Islamic work ethic: a critical review

Abbas J. Ali
School of International Management, Eberly College of Business and Information Technology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania, USA, and
Abdullah Al-Owaihan
Kuwait University, Safat, Kuwait

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a coherent but critical treatment of Islamic work ethic (IWE). It explores the nature of IWE in the context of cultural and political evolution and offers a cultural and religious perspective pertaining to organization and management.

Design/methodology/approach – It briefly investigates the economic and cultural conditions that facilitate the emergence of work ethics and the centrality of trade in Islamic culture. The paper, then, reviews the pillars and foundations of IWE and investigates various empirical studies conducted in various countries.

Findings – IWE has economic as well as moral and social dimensions. These along with basic elements of IWE seem to provide the faithful with a sense of worthiness and strengthen organizational commitment and continuity. That is, work is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a means to foster personal growth and social relations.

Practical implications – Offers managers and consults various avenues on how to design teamwork and new methods of change that focus on producing results which reinforce existing commitment and enthusiasm. As justice and generosity in the workplace are considered virtues, issues of a hiring and firing become part of a broader concern with consequences far beyond the organization.

Originality/value – IWE is a multidimensional concept. It links an organization’s prosperity and continuity to societal welfare. Its four elements – effort, competition, transparency and morally responsible conduct – have the promise to strengthen commerce and economic progress in today’s world.

Keywords Work ethic, Islam, Culture, Managers, Motivation (psychology)

Paper type General review

Introduction

Researchers have frequently attributed the rise and evolution of work ethics to changing economic and religious environments in the Western world. These researchers claim that economic expansion in Europe and later in the USA created new forms of economic enterprises and subsequently changed the nature and meaning of work. Zuboff (1983) argued that as industrial capitalism emerged in the 18th century employees faced the demands of new work and asked themselves why they should do it. Zuboff indicated that the answer came from the employers rather than from employees. Employers sought a theory of productive behavior which offered the promise of engaging the spirit as well as the body of the worker. He argued that the conceptualization of work ethic was necessary to ease the management of the newly invented work organization.

The author wishes to thank Professor Helen T. Bailie for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.
While Calvinism viewed work as the glorification of God, Barbash (1983) and Welsh (2005) traced most of the modern conviction about work to the era of the industrial revolution. Barbash, in particular, asserted that work ethic as a concept was the product of an era of scarcity and deprivation when workers either worked or starved. He (p. 232) viewed work ethic as an ideology propagated by the middle classes for the working classes with enough "plausibility and truth to make it credible". Ferguson (2004) and Diddams and Whittington (2003) seem to agree that work ethic is a product of the 19th century. These authors, along with others, have concluded that the existence of work ethic is a phenomenon that is linked to and associated with the emergence of industrial revolution and the rise of contemporary capitalism.

Perhaps, the attribution of the presence of and interest in work ethic primarily to the religious-economic conditions in the 19th century is influenced by the fact that in Europe, prior to the industrial revolution, work was not held in high esteem. The prevailing religious and social norms were neither appreciative nor in favor of work per se. For example, Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of the Nations* (published in 1776), indicated that businessmen are "an order of men, whose interest is never the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it" (quoted in Koontz *et al.*, 1980, p. 31). This negative view of work may induce researchers in the west to attribute the evolving positive view of work to the emergence of Protestantism in Christian Europe and the corresponding rise of the industrial revolution. In fact, this belief was strengthened after Max Weber published his seminal essay on, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Since this publication, researchers have given increasing attention to work ethic and the role of religion in advancing economic growth and the accumulation of wealth.

While the evolution of work ethic and the meaning of work in the Western world may correspond to the nature of the European society and its held values and beliefs, one should not overlook the fact that other societies and civilizations have their own work ethic and beliefs. Their experiences may not mirror those of the West. More likely, these societies have had developed conceptualization and views of work that manifest their cultural realities. This is especially true for Confucian and Islamic civilizations. Over centuries, both civilizations have accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience pertaining to work and economic enterprises. Their achievements were a testimony to the existence of thriving cultures.

Since the early days of Islam, in particular, Muslims have offered unique perspectives on work and have formulated specific conceptualization of work ethic. In all probability, their articulation of work ethic and desired behavior has reinforced their faith and accelerated social and economic changes that were seldom experienced in Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. Indeed, as documented in the following sections, the positive meaning that was attached to work was at that time a novel development and arguably is in tune with today’s contemporary thinking. For example, Ibn Khaldun and Abd al-Rahman (1989, p. 273), the medieval Arab sociologist, argued that engaging in business serves four objectives: facilitating cooperation and mutual understanding among people, satisfying the needs of people, increasing wealth and influence and spurning the growth of cities. Previously, the Ikhwan-us-Safa (Brothers of Purity) who rose in the tenth century have used terms corresponding to contemporary categorization of management and organizational behavior in describing the centrality and meaning of work. They indicated that engagement in trade and manufacturing served physical, psychological, social and spiritual purposes. Specifically (Vol. 1,
p. 286), they identified the following reasons for pursuing business activities: alleviation of poverty; motivating people to be persistent and engaging creatively in an appropriate profession; complementing the human soul with verified knowledge, good manners, useful ideas and responsible deeds; and reaching salvation. Ikhwan-us-Safa not only stressed (pp. 288-90) that the benefits from work differ across industry and profession but also offered a strong rationale for treating any type of work as an honorable task and the perfection of work as the most blessed action by God.

Unlike work ethic in Judaism and Christianity, Islamic work ethic (IWE) has been misunderstood or ignored in management and organization studies. This is because management scholars have no ready access to the wealth of literature in Islam pertaining to business and organization. In this context, it is useful to note that Islam shares some similarities with the other two monotheistic religions: Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, in terms of work, Islam differs from both religions. In Judaism, for example, there is an emphasis on the specific and relevant and on the role of man on earth. In contrast, Christianity places greater emphasis on general and unspecified guidelines in life and mostly on spiritual aspects (Ali and Gibbs, 1998). Islam, on the other hand, provides detailed regulations of human life and at the same time maintains the spiritual perspectives implied in Christianity. Work in Islam, therefore, is situated in the core of the faith and is considered as an integral part in life. Furthermore, in Muslim societies the sayings of Prophet Mohamed and Quranic text are an integral part of socio-political discourse. Therefore, the use of these sources become imperative in any discussion of IWE.

This paper is designed to address the nature of IWE and the place of work in Islamic faith. The paper provides a brief analysis of the economic and cultural conditions that facilitate the emergence of work ethics and the centrality of trade in Islamic culture. The paper, then, will discuss the foundations and the pillars of IWE. Furthermore, the paper highlights IWE in practice by reflecting on recent empirical studies and provides relevant implications.

The place of trade in Islamic thinking
From the beginning, Islam has viewed commercial activities not only as a divine calling but also as a necessary aspect of human life, a source of social gratification and psychological pleasure. The Quran instructs Muslims to persistently work whenever and wherever it is available: “disperse through the land and seek of the bounty of God” (Quran, 62:10) and “God hath permitted trade and forbidden usury” (2:275). The Prophet Mohammed preached that merchants should perform tasks that were not only morally required, but that were essential for the survival and flourishing of a society. He declared, “I commend the merchants to you, for they are the couriers of the horizons and God’s trusted servants on earth” and “the honest, truthful Muslim merchant will stand with the martyrs on the Day of Judgment”.

During the first six centuries of Islam’s Golden Age (since the sixth century), knowledge, trade, industry, agriculture and construction of complex organizations flourished. Work and creativity were honored in all their forms. Quranic principles and prophetic prescriptions served as guides for Muslims in conducting their business and family affairs. Izzeddin (1953, pp. 30-1) examined the contributions of the Arab/Muslim people, during the golden age, to organized works, noting that:

The industries and trades were organized in corporations or guilds. These corporations were of great social importance. They maintained the standard of craftsmanship and prevented underhand competition, thereby insuring a friendly society. Based on religious and moral
foundations, they impressed upon their members a sense of duty toward one's craft and toward one another. Honesty and sobriety were characteristic qualities of Moslem artisans. A tradition of mutual aid prevailed.

It was during this Golden Age that highly esteemed professional organizations emerged. These organizations were instrumental in setting a standard of conduct and accepted ethical behavior in the marketplace. Merchants and craftsmen were looked upon with respect and admiration. The status of merchants and trade in Arab-Islamic thinking was reflected in the Prophet Mohammed's saying: "He who brings supplies to our market is like a warrior in the war for God" and "the truthful, honest merchant is with the prophets, and the truthful ones, and the martyrs" (quoted in Ali, 1977, p. 294). Likewise, Imam Ali (1989, AD 598-661), in his letter to the Governor of Egypt (329-30), demonstrated his esteem for merchants as he urged the Governor to:

Take good care of the merchants and artisans, and ensure their well-being whether they are settled or traveling, or working on their own. Those are the providers of benefits and goods, which they bring from far away by sea or by land through mountains and valleys, securing them for people who are unable to reach them. Those are the people who will assure you a durable peace and respected allegiance. Give them due care in your vicinity and in other areas of your land.

This view concerning the merchant classes was in direct contrast to the beliefs that prevailed among other civilizations that prospered before or after the Islamic empire. For example, Dessler (1986, p. 15) pointed out that in ancient Greece "Business in general, and money-lending in particular, were ... carried out by slaves and less-than-respected citizens; manual workers and merchants, in fact, were not permitted citizenship in the Greek democracy". Likewise, an earlier Jewish belief viewed work as sinful activity, "if man does not find his food like animals and birds but must earned it, that is due to sin" (Lipset, 1990, p. 2).

**Rationales for engaging in economic activities**

In the early stage of its inception, Islam, positioned itself as the leading force for promoting economic growth and development by its emphasis on trade. The centrality and necessity of trade in early Islamic thinking and practice was profoundly different from the prevailing cultural norms. Islamic view of trade and work, however, was grounded in a deep understanding of the necessary social and economic conditions that were considered crucial in strengthening the foundation of the new faith and state. That is, Mohamed not only recognized the need for preparing the ground work, through trade, for eventual victory against his immediate rivals, the elite of Mecca who controlled trade, but also the necessity of trade in the formation of social and political networks and in spreading his spiritual message to other regions. Trade was viewed, in early Islamic thinking, as an instrument for realizing religious, political, social and economic goals. That is, involvement and participation in economic activities was not merely considered a divine call but also as a means to sustain a thriving and healthy community.

In pre-Islam, the elite of Mecca assumed the leading roles in trade. It was mostly this elite class that organized a campaign against Mohamed and his message, despite the fact that Mohamed was a merchant, married to a merchant whose name was Khadija, and who was herself from a noble family that engaged in trade. The Meccans' elite saw the new message as a threat to their established roles and their domination of other tribes and trade routes. Fearing their reprisal, Mohamed sought various avenues to escape their abuse.
In AD 622, Mohamed emigrated from Mecca to another city – Yethreb (Medina) – and sought to build a viable community. In this city-state, Mohamed assumed religious and political responsibilities along with the role of social arbitrator and, initially, the regulator of the market.

In Medina, the Prophet gave considerable attention to trade and was determined to weaken the Meccans’ elite stronghold on trade. Several battles took place between the Muslims and the Meccans. By AD 632, the Muslims defeated the Meccans and entered Mecca. That event assured the control of Muslims over Arabian trade and trade routes and Mohamed became the undisputed leader. As usual, members of the commercial class assumed political positions and leadership roles in the new Muslim administration. The Merchants were granted unlimited support during the reign of Prophet Mohamed and his four successors, the wise Caliphs. All viewed trade as a noble and essential profession for the survival and revival of the faith and for the prosperity and the growth of the state. Lewis (1993, p. 97) reviewing the book On Earning written by Muhammad al-Shaybani (died 804) pointed out that the writer proposed that “earning a livelihood is not merely permitted but incumbent on Muslims. Man’s primary duty is to serve God, but to do this properly he must be adequately fed, housed and clothed. This can only be achieved by working and earning. Nor need his earnings be limited to providing for the bare necessities of life, since the acquisition and use of luxuries is also permitted”. Al-Shaybani asserted that money earned through trade or crafts is preferred by God over money received from government for civil or military service.

In 661, the Ommeyade dynasty (661-750) ascended to political power and was followed by the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258). The ascendancy of the first, in particular, was a turning point in the history of trade and economic activities of the Islamic culture. The state became an instrument for trade expansion. The Ommeyade family had been the leading merchant group before the rise of Islam and had, initially, led the opposition to Islam. The ascendancy of the Ommeyade to power transformed the Arab social and economic environment and gave it new energy. It enabled the senior merchants to be the “merchant–rulers”. The “merchant–rulers” lured Arabs into the army and extended their tribal loyalty to national loyalty in an attempt to capture new regions (e.g. Africa, Spain, South Asia). In fact, a new social class emerged – the merchant–warrior. Members of the “merchant–warrior” class prided themselves in promoting trade, protecting trade routes and reviving agriculture and industries. In their quest to pursue their trade interests, this class of “merchant–warrior” was able, in a short period of time, to integrate the Arab world and transform it into a center for international trade between Asia, Europe and Africa. Remarkably, this class managed to blend Persian and Byzantium skills and knowledge and build a comparatively high sophisticated system of trade and finance. In fact, during the first centuries of Islam, there was enormous ethical, artistic and industrial inventiveness and expansion. Consequently, the Arab financial and commercial sectors were sophisticated relative to other societies (Rodinson, 1974; Turner, 1981).

Work as a genuine task
The centrality of work in Islamic thinking enabled early generations of Muslims to engage in a wide range of economic activities and to pursue trade across continents with energy and determination. The perspectives that Islam offered, at the time, was different from the prevailing norms and in fact resemble contemporary discourse. The Quran instructs Muslims to persistently pursue whatever work is available whenever
it is available. To that end, the Quran states, “He [God] has also made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth” (Quran, 45:13). Interestingly, the Quran (2:268), with foresight, views poverty as the promise of the Devil, and prosperity as the promise of God, “The Devil threatens you with poverty and bids you to conduct unseemly. God promised you His forgiveness and bounties”. The Prophet Mohammed not only preached that hard work caused sins to be absolved and that “no one eats better food than that which he eats out of his work” but also asserted that “work is a worship”. Furthermore, he preached that perfection of work is a religious duty, stating, “God bless the worker who learns and perfects his profession” (quoted in Ikhwan-us-Safa, 1999, p. 290). Similarly Imam Ali, the fourth successor of Prophet Mohammed, (AD 598-661, p. 483) stated, “Persist in your action with a noble end in mind... Failure to perfect your work while you are sure of the reward is injustice to yourself” adding, “poverty almost amounts to impiety”.

The elevated status of merchants and their trade in Islamic thinking is reflected in the Prophet Mohammed’s saying, “He who brings supplies to our market is like a warrior in the war for God”, and “the truthful, honest merchant is with the prophets and the truthful ones and the martyrs” (quoted in Ali, 1977). Likewise, Imam Ali (1989, AD 598-661) in his letter to the Governor of Egypt highlighted the exceptional role and function that merchants play in sustaining the welfare and prosperity of a nation. He asserted that even though tax collectors, judges, administrators, government agents and soldiers play a vital role in the state, none of them, however (p. 315), “can do without traders and craftsmen who build and maintain facilities and markets, a task which they themselves [state employees] are unable to perform”. This view was a novel departure from existing norms. It situated workers and merchants among the privileged classes and bestowed upon them a much higher prestige than government bureaucrats. More importantly, this view confirms that the survival and the progress of the state is contingent on activities performed in the marketplace.

The meaning and foundation of IWE
The IWE is an orientation that shapes and influences the involvement and participation of believers in the workplace. It implies that work is a virtue in light of a person’s needs, and is a necessity for establishing equilibrium in one’s individual and social life (Nasr, 1984). It stands not for life denial, but for life fulfillment and holds business motives in the highest regard (Ahmad, 1976). IWE views work as a means to further self-interest economically, socially and psychologically, to sustain social prestige, to advance societal welfare and reaffirm faith. The concept has its origin in the Quran and the sayings and practice of the Prophet Mohammed. The centrality of work and deed in Islamic thinking is succinctly addressed in the Quran. As such it is work and commitment that enable people to realize their designed goal (Quran 53:39); “Human being can have nothing but what they strive for”. The Quran, specifically and clearly prohibits dishonesty in business dealings (27:9; 2:188; 9:34; respectively): “Give a full measure when you measure out and weigh with a fair balance”; “So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance”; and “do not swallow up your property among yourselves by wrongful means, neither seek to gain access thereby to the authorities that ye may swallow up a portion of property of people wrongfully while ye know”. Furthermore, the Quran clearly promotes commerce and responsible behavior of all engaged in the marketplace (2:275; 25:67; respectively): “Those who, when spending, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between
those (extremes),” and “Those who hoard gold and silver and spend not in the way of
God: announce unto them a most grievous chastisement”.

The Prophet Mohamed, both deliberately and extensively, addressed issues related
to work and business set out the above instructions. His directives were numerous and
innovatively challenged the existing practices. Ali (2005, pp. 53-5) categorized the work
related sayings of Prophet Mohamed. These are grouped as follows:

(1) Pursuing legitimate business. Prophet Mohamed explicitly instructed followers
that useful work is that which benefits others and society. Subsequently, those
who work hard are acknowledged and are rewarded. He stated “Worshiping
has seventy avenues; the best of them is the involvement in an honestly earned
living”. That is, work is the best form of worshipping. He elevated people and
their work to the highest rank if their deeds benefited people: “The best work is
the one that results in benefit” and “The best of people are those who benefit
others”.

(2) Wealth must be earned. In Islamic faith, it is acknowledged that people have
different capacities. It is these capacities and existing opportunities that enable
them to acquire wealth. Pursuing economic activities, however, must be based
on moral and legitimate foundations. The Quran states (4:29-32): “Oh ye
believers! Devour not each other’s property among yourselves unlawfully save
that by trading by mutual consent; and kill not your (own) selves; Verily, God is
Merciful unto you. And whoever shall do this in aggression and injustice, soon
shall We cast him into the (Hell) fire; for this is (very) easy for God. If ye avoid
the great sins which ye are forbidden, We will expiate from your (smaller)
misdeeds, and We will admit you (to Paradise) an honorable (place of ) entry (it
is indeed). And covet not that by which God hath raised some of you above
others; for men shall have of what they earn; and for women shall have of what
they earn; and ask God of His Grace; Verily, God is in the Know of all things”.

(3) Quality of work. The pre-Islam Arabs lacked discipline and their commitment
mostly revolved around a primary group. Mohamed understood this fact as a
statesman and reformer and he attempted to transform the Arab communities
into a functional society. His emphasis on discipline and commitment intended
not only to highlight the essence of work, but also to draw a link between faith
and work and to eventually steer the Muslim community towards becoming an
economically and politically viable entity. In this context, he reiterated, “God
blesses a person who perfects his craft (does the job right)” and “God loves a
person who learns precisely how to perform his work and does it right”.

(4) Wages. Prophet Mohamed instructed Muslims to be fair and just and prompt in
compensating workers. He declared, “One must give a worker his wage before
his sweat dries (should be given on time)” and “your wage should be based on
your effort and spending”. That is, payment for wages should be timely, fair
and adequate. In fact, the Prophet considered denying a worker his/her full
wage to be an immoral act. He was quoted saying that he would personally
plead against, “He who received work from a laborer and did not pay him
in full”.

(5) Reliance on self. One of the most important functions of work is that it sustains
confidence and self-reliance. Mohamed stated, “No one eats better food than
that which he eats out of the work of his hand” and “No earnings are better than that of one’s own effort”.

(6) *Monopoly.* In Islam, monopoly is considered a great fault that produces suffering, unlawful profit and ensures inequality. Prophet Mohamed, therefore, forbade it stating, “The supplier is blessed and the monopolist is cursed” and “whoever withholds commodities, is a sinner”.

(7) *Bribery.* Like monopoly and cheating, bribery is strongly condemned in Islam. Mohamed declared, “God cursed the one who gives and the one who receives bribery”.

(8) *Deeds and intentions.* These constitute significant pillars in the IWE. They clearly differentiate the IWE from the work ethics of other faiths. One of the fundamental assumptions in Islam is that intention rather than result is the criterion upon which work is evaluated in terms of benefit to community. Any activity that is perceived to do harm, even though it results in significant wealth to those who undertake it, is considered unlawful. Prophet Mohamed stated, “God does not look at your matters [shapes or forms] and wealth, rather God examines your intentions and actions”.

(9) *Transparency.* Business and work in general have to rest on ethical and moral foundations. The precondition for propagating and realizing this goal is transparency. It was reported that Prophet Mohamed once inspected a bin for dates and found that those that were not good were hidden underneath the fresh dates. The prophet ordered the merchant to differentiate between the quality of the dates saying, “He who cheated us is not one of us” and if buyers and sellers “conceal and tell lies, the blessing of their transaction shall be obliterated”. His saying “Those who declare things frankly, will not lead to each other destruction” underlies the significant of transparency in any business transaction, and the necessity for enhancing trust and reducing problems in the marketplace.

(10) *Greed.* In Islam, greed is considered a threat to social and economic justice. The Prophet Mohamed in his struggle against the elite of Mecca consistently and tirelessly criticized their greediness. He stated, “Be aware of greediness; it is the living poverty” and “Two qualities are not found in a believer: greediness and immorality”.

(11) *Generosity.* Generosity is a virtue in Islam. The Prophet Mohamed stated that “There is nothing worse than avariciousness”. He declared, “The generous person is closest to God, heaven, people and far from hell” and “He who removes a distress, God blesses in this world and the hereafter”.

**The pillars of IWE**
The preceding discussion demonstrates that work in Islam, in addition to its economic aspect, has moral, psychological and social (relational) dimensions. Work must be beneficial and meaningful. That is, it has to be useful to others and the community at large while serving as a source for pride and a dignified and balanced life. Generally, the IWE is built on four primary concepts: effort, competition, transparency and morally responsible conduct. Collectively, they imply that conducting business with minimum or no restrictions and in a spirited environment will, essentially, result in higher performance and widespread prosperity. Effort is seen as the necessary
ingredient for serving self and society. That is, productive involvement minimizes social and economic problems, while allowing a person to obtain reasonable living standards for self and family. What is significantly important is that effort in Islam is held in the highest regard. The Second Caliph, Omar, was quoted saying, “I would prefer dying while struggling for my sustenance and the sustenance of my children, to dying while fighting in the defense of faith” (quoted in Abdul-Rauf, 1984, p. 23) and “The strength of any deed, is not to postpone today’s work to tomorrow”. The Fourth Caliph, Imam Ali (1989, p. 469), stated, “Do not be one of those who hope for a better world to come without working for it” and “He, who does not perfect his/her work, will bring confusion to self”. In Islam effort is linked to knowledge and the spirit of discovery. The Quran (25:67) instructs believers, “pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge”. And Imam Ali stated that a person (p. 550) “who acts according to knowledge is like one whose road is clear”.

Individuals must compete fairly and honestly and trade with good intentions. The Quran (4:29) declares, “Do not divide your property among yourselves falsely except that it be trading by mutual consent”. Prophet Mohamed was very clear that trade should be conducted without limitations that may obstruct prosperity. He stated, “Why do you restrain your brother from that which will benefit him and is also profitable to you?” Trade and transactions, however, should be conducted in an environment of trust and openness. Thus, transparency is prescribed as a moral responsibility. Transparency is based on mutual understanding that faulty conduct and acts of deception obstruct justice and limit freedom of action in the marketplace. Morally based conduct is an essential precondition for sustaining a prosperous economy and a vital business community. Nasr (1984) asserts that Islam provides a climate of work within which the ethical is not separated from the economic. He argues (p. 35) that Islam bestows “an ethical dimension on all kinds of work and in extending the ethical to include even the qualitative aspect of the work in question”.

The simultaneous presence of the above four concepts ensures a balanced benefit to the individual and the community. This is accentuated in the Quran (62:10): “Disperse abroad in the land and seek of God’s bounty”. Effort and competition have to be conducted in such a way as not to inflict any intentional damage on others. Those who conduct their business in a morally acceptable manner are held in high esteem. The Quran (49:13) states, “The noblest of you in the sight of God is the best of you in conduct”.

This concept of morally responsible business conduct represented at that time a major breakthrough in the world of trade. At that time, merchants and producers had no guidelines and no ethical standards to rely on. Mohamed profoundly altered that culture and insisted on moral conduct not only as a means for profitable business, but also as a foundation for salvation. Mohamed seemed to recognize that a business could not flourish in an environment that is characterized by abuse and unethical behavior. This recognition prompted him to declare two essential foundations for fair competitive environment: “Religion is found in the way of dealing with other people” and “He who cheated us is not from us”. In the context of these two pillars, he strongly rejected the concept “Buyer beware”. The underlying assumption of this concept implies that deceiving is not only a possibility, but a fact of market condition. It further shifts the responsibility of inspection from the producer/supplier to the buyer or customer, infers a hidden cost and creates formidable obstacles to free and fair market practice. In fact, the concept conveys that a competitive environment is subject to corruption and abuse. Consequently, the outcome is a mistrust of market institutions.
The introduction of transparency and honesty in the marketplace highlights two issues: the importance of character and credibility of those involved in sustaining market stability and that the prosperity of business people, both as individuals and as a group, is interwoven. That is, the moral stance of business people is the only credible assurance for minimizing or preventing market scandals, abuses and disruption. Only moral and honest conduct inspires confidence in the market and reinforces social contract, ethical understanding and motivates market actors to focus on meeting their primary business responsibilities. Hence, partners, clients, competitors and customers acquire faith in each other’s good intentions.

**The IWE in practice**

It is important to note that the dominant features of the IWE are contained in all Islamic schools of thought, except in the Jabria School (predestination). In its spirit and meaning, the IWE stands in contrast to the teaching of the Jabria school which is currently sanctioned by existing Arab/Islamic governments. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, however, a cultural awakening has spread throughout the Islamic countries, and many groups and associations have been established to advocate cultural revivalism. The IWE, thus, appears to attract many segments of the population, not only for cultural reasons but because the IWE encourages the individual to better him/herself and to strive for economic prosperity. The cultural awakening resulted in some degree of sensitivity to economic and political calamity that exists in most Muslim societies. Perhaps, this development has intensified an interest, especially among the educated and professional people, in the nature of IWE and its role in modern society.

Consequently, many professional organizations and institutes have embarked on studying and presenting work ethic in a changing world. After an extensive review of the literature and consultation with several Muslim scholars, Ali (1988) developed a construct for measuring IWE. The measure includes 46 statements and it was found to be reliable and valid. Subsequent empirical studies were conducted in several countries evidence the validity and reliability of the measure. The IWE construct captures the essence of work ethic in Islam. It highlights that work is an obligatory activity and a virtue in light of the needs of human being and the necessity to establish equilibrium in one’s individual and social life. Work enables a person to be independent and is a source of self-respect, satisfaction and fulfillment. Success and progress on the job depends on hard work and commitment to one’s job. Commitment to work also involves a desire to improve the community and societal welfare. Society would have fewer problems if individuals were committed to their work and avoided unethical methods of wealth accumulation. Creative work and cooperation are not only a source of happiness, but are considered noble deeds as well.

The core of IWE is profoundly different from the Protestant Work Ethic. Even though both of them place an emphasis on work involvement and work as a divine calling, IWE encompasses dimensions that are not explicitly addressed in PWE. In particular, there is an emphasis in IWE on intention, rather then outcome, as a measure of morality. Engaging in monopoly, gambling or trading in alcohol, for example, may bring fortune, but are considered an immoral endeavor. Serving others and the community is considered an integral part of IWE. Furthermore, the ever-existing possibility of deceptive behavior makes it an obligation for those engage in any transaction to be transparent. In this context, the saying “Buyer beware” is not sanctioned.
Empirical studies show that IWE is correlated with various organizational factors. Ali (1992) demonstrated a high correlation between IWE and individualism. In their studies of work ethic in the USA and Canada Ali et al. (1995) found that PWE, work involvement and work individualism measures correlated with IWE. Yousef (2001a, b) studied the relationships between IWE and job satisfaction and organizational commitment and found a strong correlation among these factors. Previously, Yousef (2000) found positive high relationships between IWE and role ambiguity and locus of control scales. Abu-Saad (2003) empirically studied IWE among Arab schoolteachers in Israel and found that, unlike Western instruments of work ethics, IWE uniquely captured the importance of one's contribution to community and society and the obligations of the organization to its employees. Recently, Ali and Al-Kazemi (2006) reported that IWE is strongly related to loyalty measure.

In a survey using a short version of the IWE in several Muslim countries, it was found that managers and employees scored high on the IWE; using five-point scale. The overall mean of the IWE in Arabia is 4.16, the UAE is 4.26 and Kuwait is 4.32; all are relatively high (see Table I). These results are consistent with results provided by Yousef (2001a, b) and Abu-Saad (2003). Both authors reported that their subjects scored high on IWE.

The results in Table I demonstrate a high commitment to work ethic among Muslims managers and employees. In particular, the results revealed that participants view work as a virtue, that work benefits both one's self and others, that justice and generosity in the workplace are necessary conditions for society’s welfare, that a person should carry out work to the best of their ability, that life has no meaning without work, that work allows a person to control nature and be independent and that creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment. These results, along with others, differentiate IWE from PWE and demonstrate an attachment to work beyond self-interest and the narrow definition of work involvement.

Implications
There are various implications for the strong commitment to the IWE among Muslim managers. First, there is an emphasis on hard work, meeting deadlines and persistence. This means that in introducing change, the establishment of a timetable and clarification of goals and responsibilities are essential in carrying out a successful intervention. Second, work is viewed not as end in itself, but as a means to foster personal growth and social relations. In this context, group interactions and team activities, if designed appropriately, could result in optimal facilitation of intended changes. Third, dedication to work and work creativity are seen as virtuous. Managers and consultants should focus their process design on the new method of change and on producing results that reinforce existing commitment and enthusiasm. Fourth, justice and generosity in the workplace are necessary conditions for society’s welfare. This has three implications: managers/consultants must show that they are attentive to and are concerned about human needs; when considering firing employees for example, they may consider factors other than performance before a decision is made; social skills and mastering public relations are essential to effect change in a successful intervention – in highly personalized Muslim societies, once a commitment is obtained there will be smooth implementation; and goals for change are directed toward serving the community or the society as a whole; that is the managers should highlight the fruits of the results to the organization and society. Fifth, business transparency is not only a good practice, but also a virtue. It inspires confidence in and sustains market
Proper functions. Finally, unlike the Judeo-Christian ethic, the IWE places more emphasis on intentions than on results. The Prophet Mohammed stated, “Actions are recorded according to intention, and man will be rewarded or punished accordingly.” That is, unlawful work that results in accumulation of wealth (e.g. gambling, prostitution, drug trafficking, deceiving, extortion, hoarding, monopoly) is condemned and those who engage in it are looked upon with contempt.

Beyond managing and organizing, there are general implications. These implications provide practical insight into the cultural and political conditions prevailing in many Muslim societies. As was discussed in the preceding sections, in the West, scholars attributed economic progress and growth to the rise of PWE. In Muslim societies, results of the aforementioned studies show the existence of a high commitment to work. Nevertheless, most of these societies experience economic stagnation and poor performance in the areas of technological creativity and economic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of Islamic work ethic in Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia (n = 117) SD</th>
<th>UAE (n = 209) SD</th>
<th>Kuwait (n = 762) SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Laziness is a vice</td>
<td>4.66 0.75</td>
<td>4.53 0.81</td>
<td>4.57 0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dedication to work is a virtue</td>
<td>4.62 0.56</td>
<td>4.66 0.61</td>
<td>4.72 0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Good work benefits both one’s self and others</td>
<td>4.57 0.65</td>
<td>4.59 0.58</td>
<td>4.74 0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Justice and generosity in the workplace are necessary conditions for society’s welfare</td>
<td>4.59 0.74</td>
<td>4.6 0.60</td>
<td>4.57 0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Producing more than enough to meet one’s personal needs contributes to the prosperity of society as a whole</td>
<td>3.71 1.16</td>
<td>4.23 0.85</td>
<td>4.62 0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. One should carry work out to the best of one’s ability</td>
<td>4.7 0.61</td>
<td>4.68 0.54</td>
<td>4.72 0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Work is not an end in itself but a means to foster personal growth and social relations</td>
<td>3.97 1.00</td>
<td>4.01 1.02</td>
<td>4.15 0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Life has no meaning without work</td>
<td>4.47 0.74</td>
<td>4.54 0.68</td>
<td>4.46 0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. More leisure time is good for society</td>
<td>3.08 1.09</td>
<td>2.76 1.22</td>
<td>2.48 1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Human relations in organizations should be emphasized and encouraged</td>
<td>3.89 0.84</td>
<td>4.00 0.86</td>
<td>4.64 0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Work enables a person to control nature</td>
<td>4.06 0.88</td>
<td>4.18 0.74</td>
<td>4.17 0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment</td>
<td>4.6 0.67</td>
<td>4.6 0.57</td>
<td>4.7 0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Any person who works is more likely to get ahead in life</td>
<td>3.92 1.04</td>
<td>4.14 0.86</td>
<td>4.01 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Work gives one the chance to be independent</td>
<td>4.35 0.81</td>
<td>4.45 0.61</td>
<td>4.48 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work</td>
<td>4.17 0.87</td>
<td>4.43 0.65</td>
<td>4.26 0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities</td>
<td>4.25 0.87</td>
<td>4.44 0.68</td>
<td>4.51 0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. The value of work is derived from the accompanying intention rather than its results</td>
<td>3.16 1.09</td>
<td>3.65 1.08</td>
<td>3.77 1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I.** Means of Islamic work ethic in Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait

**Note:** Scoring revised

**Source:** Based on Ali (1992), Ali and Azim (1999), and Ali and Al-Kazemi (2006)
innovation. Economic progress, however, should not be primarily attributed to the existence of a strong commitment to work. It is possible that managers and professional classes who participated in the mentioned studies are aware and more sensitive not only to the prevailing international and national conditions but also to the spirit and meaning of IWE. Their assessments and attitude may not resemble the general attitude of the ordinary citizens in the society. More importantly, productive work is possible when both national and international conditions are conducive. Most Muslim societies have been subjected to colonization and invasion. The governments that were established after the end of colonization have been mostly authoritarian and do not answer to their people. These governments have been interested in maintaining power and pleasing foreign powers. While the current political events and instability in the Middle East and South Asia are a reminder of the plight of these societies, one should note that distant events have profoundly shaped the political and cultural aspects of these societies. For example, British scholar, Rom Landau, visited the Middle East in the early 1930s and noted (1938:8), that the financial downfall of the region was inevitable as a result of the domination of the West, and that “Western greed, disguised as superiority, spread the rumor that without Western administration and financial advisers the orient was doomed to failure”. Furthermore, Yergin (1991) notes that, for a long time, economic destinies of Arab-oil producing states were dictated from remote locations in London, New York and so forth. Berque (1991) argues that the Arabs have lost their equilibrium and the mechanism to control their destiny owing not only to Western political domination but also to Western social and spiritual mores.

Moreover, the issue of cultural discontinuity should not be overlooked in any discourse on IWE and economic progress. After the collapse of the Arab Caliph around 1258 non-Arab rulers who had little understanding of the cultural tenants governed Muslim societies with an iron fist. Turner (1981) argues that Islamic stagnation and the servile imitation of traditions were the inevitable consequences of military absolutism. In order to maximize their control over the Islamic umma [nation], the new rulers encouraged a conservative theology of strict obedience to authority. Intellectual pursuits and formal schooling were prohibited and Jabria principles were advanced. With the absence of written communication, the lack of knowledge of general Islamic principles, and the isolation of Muslims in different parts of the world, many Muslim people adopted various foreign rituals and legends as their own. The supremacy of Western colonial powers over the Arab/Islamic lands, especially after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, further reinforced cultural discontinuity and alienation. For example, even though the Western powers allowed schools to open in various Muslim countries in the first decades of the 20th century, they attempted to replace the Arabic language with French or English in the Arab world and in other non-Arab Muslim countries. Attempts were made to replace the Arab alphabet with the Latin one (e.g. countrie Asia). In fact, in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, the French colonial power forced its language on the indigenous people. After independence, the new governments did not make serious attempts to revise the colonial legacy, and the French language is still used for instruction at the university level and in the workplace.

In fact most of the states, which emerged afterward, lacked the enthusiasm, energy and invigoration that characterized the early decades of the Ommeyade and Abbasid empires. Likewise, some of these states did not appreciate trade and were suspicious of merchants. For example, some of the rulers during the Mamluk era (1250-1517) in both Egypt and Syria were not friendly to merchants. Goitein (1968, p. 351) states that the
“rapacious Mamluks, always watchful not to let any one become too prosperous and mighty, destroyed systematically the great merchant houses by imposing on them exorbitant contributions or by wholesale confiscation of the remaining estates”.

The point is that in a state of cultural discontinuity it is more likely that individuals and groups alike will not have the necessary frame of reference to move forward with confidence, discipline and determination. Furthermore, under the condition of political oppression and turmoil, individual will lack not only the necessary discipline to be productive but also the spirit to work freely and creatively.

Conclusion
In this paper, an attempt was made to provide an in-depth review of IWE. The concept of work ethic, its presence and evolution have been covered. Political, social and economic conditions that gave rise to IWE were addressed. It was demonstrated that certain factors, especially faith, have cultivated and eased the emergence of work ethic. During the first few centuries of Islam, trade and other economic activities were encouraged and promoted. At that time, rulers displayed an enthusiasm and commitment to trade. They played a significant role in providing protection to merchants and trade. As such, merchants and commerce were held in high regard. Consequently, Muslim merchants reached foreign lands and operated in different countries. As inflexible attitudes, rigid beliefs and foreign domination swept across the Muslim lands, trade, creative thinking and scientific discoveries experienced serious stagnations and setbacks. Since that time, economic and organizational activities have not progressed adequately.

The paper proposed that, in general and in terms of business and management, Islamic principles and the original thinking of the early Muslim generations are conducive for building business institutions and for a market economy that is founded on justice and responsible competition. Moral principles, hard work and commitment to the community which helped the Muslim society to thrive economically in the past have the promise to strengthen commerce and economic progress in today’s world. These principles are vital for independent thinking, genuine creativity and dynamic commerce.

References


Goitein, S. (1968), Studies in Islamic History and Institutions, E.J. Brill, Leiden.


Izeeddin, N. (1953), The Arab World, Henry Regnery, Chicago, IL.


Further reading

Corresponding author
Abbas J. Ali can be contacted at: aaali@iup.edu