responsibilities that the office does not accommodate. An employee who appears busy may be productive or may be skilled at performing busyness while achieving little.

These nuances are invisible to traditional research methods. Surveys cannot capture the subtle glance that communicates disapproval. Questionnaires cannot record the whispered comment that damages a reputation. Statistical analyses cannot reveal the unspoken rule that junior staff must be seen to work harder than senior staff. To understand work ethic in action, we need a method that can capture the taken-for-granted, the embodied, the tacit. We need ethnography.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to observe, describe, and interpret how work ethic is enacted, recognized, negotiated, and enforced in the daily life of a Ghanaian civil service office. By providing thick description of office culture, the study aims to reveal the social and cultural dynamics that shape work-related behavior beyond individual attitudes and beliefs.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.1 General Objective

To understand how work ethic is embodied, performed, and socially enforced in the context of Ghanaian civil service office culture.

4.2 Specific Objectives

- To describe the daily routines and temporal rhythms of office life, including patterns of arrival, departure, and break-taking.
- To observe how employees display work ethic through visible behaviors and how they read work ethic in others.

- To identify the unspoken norms and informal rules that govern work-related behavior.
- To examine how work ethic is enforced through social sanctions, including gossip, exclusion, and reputational damage.
- To explore how work ethic varies by hierarchical position, with attention to differential expectations for senior and junior staff.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1977) and Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005).

Practice Theory, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizes that social life is not governed by explicit rules or conscious calculations but by practical sense a tacit, embodied understanding of how to act appropriately in given situations. Bourdieu introduced the concept of habitus: the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization. In the context of office culture, habitus shapes how employees understand what it means to work hard, when to arrive, how to behave in meetings, and how to respond to authority. Work ethic, from this perspective, is not a set of consciously held beliefs but an embodied disposition that feels natural and obvious to those who share the habitus.

Institutional Ethnography, developed by Dorothy Smith, focuses on how everyday experiences are coordinated by institutional processes. Smith argues that to understand how institutions work, researchers must start from the standpoint of those actually doing the work. This approach is particularly suited to studying office culture because it attends to the mundane, routine activities that constitute organizational life. Institutional ethnography examines how texts (memos, forms, reports, emails) organize work, how hierarchies shape interaction, and how institutional accountability produces particular forms of behavior.

Together, these frameworks direct attention to the embodied, tacit, and institutionally organized dimensions of work ethic that are invisible to survey-based research.

5.2 Conceptual Review

Work ethic in action refers to the observable, enacted behaviors through which work ethic is displayed, recognized, and negotiated in organizational settings. This contrasts with work ethic as an abstract attitude or belief. The distinction is critical because what people say about their work ethic and what they actually do may differ, and because work ethic is socially interpreted by others.

Office culture refers to the shared norms, values, assumptions, and practices that characterize a particular workplace. Culture is not monolithic; it may vary across departments, hierarchical levels, and even desks. However, shared patterns are identifiable.

Embodiment refers to the way that cultural knowledge is carried in the body in posture, gesture, pace, and habit. An employee who has internalized the office's temporal norms does not need to check a rulebook; their body knows when to arrive and when to leave.

Social enforcement refers to the informal mechanisms through which norms are maintained, including gossip, ridicule, exclusion, and withdrawal of cooperation. These mechanisms are often more powerful than formal sanctions.

5.3 Empirical Review

Ethnographic studies of office culture have a rich history. Perhaps the most famous is Dalton's (1959) study of managerial behavior, which revealed the gap between formal organizational charts and informal power structures. More recently, ethnographies of public sector organizations have documented how bureaucratic routines shape employee behavior (Lipsky, 2010). However, few ethnographic studies have focused specifically on work ethic, and none have examined Ghanaian civil service culture in depth.

Studies of African workplace cultures have emphasized the importance of relational networks. In many African organizational contexts, work is not conducted through impersonal, rule-based transactions but through relationships of obligation and reciprocity (Blunt & Jones, 1997). These relationships shape who works for whom, who can be trusted, and who is excluded. Understanding work ethic in Ghanaian office culture requires attending to these relational dynamics.

Research on time and work in Ghana has found that temporal norms differ from Western expectations. "Ghanaian time" is often described as more flexible than "Swiss time," but this characterization oversimplifies a complex set of practices (Agyeman, 2019). In office settings, different activities are governed by different temporal logics: meetings may start late, but payroll deadlines are strictly enforced. Ethnography can capture these nuances.

No ethnographic study has been conducted specifically on work ethic in Ghanaian civil service office culture. This study therefore represents an original contribution.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study employed ethnographic design, which involves prolonged immersion in a social setting to understand the culture from the insider's perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson,

2019). Ethnography is uniquely suited to studying taken-for-granted practices, unspoken norms, and embodied routines.

6.2 Research Approach

An interpretive, constructivist approach guided the study. The goal was not to measure objective variables but to understand how employees themselves make sense of work ethic and navigate their social world.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted in a medium-sized ministry of the Ghanaian civil service located in the Greater Accra Region. The ministry employs approximately 450 people across six departments. I chose this setting because it is typical of Ghanaian civil service ministries in terms of size, structure, and culture, while being accessible for long-term ethnographic fieldwork.

6.4 Role of the Researcher

I entered the field as a participant observer. I was given a desk in a shared office, access to common areas, and permission to attend meetings and observe daily activities. My role was known to all employees; I explained my research and obtained informed consent. Over time, I became a familiar presence, and employees largely ignored my notebook and behaved as they normally would. This acceptance is critical to ethnographic validity.

6.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected over six months (February to July) using three primary methods:

Participant observation: I was present in the office from approximately 7:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Thursday, and 7:30 AM to 2:00 PM on Fridays (the office's schedule). I observed arrivals, departures, desk work, meetings, tea breaks, corridor conversations, and informal gatherings. I paid attention to who talked to whom, who sat where, who was included or excluded, and how employees responded to authority.

Field notes: I wrote detailed field notes each day, recording observations, conversations, and my own reflections. Notes were written in a notebook during observations (using abbreviations to be unobtrusive) and expanded into typed notes each evening. Field notes totaled approximately 180 single-spaced pages.

Informal interviews and conversations: I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with employees at various levels: junior clerks, administrative officers, technical staff, and senior managers. Interviews explored participants' perceptions of work ethic, how they evaluate colleagues, how they understand office norms, and their experiences of enforcement.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Additionally, I had countless informal conversations that I recorded in field notes.

6.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing throughout fieldwork and intensified after leaving the field. I followed the iterative process described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011): reading and rereading field notes, writing analytic memos, coding for themes, and developing interpretations. Coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data. I used NVivo to manage coding but relied primarily on close reading and interpretive analysis.

6.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical challenges in ethnographic research include informed consent, confidentiality, and the risk of exposing participants. All participants were informed of the research and consented. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals and for the ministry itself. Some identifying details have been altered while preserving analytic meaning.

6.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement (six months), persistent observation, triangulation across methods and participants, member checking (discussing preliminary findings with participants), and reflexivity (maintaining a journal documenting my positionality and its influence on observations).

7. FINDINGS

The findings are organized around four major patterns that emerged from the ethnographic data: temporal work ethic, relational work ethic, hierarchical work ethic, and performative work ethic.

7.1 Temporal Work Ethic: The Visible Performance of Time

The most visible and frequently discussed marker of work ethic in this office was time: when you arrived, when you left, how long you took for breaks, and whether you were “at your desk” during working hours. Time was the primary metric through which employees judged one another’s virtue.

Arrival. The official start time was 8:00 a.m. However, arrival patterns varied significantly. A small group of employees (approximately 15%) arrived before 7:45 a.m. These early arrivers were widely regarded as the most hardworking, regardless of what they actually did during those early minutes. As one senior officer explained:

“When I see someone coming in before 7:30 a.m., I know that person has a strong work ethic. They are serious. They are not here to play. You don’t come that early unless you care about your work.”

The majority arrived between 7:55 a.m. and 8:15 a.m. These employees were considered “normal” – neither virtuous nor problematic. However, employees who consistently arrived after 8:30 a.m. were noticed and discussed. A junior clerk told me:

“Everyone knows who comes late. We see them. We count. There is one person who comes at 9:00 a.m. almost every day. People talk about him. ‘Where is he? Still sleeping? His bed is too comfortable.’ He doesn’t know people are talking, but they are. His reputation is bad.”

Importantly, lateness was not equally tolerated. Senior staff could arrive later with less comment; junior staff were more closely watched. As I recorded in my field notes one morning:

“At 8:45 a.m. The Deputy Director walks in, nods to no one, goes to his office. No one comments. Five minutes later, a junior clerk walks in. The woman at the next desk says, loudly enough for others to hear, ‘Ah, look who decided to join us today.’ The clerk says nothing, sits down, keeps his head down. The double standard is obvious.”

Departure. The official closing time was 5:00 p.m. (2:00 p.m. on Fridays). Departure patterns were also read as signals of work ethic. Employees who left exactly at 5:00 a.m. were sometimes viewed as “clock-watchers” – doing only what was required. Employees who stayed late were admired, even if their late departure was not accompanied by visible productivity.

A senior manager told me:

“I don’t trust people who pack their bag at 4:55 p.m. and are out the door at 5:00 p.m. exactly. It tells me they are thinking about leaving, not about work. The people who stay until 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m., those are the ones who care.”

However, staying late was also strategic. I observed several employees who spent the late afternoon hours engaged in personal activities (making phone calls, browsing social media, reading newspapers) but remained at their desks past 5:00 p.m. When I asked one such employee why he stayed late despite not working, he laughed:

“You think I am working? No. But the boss sees me here at 5:30 p.m. That is what matters. He will remember that when it is time for promotion. Appearance is everything.”

Breaks. Tea breaks and lunch breaks were important sites of social interaction, but also potential evidence of a poor work ethic. The office had an unofficial rule: tea breaks should

not exceed 30 minutes; lunch breaks should not exceed one hour. Employees who took longer were noticed.

One afternoon, I observed a small drama. A junior staff member returned from lunch 20 minutes late. His supervisor called him into a side office. Through the door, I heard: “You are always returning late from lunch. People are noticing. It doesn’t look good. I am telling you for your own good.” No formal warning was issued, but the message was clear: your work ethic is being watched.

7.2 Relational Work Ethic: Favor, Obligation, and Reciprocity

The second major pattern was the relational nature of work ethic. In this office, work was not conducted through impersonal, rule-based transactions. Instead, who worked hard for whom depended on relationships of favor, obligation, and reciprocity.

The logic of “who you know.” A common phrase in the office was “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” This was not said cynically but as a factual description of how work got done. If you needed something processed quickly, you asked someone who owed you a favor. If you had a good relationship with a colleague in another department, your requests were prioritized. If you had no relationships, you waited.

A mid-level officer explained:

“When I receive a file, I look at who sent it. If it is my friend, I do it immediately. If it is someone I don’t know, it goes to the bottom. Is that fair? No. But that is how the system works. Work ethic is not just about working hard. It is about working hard for the right people.”

Refusing a favor. Refusing to help someone was a serious violation of office norms and could lead to reputational damage. Even if you were busy, even if the request was unreasonable, you were expected to help. One participant described the consequences of refusal:

“I once told a colleague I could not help him because I had my own work. He never forgot. He told other people. ‘She is selfish,’ he said. ‘She does not care about anyone but herself.’ After that, people stopped asking me for help. But they also stopped helping me. My work became harder. I learned my lesson. Now I always say yes, even if it means staying late.”

The lazy person as untrustworthy. In this relational system, a poor work ethic was not just about failing to work; it was about failing to be a reliable member of the reciprocal network. A person who did not pull their weight was excluded from the network.

A senior clerk told me:

“There is a man here who does nothing. He sleeps at his desk. He disappears for hours. Everyone knows. So, no one helps him. When he asks for something, we say we are busy. He is alone. He has made himself alone. That is the punishment.”

7.3 Hierarchical Work Ethic: Different Rules for Different Levels

Work ethic was not a uniform standard applied equally to all employees. What counted as good work ethic varied dramatically by hierarchical position. Senior staff were held to different expectations than junior staff, both in terms of what they had to do and how they were judged.

Senior staff: The privilege of invisibility. Senior managers (directors, deputy directors, chief officers) were largely invisible in the daily life of the office. They had private offices, arrived and left as they pleased, attended meetings off-site, and were not subject to the same scrutiny as junior staff. Their work ethic was assumed rather than demonstrated.

A junior officer observed:

“The directors? They come and go. Sometimes I don’t see my director for three days. No one says anything. If I disappeared for three days, I would be fired. But they are above the rules. They have earned that right, people say. Maybe. But it feels different when you are the one being watched all the time.”

However, senior staff were subject to different pressures. Their work ethic was judged on visible outputs: reports completed, meetings chaired, external engagements. One deputy director explained:

“People think we do nothing. They don’t see the meetings, the negotiations, the political pressures. My work is not at a desk. My work is relationships. But the junior staff, they only see what is visible. They see me leave at 3:00 p.m. and think I am lazy. They don’t know I was at a ministry meeting until 9:00 p.m. last night.”

Junior staff: The burden of visibility. Junior staff were the most closely watched. Their desks were in open-plan areas. Their arrivals and departures were visible to everyone. Their work ethic was assessed through constant surveillance.

A junior clerk told me:

“I feel like I am always being watched. My supervisor watches. My colleagues watch. Even the cleaners watch. Everyone has an opinion about whether I am working hard enough. It is exhausting. Sometimes I want to rest for five minutes, but I cannot because someone will see and they will talk. So, I pretend to work even when I have nothing to do. Just to avoid the talk.”

Middle staff: Navigating both directions. Mid-level employees (principal officers, senior officers) occupied an ambiguous position. They were watched by their seniors and also watched their juniors. They had to demonstrate work ethic upward while enforcing it downward.

One senior officer described this double bind:

“My boss expects me to work hard. My staff expects me to be fair. Sometimes those conflict. If I push my staff too hard, they resent me. If I push them too little, my boss thinks I am weak. I have to find a balance. It is not easy.”

7.4 Performative Work Ethic: Appearing to Work

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding was the distinction between substantive work ethic (actually working) and performative work ethic (appearing to work). Employees were highly skilled at performing work ethic, and this performance was often more important than actual productivity.

The performance of busyness. Throughout the office, employees enacted busyness: walking quickly between offices, frowning at papers, typing vigorously, sighing with exhaustion. These performances were recognizable to everyone as performances, yet they were effective.

I recorded in my field notes:

“10:30 a.m. A junior officer walks from his desk to the printer and back. He is carrying a single piece of paper. He walks quickly, with purpose, frowning slightly. When he returns to his desk, he stares at the paper for a full minute, then puts it down and picks up another paper. He has not produced anything, but he looks very busy. His supervisor walks by, nods approvingly, and continues.”

One participant explained the logic:

“You have to look busy. If you look busy, people leave you alone. If you look idle, people give you work. So, everyone learns to look busy. It is a survival skill. The people who are actually busy are the ones who do not have time to look busy. But they are punished for it because they look like they are not doing anything. It is backwards.”

The danger of actually working. Several participants told me that actually working hard could be risky because it raised expectations. If you worked quickly, you would be given more work. If you worked accurately, you would be given the most difficult files. The rational strategy, for some, was to work at a moderate pace and hide their full capacity.

A senior clerk explained:

“When I first started, I worked very hard. I finished everything fast. My supervisor gave me more and more. My colleagues resented me because I made them look bad. After two years, I

was exhausted and everyone hated me. So, I slowed down. I learned to work at the same speed as everyone else. Now no one notices me. It is better.”

Gossip as enforcement. Gossip was the primary mechanism for enforcing work ethic norms. Employees who violated expectations were discussed in whispers, their reputations damaged. Because reputation was critical to the relational network, gossip was a powerful sanction.

A participant told me:

“People talk. When you are not there, they talk. They say, ‘Did you see him? He came late again.’ ‘She spends all day on her phone.’ ‘He sleeps at his desk.’ The person never hears it directly, but everyone knows. And once your reputation is bad, it is very hard to fix. People will not help you. You are excluded.”

8. DISCUSSION

This ethnographic study reveals that work ethic in Ghanaian office culture is not a fixed individual trait but a dynamic, socially constructed, and socially enforced performance. The findings challenge the assumptions underlying many human resource management interventions, which tend to treat work ethic as an attribute that can be measured, trained, and rewarded.

The primacy of temporal visibility, the focus on arrivals, departures, and break times, suggests that what matters most is not what employees do, but when they are seen doing it. This has implications for performance management. If employees are rewarded for visible presence rather than substantive contribution, they will optimize for visibility. The employee who stays late doing nothing is rewarded; the employee who leaves on time after completing everything is penalized. This is an inefficient system, but it is rational given the social logic of the office.

The relational nature of work ethic the way that effort is directed toward those to whom one has obligations suggests that formal job descriptions and hierarchical authority are less important than informal networks. Employees work hard for friends and patrons; they withhold effort from those outside their networks. This is not laziness; it is strategic behavior within a relational system. Interventions that ignore this relational logic will fail.

The hierarchical double standard different expectations for senior and junior staff reflects broader patterns of Ghanaian social organization, where age and rank confer privileges. Junior staff are subject to intense surveillance; senior staff are largely invisible. This creates resentment among junior staff and reduces their motivation to work hard, since they perceive that the rules are unfair.

The distinction between substantive and performative work ethic is perhaps the most important finding for practice. Employees have learned that performance matters more than productivity, so they invest energy in performing. The challenge for organizations is to align substantive contribution with social reward to make it socially advantageous to actually work hard, rather than merely to appear to do so.

9. CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study of work ethic in Ghanaian office culture has shown that work ethic is not what surveys measure. It is not a set of attitudes or beliefs. It is a lived, embodied, social practice. It is displayed through visible behaviors particularly around time. It is enforced through gossip, exclusion, and the withdrawal of favors. It varies by hierarchical position. And it is often performative: employees learn to appear busy because appearing busy is rewarded.

These findings have implications for how we study work ethic and how we intervene to improve it. Researchers should supplement surveys with observation. Practitioners should design interventions that address the social and cultural dynamics of work ethic, not just individual attitudes. And reformers should recognize that changing work ethic requires changing the social logic of the office, not just issuing new policies.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the ethnographic findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Shift from Surveillance to Outcomes: Instead of monitoring arrivals and departures, managers should focus on outputs and outcomes. Employees who complete their work effectively should be trusted to manage their own time.

Recognize Relational Realities: Performance management systems should acknowledge that work is conducted through relationships. Training in constructive reciprocity and boundary-setting could help employees navigate relational demands.

Reduce Hierarchical Hypocrisy: Senior staff should model the behaviors they expect from junior staff, including punctuality and presence. The double standard undermines morale and motivation.

Reward Substantive Contribution: Organizations should develop ways to recognize and reward actual productivity, not just visible busyness. This requires better metrics and more attentive supervision.

Address Gossip as Enforcement: Instead of ignoring gossip, managers should address the underlying issues that make gossip necessary. If employees feel that their concerns are heard through formal channels, they may rely less on informal enforcement.

Conduct Further Research: Comparative ethnographic studies in different Ghanaian organizations would reveal how context shapes work ethic. Longitudinal ethnography could track how work ethic changes over time, particularly in response to interventions.

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