

HOW DO 'HIGH PERFORMANCE WORK SYSTEM PRACTICES' INFLUENCE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE OF WORK?: THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE ORDER AND PREDICTABILITY

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The growing body of empirical work on the impact of so-called 'high performance work systems' (HPWS) on employees has demonstrated a range of outcomes in different settings, suggesting that we should be sceptical of universal claims that HPWS are 'good' or 'bad' for employees. If we are to continue to develop useful knowledge of the impact of HPWS on employees, we need to move beyond simple 'good vs bad' debates and to begin to explore how and why particular employee outcomes emerge. This paper draws on insights from sociology, in particular labour process theory (LPT), as a means to explain the apparent positive impact of HPWS on employees' experience of work. Our specific focus is on the extent to which HPWS practices contribute to positive experiences of work by meeting employees' interests, specifically enhanced order and predictability at work. Utilising data from a survey of aged-care workers, we test the mediating effect of workplace order and predictability on associations between HPWS practices and commitment, satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. Our analysis suggests that associations between some HPWS practices and some employee outcomes are partially mediated by workplace order and predictability, lending credence to the argument that HPWS can work through meeting employee interests. The paper is divided into five main sections. In the first, we discuss conventional explanations for the positive impact of HPWS on employees' experience of work, before moving in Section Two to introduce the potential role of interests. In the third section, we explain our dataset and variables. Section Four explains our analytical strategy and presents our results, while the final section of the paper discusses the implications of the findings.

HPWS AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES OF WORK

While early research on HPWS tended to be managerial in focus and to test associations between HPWS practices and organizational performance (eg. Becker and Huselid, 1998), more recently there has been a growth in research which has focused explicitly on the implications of HPWS for employees (see Handel and Levine, 2004). Debates about the implications of HPWS for employees have tended to be polarised (see Harley, 2005). 'Mainstream' accounts have presented HPWS as generally positive for employees in delivering more discretion and skills, thereby contributing to satisfaction and commitment. In contrast, 'critical' accounts have suggested either that the practices have largely negative impacts in terms of intensifying work effort and shifting responsibility for production decisions to workers (Danford et al, 2004) or that they are simply 'window dressing' and have no significant impact, either positive or negative (Harley, 2001).

It is possible to find a range of rigorous survey-based studies using different sets of data in different national and industry contexts, which provide evidence which supports one side or other of the debate. Some recent studies of HPWS-style practices have found generally positive associations with employee experience of work (Harley et al, 2007; Macky and Boxall, 2007), while others have found negative ones (Berg and Frost, 2005). Some studies challenge both 'mainstream' and 'critical' accounts by showing a combination of positive and negative associations (Ramsay et al, 2000) and some none at all (Harley, 2001). This suggests that HPWS practices do not have universally 'good' or 'bad' outcomes, but rather the outcomes vary. If outcomes vary, there seems little point attempting to determine definitively whether HPWS are good or bad for employees. Future research needs to pursue new avenues. A potentially fruitful way forward is to explore how particular HPWS practices are associated with particular employee outcomes, taking into account contextual factors.

The research which has sought to explore possible causal paths has generally focused on psychological factors as mediating associations between HPWS and experiences of work. Key intervening variables which have been explored have included trust (Kalleberg et al, 2004; Appelbaum et al, 2000) and intrinsic rewards (Appelbaum et al, 2000). The apparent assumption is that to understand the way in which HPWS practices influence employees' experiences of work, we must understand employees' psychological responses to the practices. That is, they seek to explore

the extent to which HPWS practices meet innate human needs of workers. While we consider it entirely probable that psychological responses influence employee experiences of work, we believe that this is likely to be only a partial explanation of the impact of HPWS on employees.

HPWS PRACTICES AND ORIENTATIONS TO WORK: THE ROLE OF INTERESTS

We seek to develop a research agenda which draws on social and political understandings of the workplace and explicitly considers the role of interests in shaping outcomes. Our agenda is informed by labour process theory (LPT), an approach which underlies many of the critical analyses of HPWS (see Ramsay et al, 2000). While there are divergent views within LPT, at its heart is an understanding of workplace relations as being shaped by the structure of capitalism. Workplace relations involve relations between capital and labour, rather than simply between human actors. Workplace actors' interests are shaped in crucial ways by their positions within this structural dichotomy. LPT generally conceptualizes the employment relationship as being characterized by 'structured antagonism' (Edwards, 1990). That is, while in some circumstances workers and managers have shared interests (for example in the continued viability of an enterprise), their relationship is necessarily characterized by underlying conflict over the control of production and the distribution of resources.

A criticism of interest-based theories of workplace relations is that they assume the interests of management and labour to be predetermined and thus struggle to explain why patterns of conflict and compromise vary so much across different situations (Edwards et al 2006; Belanger and Edwards 2007). In an attempt to explain such variation, while recognizing that conflict is an inevitable part of workplace relations, Belanger and Edwards replace the concept of interests with the less deterministic notion of 'concerns' and argue that "the competing rationales of management and labour sometimes run in parallel, and sometimes not, and that their concerns are not unitary, fixed over time or predetermined" (2007: 715). If Belanger and Edwards' (2007) concerns are understood as specific micro-level manifestations of general macro-level interests, which are however relatively autonomous from these broader interests, the concept of concerns provides us with a way to understand how employee and management concerns can be reconciled, at least partially, which does not ignore the inevitability of conflict between broad and enduring class interests. Thus, when we talk about interests in the remainder of the paper, we conceptualise them as encompassing both broad class interests and related (and materially-based), but context-specific and localized, interests.

Edwards et al (2006) and Belanger and Edwards (2007) suggest that in some situations it may be possible for new approaches to labour management to simultaneously meet, to some extent, the interests of workers and management. Their suggestion is not that practices such as HPWS can generate the kind of 'win-win' outcomes beloved of unitarists or "dissolve class conflict" (Edwards et al, 2006: 134), but that in some settings the practices might deliver benefits to both parties in the employment relationship. If this is the case, it would allow us to make sense of the apparent mutual gains arising from HPWS, while simultaneously acknowledging the fact that conflict between the interests of workers and managers is always present. Edwards et al (2006: 129) argue that the interests of capital (and by extension managers) chiefly concern the effective operation of the enterprise, meeting competition from other enterprises and managing workers so that they work effectively in pursuit of organizational goals. There are numerous studies which demonstrate that HPWS practices are positively associated with outcomes which are clearly consistent with the interests of management in the effective functioning of organisations (see Becker and Huselid, 1998). It remains less clear that HPWS reflect employee interests. Edwards et al identify key worker interests as pay, working conditions and participation in decision making (2006: 129). Due to space constraints we have elected to focus on working conditions in the remainder of the paper. More specifically, we focus on the possibility that a key worker interest that might be enhanced by HPWS is the provision of a systematic, predictable and orderly working environment. Our inspiration for this focus is Edwards et al's (1998) 'disciplined worker thesis'. In their study of worker responses to quality management (QM) initiatives, these authors argue that workers have an interest in working environments which are orderly and disciplined, not chaotic. Systematic, predictable and orderly arrangements at work increase the likelihood that workplaces will be productive and thus viable, but also allow workers some degree of control over outcomes. To the extent that managerial initiatives have the effect of increasing order and predictability this may meet workers' interests in this regard, while simultaneously enhancing organizational performance.

How might HPWS practices be expected to increase predictability and order for workers? Answering this question requires consideration of what constitutes HPWS and how each of the elements might play a role in making workplaces more orderly and predictable environments. There is a lack of agreement about precisely what constitutes HPWS (Harley, 2005). Nonetheless, there is broad agreement about the three key features of HPWS: work organization; skills; and motivation (see Appelbaum (2002) and Harley (2005) for detailed discussion). At the heart of HPWS are forms of work organization which allow employees a degree of discretion and flexibility in terms of how they do their work. Autonomous or semi-autonomous teamwork is central to many accounts of HPWS, but the literature also emphasizes individual jobs which reflect a non-Taylorist approach and are characterized by discretion, the use of a range of skills, multi-tasking, continuous feedback and completion of whole tasks. All of these features of work organization could be expected to increase the extent to which employees enjoy orderly and predictable working environments, because they are likely to increase control of work processes, development of detailed knowledge of production processes and access to information on outcomes of work processes. Similarly, autonomous team membership ought to enhance influence over, and awareness of, processes within the workplace.

The second key feature of HPWS is a range of incentives and other measures aimed at motivating employees to work effectively. Particularly important in many accounts of HPWS is the use of performance management practices in the form of performance appraisal systems and performance-based pay. Performance management systems can be seen as part of a bureaucratic approach to controlling employees and production. Because they generally involve measurement of performance against some kind of target or benchmark, and link performance to rewards, they should provide employees with a clear set of expectations as well as with feedback on performance, thereby increasing predictability and order.

The final component of HPWS is skills. The argument made in much of the literature is that effective work organization and performance management systems function best when employees have the requisite skills. The key mechanism for providing employees with skills, obviously, is training. Again, we might expect an association between training and an orderly and predictable working environment, because when most or all employees are provided with appropriate training they are likely to know what to do and how to do it, although the impact of training on workplace predictability would depend on its content. For example, training which developed knowledge of an employee's place in the production process would likely have a stronger impact than training which emphasized narrow technical skills.

Based on the preceding discussion, it seems plausible that key HPWS practices will be associated positively with employees experiencing their working lives as orderly and predictable, which in turn should feed into positive experiences of work. Our aim in the remainder of the paper is to explore this possibility. The specific question which we seek to elucidate is: do HPWS contribute to positive experiences of work by meeting employees' interests, specifically by enhancing order and predictability at work? The remainder of the paper is devoted to an empirical exploration of this question. As the preceding discussion has highlighted, however, the available evidence suggests a variety of outcomes for employees from HPWS practices. As well as seeking to explore the apparent paths from HPWS practices to employee outcomes in a general sense, we are also interested in considering the specific contextual factors which might explain associations. Thus, in making sense of the results of our empirical analysis we seek to develop explanations involving features of the setting in which our research was conducted. We now turn to our dataset.

DATASET AND VARIABLES

This paper utilises data from a survey of Australian aged-care workers conducted in 2007 in Victoria. The respondents were registered nurses (RNs) and personal care workers (PCWs) randomly sampled from the membership rolls of the main nurses' union, the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF). We mailed 3000 questionnaires and received 974 useable responses (32% response rate). The questionnaire covered a range of topics, including the presence of practices associated with HPWS, individual and workplace features and orientations to work.

We collected data in aged care for a number of reasons. First, most studies of HPWS have utilised data from manufacturing or from large-scale national-level surveys, whereas the increasingly

important service sector has received relatively little attention (Harley et al, 2007). Further, there has been very little research indeed done on employee management in the aged-care sector. Aged care is also a potentially fruitful setting in view of our concerns in this research. Nursing and care work can be characterised as “mass-customised service work” (Sturdy and Korczynski 2005: 102). That is, while it is characterised by standardisation and efficiency, in contrast to service sectors such as fast food, aged care involves direct ‘customer’ interaction with staff in the production of service and the need to tailor services to meet customer needs. Managers need to exert direct control on employees in pursuit of standardised service, while at the same time using less direct techniques to encourage labour effort and flexibility. This configuration is characterised by Sturdy and Korczynski as “customer-oriented bureaucracy” (2005: 103), in which these potentially contradictory goals are pursued by a combination of bureaucratic controls and normative pressure from customers. We consider aged-care to be a good example of this ideal type. It is highly externally regulated and characterised by a high level of bureaucracy, but with staff who commonly express a very strong ethos of service to residents of aged-care facilities¹. In this context, HPWS, which emphasises a combination of bureaucratic control and employee discretion, might simultaneously facilitate standardisation and flexibility. Significantly for our research, it is also a mechanism which might simultaneously meet management interests in efficiency and productivity and employee interests in order and predictability. A final pragmatic reason to choose aged care is that the sector is highly unionised. Because much service sector employment in Australia is in small and geographically dispersed workplaces, it is difficult to identify samples of workers. High unionisation meant that, with the cooperation of the ANF, we could identify and access a large sample using their membership rolls.

Four sets of variables were used in the analysis (Space constraints do not permit inclusion of full details of variables or of univariate statistics, but they can be provided on request). A series of items captured key elements of HPWS. Elements of non-Taylorist work organisation were captured by an autonomous team membership variable and a composite scale capturing the elements of Hackman and Oldham’s (1974) job characteristics model. Four performance management items were used. The items loaded on a single factor and they also demonstrated sound internal consistency. Our final HPWS item asked respondents how much off-the-job training employers had provided in the past year. Our second group of variables captured employee experiences of work (hereafter, for convenience referred to as employee outcomes). The first measures affective organisational commitment, the second is a job satisfaction scale and the third an indicator of emotional exhaustion. The focus on satisfaction and commitment reflect the fact that these are key indicators of a positive experience of work and that they are ‘standard’ outcome measures in numerous studies of HPWS (eg. Appelbaum et al, 2000). We included a measure of emotional exhaustion because some scholars have argued that HPWS practices may increase pressure on employees by shifting responsibility for production tasks to them, thereby contributing to ‘burnout’ (see Appelbaum, 2002; Danford et al, 2004). Third, we sought to measure workplace predictability and order (hereafter referred to as predictability). We developed four items which captured different aspects of predictability and which we combined into a scale. Confirmatory factor analysis (principal components analysis with varimax rotation) showed that they all loaded on a single item. They also demonstrated sound internal consistency. Finally, we included a series of control variables which capture key employee characteristics as well as features of the workplaces where respondents worked. All analysis was conducted using SPSS 15.0. The next section of the paper presents the analysis and results.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To assess the extent to which HPWS practices work through enhanced workplace predictability it was necessary to test for mediating effects of the predictability variable on associations between HPWS practices and employee outcome variables (commitment, satisfaction and emotional exhaustion). This involved three steps (see Baron and Kenny, 1986). First, we tested whether the HPWS practices were associated with the outcome variables. Second, it was necessary to test whether the HPWS practices were associated with predictability. Table One presents regression analysis testing these two sets of associations. The regression analysis was run in two steps, with the control variables in the first step and the HPWS variables added in the second step. In every case the r^2 for the first step of the regressions was minuscule and in every case the addition of the HPWS items increased the r^2 value considerably. Even with the addition of the HPWS items, however, the models still only explained small percentages of the variance in the employee outcome and predictability variables.

In terms of the associations between HPWS practices and the employee outcome variables, autonomous team membership was associated only with commitment (positively). Training was weakly but significantly associated with commitment, satisfaction (both positively) and emotional exhaustion (negatively). Neither team membership nor training, however, was significantly associated with predictability. These results suggest that autonomous team membership is a relatively poor predictor of employee outcomes. Further, they suggest that there is not any mediating effect of predictability on associations involving either team membership or training. Consequently, both HPWS variables were excluded from further analysis. The job characteristics variable was significantly associated with all three of the outcome variables, positively with commitment and satisfaction and negatively with emotional exhaustion. Further, this variable was quite strongly, positively and significantly associated with predictability. These results suggest that the more non-Taylorist the job a worker occupies, the more likely s/he is to report a positive experience of work and the more predictable s/he will report her/his working environment to be. An identical pattern of results was found for associations involving the performance management scale, although the coefficient for predictability was much smaller. Again, the results suggest that the greater the extent of performance management and links between performance and reward, the more positive will be the experience of work and the more predictable will be the working environment. The results were consistent with a mediating effect by predictability on the associations between job characteristics and performance management and employees outcomes. To test for mediation, we ran stepwise regressions of the employee outcome variables on the HPWS and predictability variables. In the first step, the job characteristics, performance management and control variables were included, with the predictability scale added in the second step. The results are presented in Table Two.

Table One: Regressions of Employee Outcome Variables and Predictability on HPWS Practices and Controls

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	Commitment	Satisfaction	Emot. Exhaustion	Predictability
Step 1: Control variables				
Gender	-.08*	-.02	-.03	-.07*
Age	.08*	.11**	-.06	.01
Occupation	-.02	-.02	.02	-.05
Highest Qualification	-.01	.03	.04	-.03
Total Hours Worked per Week	.09**	.03	.03	.05
Tenure	.06	-.04	-.02	.03
Number of Beds	.00	.01	-.03	-.07*
Chain vs. Standalone	.06	.03	-.02	.05
Age of Organisation	.03	.09**	-.06	.06
Public vs. Private	-.01	.03	-.03	-.04
Not-for-Profit	.05	.03	.03	-.04
Step 2: HPWS Variables				
Autonomous Team M'ship	.06*	.03	.01	.04
Job Characteristics	.25**	.20**	-.17**	.41**
Performance Management	.25**	.18**	-.15**	.16**
Training	.11**	.06*	-.07*	.02
Step 1 adj R²	.03	.02	.00	.02
Step 2 change in adj R²	.20	.10	.08	.24
ΔF	64.91**	30.01**	21.33**	79.00**
N	974	974	974	974

Regression coefficients are standardized.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Dealing first with commitment, the results show that the addition of the predictability scale reduced the beta coefficient for both of the HPWS items slightly, although in both cases they remained statistically significant. These results suggest that predictability partially mediates the positive associations between the HPWS variables and commitment. Sobel's test showed that in both cases the mediation was statistically significant (job characteristics: $Z=6.910$, $p=.000$; performance management: $Z=6.615$, $p=.000$). A similar pattern resulted from the analysis involving satisfaction and again Sobel's test showed that the mediating effect was statistically significant (job characteristics: $Z=7.394$, $p=.000$; performance management: $Z=6.661$, $p=.000$). Turning to emotional exhaustion, the coefficients for both of the HPWS variables were reduced with the addition of the predictability variable. Again, Sobel's test showed that the mediations were statistically significant (job characteristics: $Z=-.732$, $p=.000$; performance management: $Z=-.649$, $p=.000$). These results suggest that predictability partially mediates the effect of the HPWS practices in reducing emotional exhaustion. In the next part of the paper we consider the implications of the findings.

Table Two: Regressions of Employee Outcome Variables on HPWS Practices, Predictability and Controls

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	Commitment	Satisfaction	Emotional Exhaustion
Step 1: HPWS Variables			
(Control variables included)			
Job Characteristics	.27**	.21**	-.18**
Performance Management	.27**	.20**	-.17**
Step 2: HPWS and Predictability			
Job Characteristics	.19**	.10**	-.07*
Performance Management	.24**	.15**	-.12**
Predictability	.19**	.25**	-.26**
Step 1 adj R²	.22	.12	.08
Step 2 change in adj R²	.03	.05	.05
ΔF	34.47**	54.07**	55.83**
N	974	974	974

Regression coefficients are standardized.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results presented above have significant implications for our understanding of HPWS, but before discussing the implications it is necessary to consider limitations. The first is that the study relies only on employee data. We must be very clear that strictly speaking any conclusions we reach are about employee perceptions of HPWS. That is, we are capturing the extent to which employees feel that they are subject to 'good' management practices, rather than the necessarily the presence of the practices themselves. Secondly, the research design introduces the possibility of common method variance (CMV). Data were collected using the same instrument and respondents, making it possible that associations between variables were artificially inflated (Podsakoff et al, 2003). Spector (2006) argues that the problem of CMV is often overestimated, but nonetheless we took steps to reduce it. Where possible we used different scale endpoints and formats for independent and dependent variables (Podsakoff et al, 2003). Dependent and independent variables were also separated into different sections of the questionnaire. Third, we can only generalize with confidence about unionized aged-care workers in Victoria. Having said this, we compared key demographic features of our sample (mean age, gender composition and mean work hours per week) to the national nursing labor force statistics (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003) and found no statistically significant differences. Moreover, we can make theoretically-informed inferences which are likely to be applicable beyond this setting. Finally, our research design has similarities with most other studies which have explored associations between HPWS and other workplace phenomena. The study is cross-sectional, so we cannot say anything about causal relationships. The strongest claim that we can make is that our results are *consistent with* the proposition that HPWS practices contribute to enhanced workplace predictability and through this to positive employee experience of work.

We now turn to the substantive implications of the findings. The central research question we set out to answer was: do HPWS practices appear to contribute to positive experiences of work because they contribute to meeting a key employee interest, specifically by enhancing order and predictability at work? To an extent, the results suggest an affirmative answer to this question. Employees who occupy 'good' non-Taylorist jobs and who work in workplaces with high levels of performance management are to that extent more likely to report positive experiences of work. The results also suggest that the increased positive experience of work results partly from increased workplace predictability, although there appear also to be direct effects from HPWS practices. Due to space constraints, we do not discuss the direct associations between HPWS and employee outcomes, but focus on the apparent effects via increased order and predictability.

First, how can we explain the positive associations between the HPWS practices on one hand and order and predictability on the other? That working in non-Taylorist jobs contributes to a predictable working environment is not surprising, but the result concerning performance management requires somewhat more explanation. Performance management is a central element of bureaucratic control systems (Edwards 1979), which are aimed at enhancing managerial control by putting in place systems of rules and procedures and linking advancement and rewards to measured performance (Gallie et al 1998: 59-60). In a setting which might be characterised as 'customer oriented bureaucracy', and in which employees enjoy a high degree of discretion, we would expect this kind of bureaucratic approach to be linked to predictability. The fact that neither autonomous team

membership nor training had any impact on predictability also requires some explanation. That teamwork is so ingrained in this context may explain the fact that formally-designated teams have no impact on predictability. In terms of training, the results may reflect the limited nature of the measure we used. Our questionnaire did not elicit details concerning the content of training and perhaps most employees in our sample were not subject to training which developed detailed knowledge of workplace policies and procedures.

We now turn to the finding that HPWS practices appear to work partly through enhanced predictability. In a general sense, it seems quite unremarkable that employees who work in orderly and predictable workplaces will have more positive orientations to work as proposed by the 'disciplined worker thesis' (Edwards et al 1998). To the extent that HPWS practices increase predictability then we would expect employees to be able to work effectively and to be more positively oriented to work.

Contextual factors appear to be important here. In recent years the Australian aged-care sector has been subject to twin pressures: a rapidly ageing population, which increases pressure on aged-care establishments and their staff; and changes in the aged-care funding arrangements which have led to cost-cutting as well as increasingly onerous reporting requirements. In this environment, and among a group of workers characterised by a strong ethos of service to residents, it is not surprising that employees find themselves struggling to provide the level of care that they would like, due to increases in paperwork and reductions in resources. In this context mechanisms which provide increased predictability and order, and which thereby allow employees to work more effectively, would be expected to contribute to an enhanced experience of work. We would suggest that the benefits of HPWS, through enhancing order and predictability, are likely to be particularly marked in settings where employees are under high levels of work pressure and experience their professional autonomy as under threat.

The findings have important implications. The inclusion of indicators of key employee interests in the analysis has provided a means to develop our theoretical understanding of how HPWS practices 'work' and also to contribute to the development of LPT. Our results indicate that in part HPWS work through meeting at least one key employee interest, thereby lending support to the 'disciplined worker thesis', as well as apparently operating directly through psychological mechanisms. This expands considerably on much previous theorising which assumed that their impact was purely psychological. Moreover, by confirming the importance of employee interests, the analysis provides us with empirical support for the theoretical proposition that interests provide us with a way of understanding the impact of HPWS, which can accommodate mutual gains while simultaneously recognising the reality of structured antagonism in the employment relationship.

We also raised the possibility that contextual factors play a decisive role in shaping outcomes and in our discussion we have tried to develop some preliminary insights into the specific circumstances in which HPWS practices deliver positive outcomes to employees. Although conclusions must remain speculative and provisional, the findings suggest that in settings which approximate customer-oriented bureaucracy, in which jobs are high quality and among skilled workers with a strong professional service ethos, HPWS practices deliver benefits to workers. Moreover, in this specific context some practices work partially via enhancing workplace order and predictability. The implication is that we can expect that in other similar settings – perhaps for example among professional staff in hospitals and university employees – we may find similar outcomes and apparent causal paths. The corollary of this is that among lower skilled staff, those who work in environments characterised by Taylorist jobs and so on, the positive outcomes may well not arise. The challenge for future research which seeks to go beyond universalist claims about the 'good' or 'bad' outcomes of HPWS is to test associations in a range of settings as a means to develop more detailed knowledge of when and how HPWS practices have positive or negative outcomes.

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ⁱ The claim that there is a strong professional service ethic among aged-care workers is based on qualitative work we engaged in as part of survey development, during which interviewees consistently and strongly stressed the importance of such an ethic in the industry.