

American Made: What Sort of Worker Are You?

For Christmas this year, my daughter gave me an unusual gift. She hired a service to deep clean my house for four hours.

At 9:15 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 17, a small car pulled into my driveway. Two men and a woman got out and removed buckets and supplies from the trunk, and we introduced ourselves. After welcoming them inside, I spent a few minutes showing them around the place. Then, this team—a wife, her husband, and their teenage son—treated me to a spectacle I haven't seen in a long time.

They worked not for the prearranged four hours, but for seven, offering several apologies along the way for taking so long to finish the job. Not once during that time did they take a break. They washed every overhead fan blade and light fixture, polished mirrors and the inside of every window, wiped the dust from every baseboard, scrubbed the bathrooms until they gleamed, left the stove looking like new, swept and washed the wooden floors, and knocked off a dozen more tasks.

Some people have their cars [detailed](#). By the time this crew had finished, I'd had my house detailed.

"The highest reward for man's toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it," [said](#) John Ruskin. Many people I know, including these cleaners, understand deep down that a job well done not only puts food on the table but also tells others who they are. It is their pride, hardwired inside their hearts and minds.

My arrangement with the cleaners could have gone so much differently. With no prior agreement to exact terms, this trio could have done a slap-dash job and left after the allotted four hours. They could also have easily claimed a lunch break

while on the clock.

Instead, they threw themselves into the work, didn't leave until the job was completed to their satisfaction, and yet still expected to receive only the agreed-on wages. With a dozen little details I've noticed since they left (who knew that the ring around the sink drain was copper colored instead of black?), they clearly took pride in their work.

Some thoughts followed the departure of this cleaning crew. Here, I told myself, was a work ethic which—if practiced by more Americans, particularly young people—would make our country a paradise. Yes, they worked for money, but they did the job with pride. And that pride, which also goes by the name of strong work ethic, is the element missing in so much of the workplace today.

Not so long ago, Americans were known around the world for their work skills and habits. This is no longer the case. Not only has the value placed on honest work diminished, but the idea of work itself has declined, particularly among men younger than 55 years old. "The labor force participation rate languishes at a miserable 62.3 percent—more than a [percentage point lower](#) than before the pandemic," reports Matt Welch in "[Americans Are Losing Their Work Ethic](#)."

Though he gives various reasons for this decline in participation rate—the U.S. now has a lower rate than all European countries except Italy—Welch also writes, "There are no silver-bullet explanations for the American defection from work."

Perhaps not. But surely one contributing factor is the absence of the idea that hard work is both necessary for survival and ennobles the worker. This explanation is hidden behind such obvious causes as government giveaways or the burgeoning disability rolls, the latter of which Welch says accounts for at least half of those missing in action from the work force.

To all those who give themselves fully to a task, however menial, my hat is off to you. You are the ones who are keeping this country alive. And to anyone struggling in a difficult job, I hope there is encouragement in Ruskin's quote: "The highest reward for man's toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it." Though the work may be hard, anyone who undertakes it becomes a better man.

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