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True Grit: Can Work Ethic, Mettle and Drive be Taught?

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Grit, mettle, drive and work ethic are essential skills for success in the professional workplace, but not all new graduates have these skills. This paper highlights results from a qualitative research study about work ethic in the construction industry. Both student and employer perspectives are shared. Strategies about how to teach work ethic in academic curricula at higher education institutions are also discussed.

Keywords: work ethic, employability skills, grit, mettle

Introduction

Employers seek candidates who are reliable, dependable and productive – essentially, candidates with a good work ethic. However, research shows that new graduates lack this skill. In time and budget driven industries like the construction industry, a good work ethic is imperative for new hires. This paper will highlight results from a qualitative research study about work ethic in the construction industry. Both student and employer perspectives will be shared.

Literature Review

Hard work and a good work ethic are essential to succeed in any job (Nance-Sons, 2023). Meriac et al. (2023) found that grit and work ethic are both related to individual motivation and persistence. Meriac et al. (2010) defines work ethic as “an individual difference construct, specifically a set of beliefs and attitudes reflecting the fundamental value of work” (p. 316). Work ethic is related to various outcomes in the workplace such as performance on the job, motivation, a positive attitude at work, and task persistence (Meriac et al., 2023). Work ethic and grit are related skills. Morell et al. (2021) define grit as “passion and perseverance for achieving long-term goals and consists of two proposed subcomponents: consistency of interests and perseverance of effort” (p. 1038). Duckworth (2016) further describes grit:

To be gritty is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall seven times and rise eight. (p. 275)

Five characteristics that commonly describe grit are courage, conscientiousness, perseverance, resilience and passion (SACAP, 2019). Duckworth (2016) found that grit is a combination of nature and nurture. Individuals can be taught grit or how to increase their overall level of grittiness. Grit has four psychological paradigms: interest, practice, purpose, and hope (Duckworth, 2016). Strengthening these areas can help increase one's level of grit. The impact of grit has been documented in both the classroom and in the workplace. Grit has been found as an important factor related to student engagement and academic success. Students who both love what they do and work hard more often perform better and overcome challenges (Duckworth and Quinn, 2009).

According to research by Gray (2022) in an article for the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), 87% of employers say professionalism and work ethic are very important, but only 44% of new graduates are proficient in those areas. In a rapidly changing dynamic economy, employers seek candidates who are qualified and who can have an immediate impact on the workplace. Work ethic and grit are two characteristics that help candidates have that immediate impact.

Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized a multi-case study approach. The research study examined the soft and technical skills needed for a successful transition from college to a career in the construction industry. Grit, mettle, drive, and work ethic were skills the participants identified that were necessary to have a successful transition and to have an immediate impact in the workplace. According to Merriam (1998), "A case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group" (p. 9). Case studies are one methodology that can be utilized to systematically study a phenomenon. Case studies are used in a variety of disciplines and can utilize either a quantitative or qualitative methodology. However, case study research, especially qualitative case study research, is frequently used in education to understand and interpret educational phenomena. Educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to further understanding that can impact and perhaps improve practice (Merriam, 1998).

The twenty participants in this study were identified through purposeful sampling. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling is the primary strategy used in qualitative research, and this sampling technique allows researchers to select participants who can purposefully inform an understanding of the research questions. Merriam (1998) further explains that purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling and is the most appropriate sampling technique for qualitative case study research. To gain a broader understanding of the research topic, two sets of participants were included in this study. All of the participants were recruited through alumni and industry partner connections of the primary researcher.

One set of participants were graduates who earned baccalaureate degrees in construction management from Ball State University and who were currently working in the construction industry. These participants had three to five years of related work experience in the industry. The second set of participants were individuals working in the construction industry who had the responsibility to hire or onboard new construction management hires. These employer participants were currently employed by general contractors or subcontractors in the construction management industry. The employer participants were employed by companies that have recruited at Ball State University for at least three years and have hired at least one graduate from the Ball State construction management program. Only some of the employer participants had an academic background in construction management. Some of the employer participants worked in project management or estimating roles at construction companies. The rest of the employer participants worked in human resources at

construction companies. The companies for all of the participants were located in the Midwest and varied in both number of total employees and annual company revenue. All participants completed a semi-structured interview with the researcher that lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were completed either in person or on the phone. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded.

Each participant and their place of employment was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher for common themes and ideas. Quotes from the participants that relate to the common themes were highlighted in the interview transcripts and included in the findings section of the study. Data analysis for this study was continuous throughout the data collection process. Merriam (1998) explains, "Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 119). As the interviews were completed and the data was collected, the researcher looked for patterns and categories to make sense of the phenomenon being studied. Bodgan and Biklen (2007) suggested that researcher write observer comments during data collection. In addition to observer comments, Merriam (1998) recommended writing memos about what was learned during both data collection and data analysis. Both of these techniques were utilized during this study. During the interviews, the researcher wrote observer comments. For the interviews that were conducted over the phone, observer comments were written throughout the interview. For the interviews conducted in person, a few notes were made during the interviews, but more detailed notes were compiled after those interviews. The purpose of all the researcher notes and memos was to document the researcher's initial reactions immediately. These comments were reviewed and incorporated into the transcription of each interview. All of the transcriptions, researcher's notes, and questions sheets from the interviews were compiled into a researcher's journal. The journal provided a detailed audit trail that documented all methodological decisions and coding processes, which supported the study's reliability and dependability and minimized researcher bias. All of the information from the journal was reread and re-analyzed throughout the entire data analysis process. The researcher's journal also established reflexivity for this study. Husserl (1931) suggested using reflective journaling to achieve reflexivity and remain objective. Journaling before, during, and after the interviews with the participants allowed the researcher to remain objective and to reduce any bias and belief related to the phenomenon being studied.

Findings

The importance of grit, mettle, drive, and work ethic was one common theme identified by both sets of participants. As with any industry, construction management graduates need to be prepared to face certain challenges as they begin their careers. As Chase, an alumni participant, noted, "This is definitely a fast-paced industry and things definitely come at you fast. I don't know that anyone can ever really be prepared for that quickness." Chase furthered explained that he thought having a well-developed work ethic helped prepare him for the fast pace of the industry. Heath, an employer participant in the study, also discussed the challenges faced by graduates in the construction industry. Heath explained:

It's dog eat dog out there. Most of us have a firm eye on the bottom line, you need to toughen up a bit and don't expect people to sugar coat stuff for you. Don't expect to walk into negotiations and everyone be pal-pal. So that's another thing. Just be prepared. Because there are some rough and tough people out there.

Heath described that skill as having mettle or resolve. When asked if construction management curriculums or higher education institutions could somehow teach those skills to students, Heath was

unsure. He stated, “How do you teach someone mettle or resolve? That’s tough.” Bethany, another employer participant, agreed with Heath and talked about the same skill, calling it passion and drive. Bethany was responsible for recruiting, hiring, and on-boarding all new hires at her company. She noted a lack of both of these necessary skills in many new hires. When asked about soft skills new hires lack, Bethany said, “I say passion and drive. I think you cannot teach passion and drive, and I think about them as the same thing.” When talking to potential candidates, Bethany often asked this question, “Are you in construction because you’re passionate about it?” Bethany shared stories of seasoned employees at her employer who demonstrated passion and drive through their commitment to the company and to the projects to which they were assigned. These seasoned employees come to work on time, do not complain about the travel to and from job sites, and put in the work and effort needed to get the project done on time and correctly. Bethany does not see this same passion and drive in all new graduates. Though, as she described candidates with those skills, “If we see it in an interview, we typically see it on the job site.” While recruiting, Bethany gets excited when she finds a student with those skills. During this conversation about the lack of passion and drive, the researcher mentioned a quote shared by a professional in the construction industry, “You can’t teach hustle.” Bethany agreed. “You can’t! I don’t know either [how to fix that]. It’s quite baffling to me. Like you said, it’s almost scary. What are we going to do?” As the Baby Boomer generation continues to retire, more positions will be available for younger professionals in construction. Bethany was not the only employer interviewed who expressed concern about this lack of passion and drive and the long-term impact that could have on the construction industry. Shannon, an alumni participant, also discussed the need to have passion for one’s work and for the construction industry in general. Shannon described, “It’s long hours. Without a passion for what you do, you can struggle with the responsibilities. Construction is a lot of hard work.” Shannon talked about working multiple 12 to 14 hours days leading up to critical deadlines on the commercial construction projects she managed and how her passion for the construction industry helped make working those long days more bearable.

Russell, an additional employer participant in the study, also discussed the lack of passion, drive, and work ethic in new graduates. As a professional with around 12 years of experience, Russell did not consider himself a seasoned professional. However, he noticed a difference in the passion, drive and work ethic of professionals of his age compared to more recent graduates. Russell experienced the recession in 2008, which had a deep, negative impact on the construction industry and on his career. Russell found a professional position in the construction industry when he graduated but was laid off once the recession began. Though he searched, he could not find another position in the construction industry. He decided to take some time off from working in the industry, and when he returned to construction, he worked for a residential company, though he preferred the commercial side of construction. Russell noted that when he decided to return to working in construction, he was just glad to find a job in construction. Russell thought that the lack of passion, drive and work ethic could be attributed to the current strong construction economy. With so many job opportunities for new graduates in construction, some companies just need to hire people to fill positions. Companies are not necessarily concerned with the quality of candidates who are hired to fill positions. Even if a person can do some of the work, that is more work than was being completed prior to when that person was hired.

The construction industry is not a 40 work hour a week industry. The industry is known for starting work early and staying until the job is done. Recent graduates need to be prepared to go above and beyond the normal workweek to meet the demands of the industry. Grit, mettle, drive and work ethic are essential skills for success in the professional workplace.

Strategies to Teach Work Ethic in an Academic Curriculum

The following strategies are examples of methods higher education institutions can utilize to teach grit, mettle, drive, and work ethic in an academic curriculum. These strategies have been implemented in the construction management curriculum at Ball State University. Ball State University is a public higher education institution located in Indiana with a total enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. The construction management program at Ball State University was established in 2004 and has a current undergraduate enrollment of approximately 250 students.

Strategy 1: Set expectations early

One example strategy is to set expectations early. Setting expectations early helps to address the fast-paced nature of the industry as described by Chase. Chase noted that graduates are often not prepared for the “quickness” of the industry, while employers like Bethany observed a distinct lack of drive in new hires compared to seasoned employees. To help set expectations early, the construction management curriculum at Ball State University offers a separate freshmen orientation program for new students each fall. At this event, students are given a “How to be a successful construction management student” punch list of activities. The goal is that students will use this list as a guide to help successfully navigate their time in the program. In addition to punch list items for categories such as academics, involvement, and internship and career planning, the punch list has a separate category for professional development. This category emphasizes the importance of skills such as professionalism, organization, and accountability. By introducing professional development categories, such as accountability and professionalism, alongside standard academic requirements early in students’ academic careers, the program aims to close the gap between student habits and the hustle that employers find lacking in recent graduates. During the freshmen orientation presentation, students are told about the work expectations of careers in the construction industry. Students are encouraged to constantly exceed expectations in the classroom to help prepare them for their future careers.

Strategy 2: Hold students accountable to deadlines

Another example strategy is to hold students accountable and to hold firm to deadlines. Deadlines are critical in the construction industry. For example, submitting a bid even one minute late is considered non-responsive and disqualifies a company from consideration for that project. Submitting a bid in the incorrect format or not submitting all of the required information for a bid by the deadline is also considered non-responsive and disqualifies a company from consideration for that project. A mistake like not submitting a document on time or submitting the wrong version of a document could result in a construction company losing hundreds of thousands to even billions of dollars. Heath described the “dog eat dog” mentality still present in the construction industry. Because of the importance of deadlines in the construction industry, not accepting late work is a consistent course policy in the construction management academic curriculum. In order to best prepare students for the workforce, the academic learning environment should mimic the work place. This helps students to develop the “mettle and resolve” Heath identified as essential. While mettle and resolve might be hard to teach, consequences such as earning zero points for late work can help effectively modify behavior.

Strategy 3: Teach organization and time management skills

Another strategy to teach work ethic is to teach strategies for organization and time management skills. Shannon highlighted that her career in the construction industry often required working multiple 12-to-14-hour days to meet critical deadlines. A schedule with those long work days requires personal discipline, time management, and organization. The old adage states, “If you plan to fail, fail to plan.” Though course management systems such as Canvas and Blackboard utilized by higher

education institutions have many advantages, providing students with a calendar of upcoming due dates and deadlines can be problematic. There is no Canvas calendar in life. In the academic curriculum in the construction management program at Ball State University, specific lectures are included in a course at the sophomore level to introduce students to apps, technology resources, and more traditional ways of staying organized. Students are shown ways to utilize a course planner and electronic calendars. In addition, strategies on how to use a blank notebook to stay organized are also shared. By teaching students to utilize time management and organizations tools, the program helps build the self-reliance necessary to survive the demanding work schedules Shannon described. This strategy helps students navigate complex projects without the "hand-holding" that employers like Bethany find baffling in recent graduates. Developing these skills early in one's collegiate academic career will help prepare students to be organized once they begin their professional careers.

Strategy 4: Involve industry partners

Involving industry partners in an academic curriculum is another strategy to help show and teach students the importance of work ethic. Having industry partners serve as guest speakers in either classes or to student organizations helps students to further identify and to understand work ethic in their future profession. This strategy directly addresses the skepticism voiced by employers like Heath and Bethany, who openly questioned whether traits like "mettle" and "hustle" could be taught in an academic setting. The employer participants in this study are only a few examples of industry representatives who could share their experiences and expertise to students. Faculty can stress the importance of this skill, but often hearing it from those working in the industry provides actual recent and relevant examples of how critical work ethic is in the professional workplace. For example, being told that construction is not a 40 hour a week industry is one thing. Hearing from an industry professional who just finished a project where he spent three months working seven 12 hour days each week is another thing. Industry partner involvement can further reinforce the importance of grit, mettle, drive and work ethic and can help to better prepare students for these skills in the professional workplace.

Strategy 5: Encourage students to find related work experience early in their academic careers

A final strategy is to encourage students to find related work experience early in their academic careers. Related work experience provides students with more information about the day to day responsibilities of careers in an industry. Related work experience can include but is not limited to internships, co-ops, volunteer work, a part time job, or job shadowing. Students in the construction management program must complete at least two internships for academic credit in order to graduate. That is a total of 800 related work hours. However, many students opt to complete more than two internships. By forcing students into internships or co-ops early, the curriculum exposes them to the grueling "12 to 14 hour days" described by Shannon, serving as a critical reality check that a classroom cannot provide. This strategy aligns with Bethany's observation that true passion is best validated "on the job site," ensuring that students return to campus not just with credit hours, but with an understanding of the stamina and work ethic required for the industry. Students often return back to campus after internships more focused and with a greater understanding of their future career and industry.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged for this study. With only twenty participants, the sample size of this study was relatively small. Only utilizing participants who volunteered to participate in a study can lead to response bias which can also limit the results. In addition, the majority of the

participants worked in the same geographic area. All of the alumni participants were also graduates of the construction management program at Ball State University. Examining students and industry partners from only one academic program is limiting. A more diverse and larger sample would collect more information and would make the data more generalizable to the greater population. Furthermore, the construction industry is diverse with a variety of career opportunities and career paths. Though the participants in this study worked at a variety of companies, not all types of specialty construction subcontractors were included in this study. Additional research could interview graduates from different construction management baccalaureate programs to identify similarities and differences between the programs. Employer representatives from companies of different sizes and in different geographic areas could also be interviewed in future studies to expand the scope. Additional research could also expand the study to include longitudinal tracking of work ethic development or comparing perceptions about work ethic across generations systematically.

Conclusion

Grit, mettle, drive and work ethic are essential skills for success in the professional workplace. The strategies highlighted in this article are several examples of methods higher education institutions can utilize to teach these skills in an academic curriculum. Teaching these skills will help graduates be better prepared for their careers and have an immediate impact in the workplace.

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