

Breaking Down the “Minimum Wage Work Ethic”

MAY 12, 2020 BY MIRANDA MARQUIT

We hear a lot about the “minimum wage work ethic.” But what is it? And are we kind of missing the point? Because, if we're being honest, that minimum wage worker is probably working harder than you.

Right now, there's a lot of talk about workers making more on unemployment — at least temporarily due to the CARES Act.

Several years ago, I attended an event that involved a presentation on building a business. One of the quotes that stuck out to me was something to this effect:

If you want to make more than minimum wage, you can't have a minimum wage worth ethic.

First of all, this sounds like something you'd hear from classic MLM huns. But this quote also perfectly embodies the faulty idea that anyone can be rich with the right amount of hard work and gumption. The reality is far, far different.

Is Hard Work Really Enough?

As much as we like to think that America is an amazing meritocracy where anyone can be anything, the reality is that social mobility is stagnating to the point where **many countries in Europe boast better socio-economic opportunities.**

One of the biggest factors in where you end up in terms of success, whether that's a financial or educational success, has less to do with how hard you work and more to do with **how affluent your parents are.** That's kind of a bummer. Especially since we've been told since The Beginning that hard work is enough. Just work hard, and you'll eventually reach your financial goals.

As long as we turn a blind eye to the **systemic realities that promote income inequality**, things are only going to get worse. The truth? **More money means more choices** — and more opportunities.

And there's a good chance that you'll find yourself financially left behind, even if you don't have a “minimum wage work ethic.”

The REAL Minimum Wage Work Ethic

One of the issues I have the quote is that the assumption is that if you are making minimum wage you are somehow lazier than someone with a higher income. The reality is that a large percentage of minimum wage workers in the United States work very hard indeed – sometimes working multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

It's common to point to the **largely inaccurate picture of the “welfare queen”** and act as if that's the rule, not the exception. The true reality of the situation is that many of those on minimum wage work long hours at thankless jobs. Many of them work double shifts or try to coordinate jobs with a life partner in order to earn money that, all too often, is gone before the end of the month. **There are no places where the federal minimum wage is actually a living wage.**

We live in a time where productivity has increased to a relatively high point, but wages in many professions have remained stagnant – or even decreased in real terms. Overall, Americans work harder than they have in the past. Sadly, that work ethic isn't translating into higher income.

How Do You Make That Money?

When looking at the situation, you have to consider how those at the top of the socio-economic food chain make their money. Then you compare that to those working minimum wage jobs.

Most of the income seen by the wealthy in the last few years has been investment income. The rich irony of the myth of the “minimum wage work ethic” is that those earning minimum wage are working hard performing actual labor, while the wealthiest among us aren't even working for most of their income. Their money does the heavy lifting. (And don't forget that this sort of income is **taxed at a favorable rate** as compared to earned income.)

It's true that small business owners and others in the upper-middle class are in a different position. And entrepreneurs are notorious for working long hours. **While we laud the entrepreneur working 70 or 80 hours a week, we turn our noses up at the minimum wage worker who might be putting in similar hours.**

Let's be real. We say work ethic and hard work are things we value in people. However, work ethic isn't actually how we measure another person's worth. We value and respect people according to what hourly wage they pull down. The higher your hourly compensation, the “better” you are as a person.

But, because we are a country that has long prized hard work and effort, we still haven't separated the two. **We assume that a high hourly wage denotes some sort of virtue and a higher work ethic, even though that isn't the case.**

I Definitely Don't Have a Minimum Wage Worth Ethic

I see it in my own life.

Yes, I worked hard at the outset of my freelance writing career. But I didn't have to work all those hours for my entire life because **I am privileged enough that I had systemic help:**

- I grew up in a middle-class, suburban landscape where college attendance was a matter of course and the schools I attended were adequate in preparing me.
- I had access to opportunities – and the knowledge of those opportunities – from a young age.
- My support system is such that if I fail, I still have options and help available.
- The timing associated with my entrance into online content production, as well as my adoption of the financial niche, allowed me access to a number of connections and opportunities that I might not have had otherwise.

The conditions that surrounded my ability to advance — and the ability of Baby Boomers to feel as though merit matters — were **engineered through government and tax policies** following World War II. (We'll leave aside, for now, the policies that **excluded many people of color** from seeing the same level of financial and socio-economic advancement.)

These middle-class supportive initiatives are the very policies that have been under attack since the 1980s, and, combined with the new ways that money flows through the system, are creating new conditions that aren't as easy to overcome, no matter how hard you work.

Those who are stuck in minimum wage jobs often don't have access to the skills, knowledge, education, and opportunities that can lead to higher income. But that doesn't mean they aren't working hard. In fact, I know they're working harder than I am, and they are probably working harder than you.

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