
Work ethic in USA and Germany

Americans and Germans have different concepts of work ethic. The following article outlines the most important differences.

Practical experience

American employers lay emphasis on practical experience with the training on the job concept. Contrary to Germany where your potential employer focuses very much on education and qualification. In the United States, the focus on egalitarianism is stronger than for example in Germany: A person is rated rather by this practical experience and his proven expertise on the job than by this education and academic background. The latter gets less important for American managers if a person is good at what he's doing.

Pragmatism

Americans are more pragmatic and goal-orientated than Germans. For example, German business and academic meetings are longer than the American equivalent. While German businessmen tend to discuss all topics in detail to make sure everything is settled and agreed on, their American counterparts concentrate on getting a positive result as quickly as possible without paying much attention to minor issues.

Flexibility

Career flexibility, the willingness to change jobs and to face new challenges are much bigger in America than in Germany. Job security and a certain loyalty from both sides (employer/employee) still significant elements of work life in Germany and until the 1990s, it was common for employees to have worked for the same company for several decades. In contrast, it is not unusual for Americans to move cities and change jobs several times in a decade, especially if they hope to climb the job ladder.

Informality

American businessmen often make a very friendly, informal and self-confident impression on their German counterparts. Examples are the art of small talk to warm up and the use of first names from the very beginning. Both things are less common in Germany, especially the latter one. However, this informal atmosphere can be misleading because hierarchies and business decisions are much more formal and strict than they appear to be.

Religion and American Dream

Another difference between German and American ideas of work and career is the Protestant work ethic that plays a major role in American work life. This is related to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination where it is said that God has already determined every individual's fate. A person cannot influence his destiny but he can interpret signs that are indicators of his predestined fate. A sign for a positive destiny (e.g. salvation) is for example economic success, which can be achieved through hard work and virtue. Additionally, prosperity is a sign for God's favour. Therefore it is highly respected and acknowledged if someone has become wealthy as a result of his hard work, individual achievement and endurance. In Germany, this approach does not really exist. In America, however, this explains on the one hand the idea of the American Dream and the rags-to-riches myth. On the other, it makes clear why many Americans strongly identify with their job and career.

Job security

One factor that also contributes to American work ethic but that sometimes seems to be neglected is the low job security in American companies. Employees can be laid off quite easily and without a warning, especially compared to Germany. However, the better an individual's performance, the more secure this person's job will be. As a consequence, employees are highly motivated to deliver best results and have an impressively positive approach to work.