

The AMERICAN WORK ETHIC

In America (as in most industrialized societies), the average person spends nearly a third of his/her day's activities at work. Add the time spent in training and preparation for work, the time spent worrying about being out of work or planning for a better work situation, and work clearly encompasses a major part of the adult's life. Working obviously has an economic or income-producing function for most individuals but, additionally, the very act of working seems to fulfill other basic human needs. Seventy-one percent of a recent national sample of employed persons said they would continue to work even if they had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. Most also indicated that working gives them a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life.

The economic consequences of various levels of work behavior to business organizations and to society in general is being debated worldwide. Both individuals and groups have taken an active role in structuring and changing their work, their work institutions and thus their society. This evolutionary change is as evident in America today as it is in Germany, Sweden, England, Yugoslavia or, more dramatically, Poland.

Conclusion: Working and work meanings are critically important to both individuals and to nations.

By **GEORGE W. ENGLAND**
and **WILLIAM WHITELY**

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN AMERICA?

The American work force is currently experiencing its *fourth* period of great evolutionary change in composition, character and in the rules for its conduct. Professor Clark Kerr, president emeritus of the University of California at Berkeley and chairman of the Carnegie Council on Higher Education, has identified the first three periods as:

Period 1: *"The enormous influx of immigrants and the rise of heavy industry, beginning in the 1880s.*

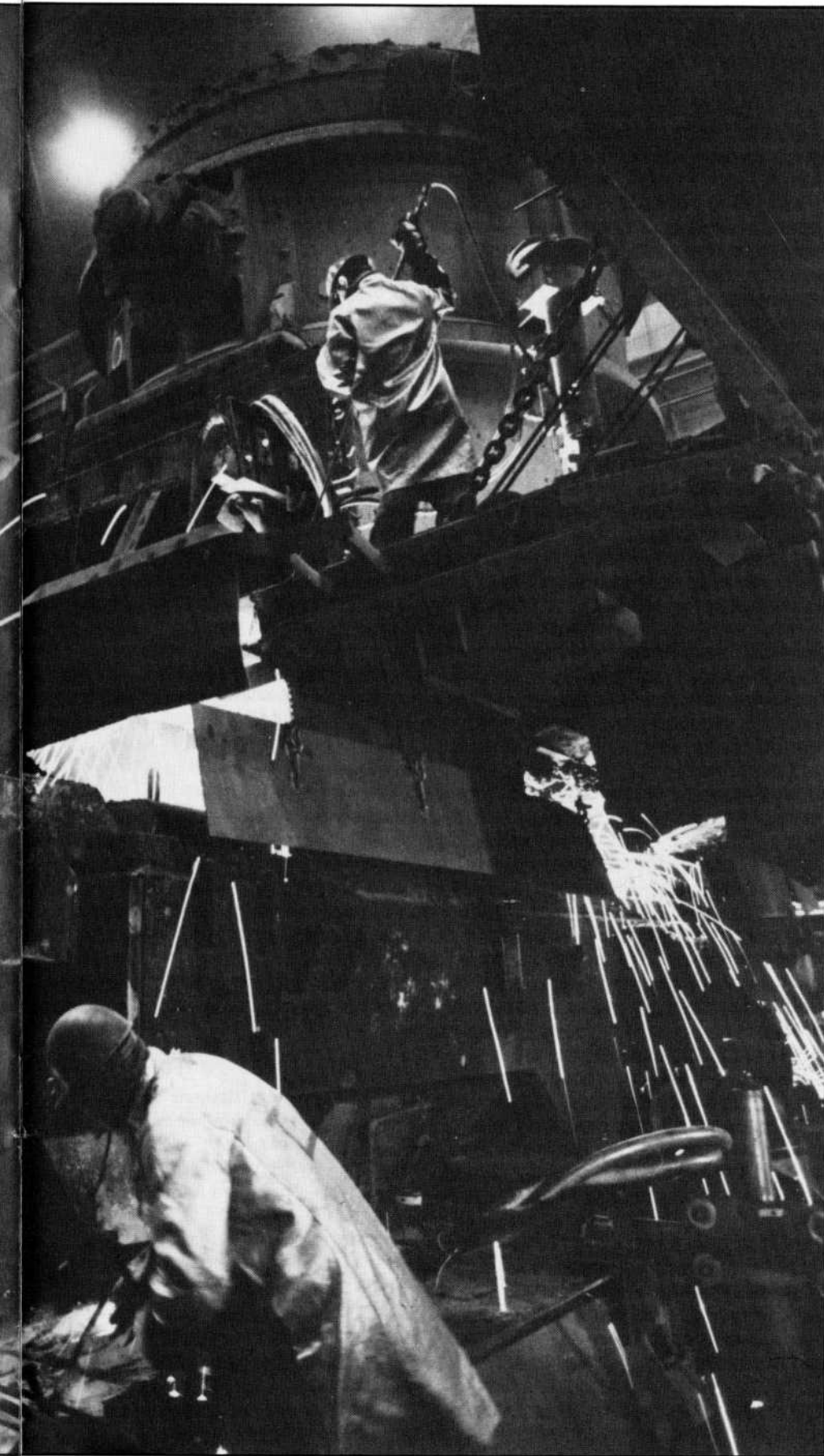
"In each of the next four decades, an average 5 million immigrants entered the United States, and the total population grew at a rate of one-fifth to one-quarter every ten years. Many of these newcomers went into the iron, steel, and other basic industries. The new workers were largely male and willing to undertake heavy and dirty work. The American economy was profoundly changed.

Period 2: *"The great internal migration and the depopulation of the countryside, beginning particularly with World War I.*

"In 1920, 20 percent of the population still lived on farms compared to only about five percent today. Movement into the cities was accelerated by the Great Depression and then by World War II. The migrants at first were largely white and later largely black. The new workers were still mostly male and oriented toward blue-collar occupations. The automobile industry has been based substantially on a labor force so derived. The United States became highly urbanized, and patterns of life were greatly affected. Suburbs grew, and ghettos spread.



American Iron & Steel Institute



Period 3: *"The introduction of social controls over the use and conduct of the labor force, greatly accelerated by the New Deal, and again in the 1960s and 1970s.*

"The federal government vastly increased its intervention into the labor market; trade unionism and collective bargaining came to cover most of basic industry and the historic crafts; and the states augmented their social legislation. A great redistribution of authority took place from the employer to the government agency and to the labor union. Two and often three parties shared power where there had been only one before. Pluralistic control of the labor market came to be the dominant mode. Rules for the workplace were once made on a unilateral basis; now they are increasingly made on a bilateral and trilateral basis."

"A new breed of Americans holds a set of values and beliefs so markedly different from the traditional outlook that they promise to transform the character of work in America."

Period 4: *The fourth period of great change in the American work force dates from the 1950s and has been described as the era of Entitlement. Increasing numbers of people want more from work, and they see these gains as a matter of legislated or negotiated rights for large groups of people rather than as rights which are earned individually. Public opinion expert Daniel Yankelovich, a long-time student of these trends, comments as follows:*

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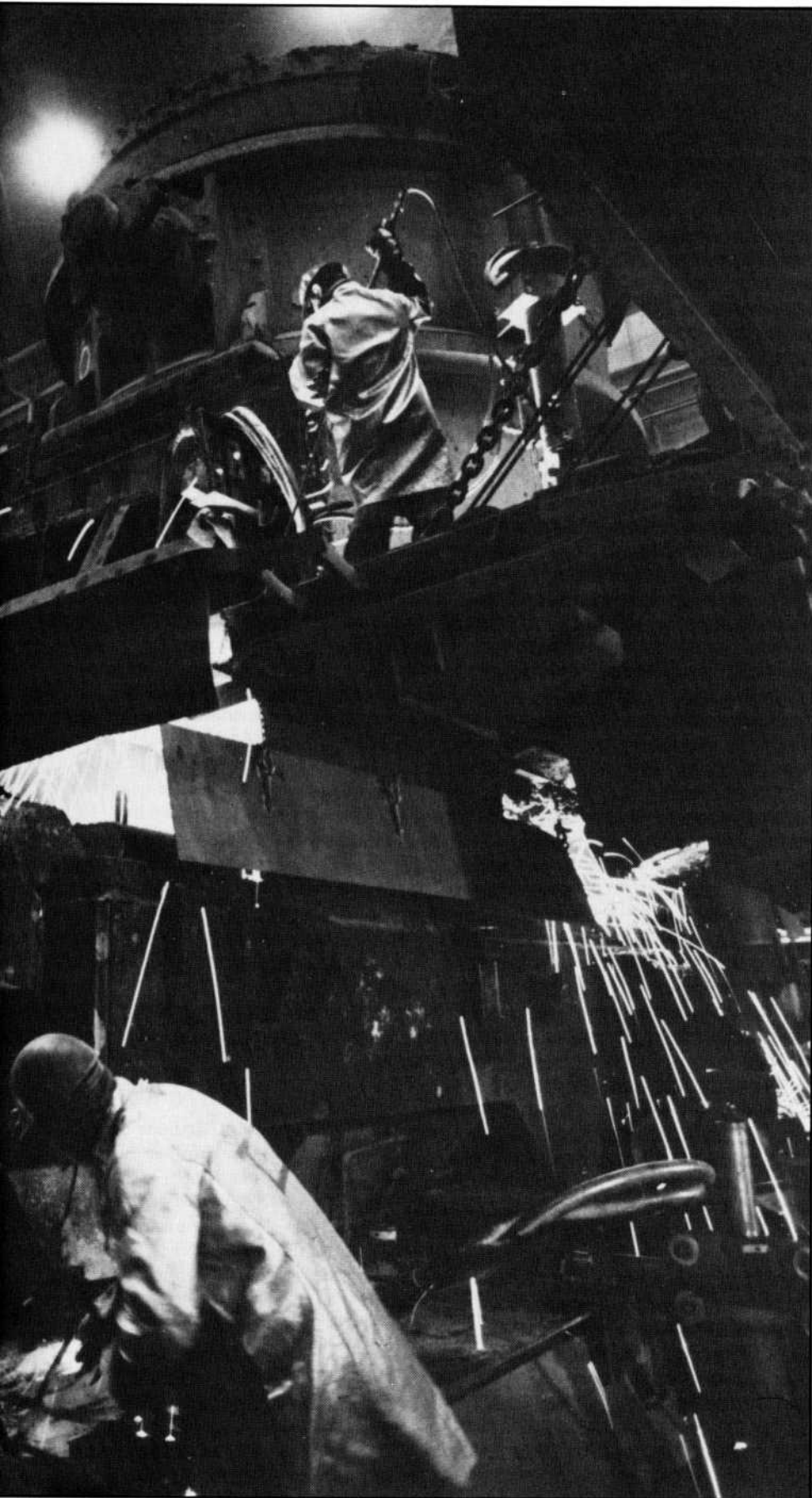
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"Here are just a few consequences of New Breed values:

► The desire to hold a paid job has become so compelling that some 24 to 27 million people not now employed in full-time paid jobs — women, young people and old people in particular — are waiting to take jobs if they become available. The traditional method of creating jobs is through growth in the economy at the average rate of 2 to 2.5 million new jobs a year; at this rate, supply has no chance of catching up with demand. The official unemployment figures therefore grossly understate the potential demand for jobs. As we move closer to a national commitment to guarantee jobs for everyone who wants to work, we are confronted with the awesome task of creating millions of more new jobs than those that will be generated by normal or even superheated growth in the economy.

► Competition for jobs already has grown so fierce that young blacks, the prime target group for many policy planners, are the most deprived; they now suffer from an unemployment rate estimated at 46 to 60 percent. If our approach to the job market does not change, their plight will grow worse. And yet, millions of jobs that are considered undesirable or "dead end" jobs cannot be filled.

► Today, millions who do hold paid jobs find the present incentive systems so unappealing that they are no longer motivated to work hard. As a consequence, not only do they withdraw emotional involvement from the job, they also insist upon steady increases in pay and fringe benefits to compensate for the job's lack of appeal. The less they give to the job, the more they seem to demand — a process that cannot continue for long without breaking down. A deep flaw in the incentive system, signified by the failure of the old incentives to catch up with the new motivations, leads inexorably to deterioration in the workplace, threatening the position of the United States as the world's foremost industrial nation."

Conclusion: The American work force and work in America have dramatically changed in the past 100 years.

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WHAT ARE SOME EFFECTS OF THE ENTITLEMENT ERA?

To understand more fully what impact the entitlement era has on the American Work Ethic, the Center for Economic and Management Research (CEMR) of the College of Business Administration at the University of Oklahoma recently studied 400 employees of a large national manufacturing firm. The 400 employees represented a 10 percent random sample of both blue-collar and white-collar employees at one major plant.

In the study, the general entitlement orientation of each individual was measured by determining his/her degree of agreement (or disagreement) with five statements concerning work entitlements. Each person could "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" with each statement. The five statements and the degree of agreement with them is shown below.

Percent who AGREE or STRONGLY AGREE

The educational system in our society should prepare every person for a good job if they exert a reasonable amount of effort. 94%

A job should be provided to every individual who desires to work. 88%

If a worker's skills become out-dated, his employer

should be responsible for re-training and re-employment.

Every person in our society should be entitled to interesting and meaningful work. 79%

When a change in work methods must be made, a supervisor should be required to ask workers for their suggestions before deciding what to do. 71%

While the level of agreement with the entitlement items seems generally high, it is more instructive to inquire about the relationship between levels of entitlement orientation and other important work outcomes. These results found were significant and clear cut:

► The higher your entitlement orientation, the *lower* your performance (quantity and quality).

► The higher your entitlement orientation, the *greater* the number of your absences from work.

► The higher your entitlement orientation, the *less* you are committed to the organization where you work.

► The higher your entitlement orientation, the *lower* the amount of effort you would prefer to spend at work.

► The higher your entitlement orientation, the *lower* your current job satisfaction (satisfaction with work, pay, promotion, supervision, co-workers and overall job satisfaction).

These results paint a rather bleak picture of persons who strongly

adhere to an entitlement orientation advocating universal employment rights. This is true whether we are concerned with one's satisfaction from work or in terms of one's performance at work. It is important to note that we are not talking about what an individual believes *he/she* is entitled to; rather, it is to what *all* individuals are entitled. There are large meaning distinctions between the entitlement statement, "I deserve a steady job because . . .," and the transformation of this statement into a generalized right, "We *all* deserve steady jobs."

We are uncertain as to the causal relationship between entitlement orientation and work outcomes. One explanation would suggest that the direction is from entitlement to outcomes; in other words, entitlement claims lead to actions aimed at legitimatizing these claims. Another explanation suggests that the direction of causation flows from work outcomes to the development of an entitlement orientation. That is, people who are dissatisfied with work and are poor performers attempt to close the gap between themselves and others by adopting work beliefs which espouse equal treatment irrespective of individual differences. Whatever the causal logic, the following observation can be made confidently.

Conclusion: Strong adherence to a general work entitlement belief is associated with *negative* human resource outcomes.

HOW DO WE COMPARE WITH OTHER COUNTRIES?

CEMR is coordinating a large-scale international study of the "Nature and Significance of Working in Eight Countries" (Belgium, Germany, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States and Yugoslavia). Approximately 2,000 individuals are being studied in each country, and final comparative results will be available within the next two years. Recent pilot study results from 800 individuals in six of the countries are useful in suggesting how U.S. work force samples might compare.

WORK CONTINUATION

Imagine that you won a lottery or inherited a large sum of money and could live comfortably for the rest of your life without working. What would you do concerning working?

- (1) I would stop working.
- (2) I would continue to work but with changed conditions.
- (3) I would continue to work in the same job.

Country	Percentage Responding		
	Stop Working	Work with Changed Conditions	Work in Same Job
JAPAN	4	42	54
NETHERLANDS	9	56	23
ISRAEL	14	50	33
GERMANY	14	52	32
U.S.A.	15	41	44
BELGIUM	15	56	29

► More Americans would stop working if they could than is the case in some countries.

WORK CENTRALITY

How important and significant is working in your total life?

One of the least important things in my life 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 One of the most important things in my life
of medium importance in my life

Country	Average Work Centrality Score (possible scores 1-7)
BELGIUM	5.7
JAPAN	5.6
ISRAEL	5.5
U.S.A.	5.4
GERMANY	4.7
NETHERLANDS	4.6

► Work is nearly as central, important and significant for Americans as for most others.

WORK ENTITLEMENT

Every person in our society should have a right to a well-paid career if they are able and willing to exert a reasonable amount of effort.

- Possible Responses:
- Strongly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly Agree

Country	Percentage Who Strongly Agree or Agree
NETHERLANDS	94%
U.S.A.	94%
GERMANY	93%
BELGIUM	91%
ISRAEL	90%
JAPAN	79%

► American workers agree slightly more with some forms of Work Entitlement than do workers from several other countries.




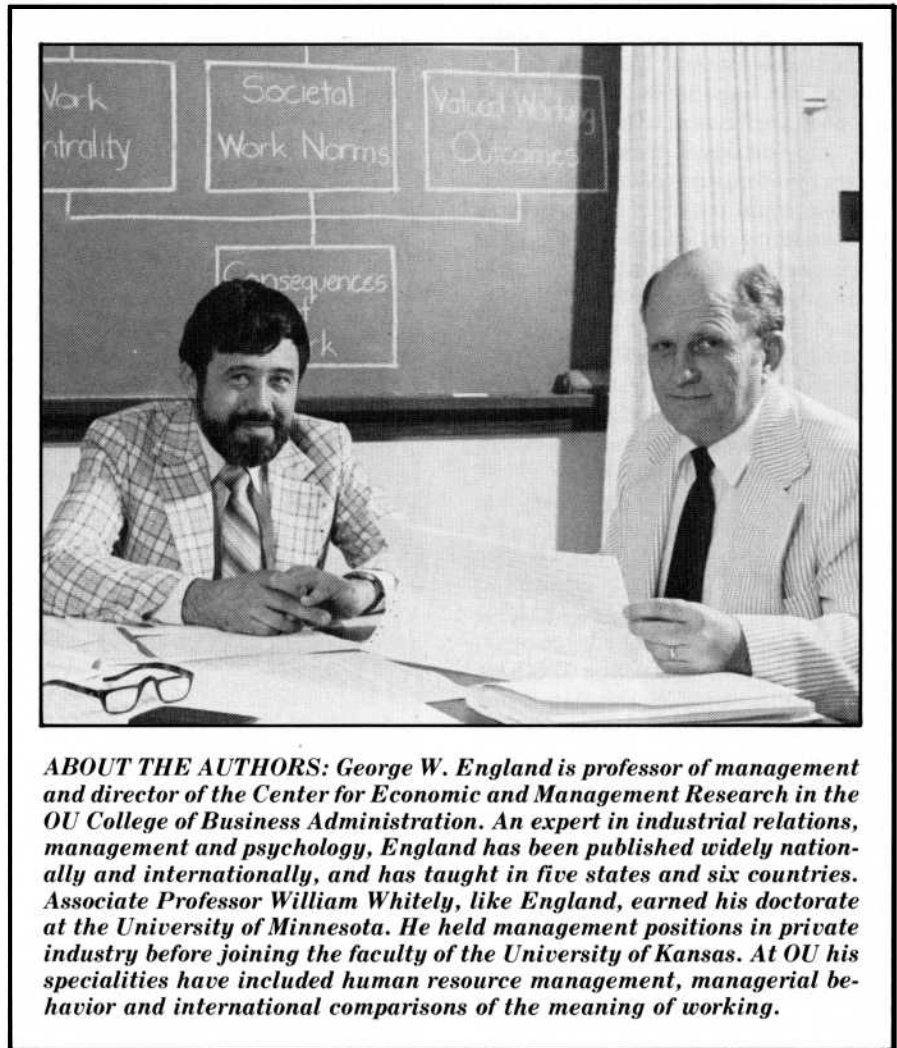
Post-Depression migration to the cities led to assembly lines, like this modern General Motors version in Oklahoma City.

The present results strongly suggest the need for a long-term program of study, discussion and action centered on the American Work Ethic.

The Center for Economic and Management Research of the College of Business Administration at the University of Oklahoma has proposed and is seeking support for a 10-year effort aimed at answering the following basic questions:

- ▶ What is the significance, meaning and value of work to various segments of our labor force?
- ▶ What causes some individuals to develop a strong and positive work ethic and others a negative or weak work ethic?
- ▶ What can be done to improve the American Work Ethic?

These questions will be addressed and answered through a program of research and through regional and national conferences and workshops on work ethic issues. To compare ourselves and our national work ethic to those existing in other nations is intrinsically interesting. To learn and profit from these comparisons is rapidly becoming a requisite to meet the international challenge of working harder and working smarter. An improved American Work Ethic is timely and essential. To do less is sheer folly. 



ABOUT THE AUTHORS: *George W. England is professor of management and director of the Center for Economic and Management Research in the OU College of Business Administration. An expert in industrial relations, management and psychology, England has been published widely nationally and internationally, and has taught in five states and six countries. Associate Professor William Whitely, like England, earned his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. He held management positions in private industry before joining the faculty of the University of Kansas. At OU his specialities have included human resource management, managerial behavior and international comparisons of the meaning of working.*