
PRIVATE SECTOR WORK ETHIC: A STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS AND PERFORMANCE CULTURE IN GHANAIAN ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

Work ethic refers to the set of values, attitudes, and behaviours individuals bring to their work, which is widely believed to drive organisational performance. Yet the factors that shape work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises remain poorly understood. This qualitative phenomenological study investigates how competition, incentives, and leadership styles shape individual work ethic in Ghanaian private firms. Drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory, the study recruited 28 employees (15 male, 13 female) from 12 private enterprises (manufacturing, financial services, technology, retail, logistics) in Accra and Kumasi through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants completed in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring their work motivations, responses to competitive environments, experiences with incentive systems, and leadership influences on their work behaviour. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), yielding six superordinate themes: (1) Competition as Double-Edged Sword; (2) Incentives Beyond Money; (3) The Leadership-Performance Bridge; (4) Intrinsic Motivation as Sustainability; (5) Peer Culture as Informal Regulation; and (6) The Productivity Paradox of Presenteeism. Findings reveal that competition motivates high performers but demotivates and increases anxiety among lower performers. Non-monetary incentives (recognition, autonomy, developmental opportunities) were reported as more sustainable drivers of work ethic than monetary bonuses. Leadership styles characterised by psychological safety and fairness produced stronger work ethic than authoritarian or laissez-faire approaches. The Ghanaian cultural norm of presenteeism paradoxically reduced actual work ethic despite satisfying visible attendance expectations. These findings inform human resource

management practices, incentive system design, and leadership development in Ghanaian private enterprises.

KEYWORDS: *Work ethic, employee motivation, leadership, incentives, competition, Ghana, private sector, qualitative research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Work ethic is the invisible engine of enterprise performance. When employees bring diligence, initiative, accountability, and commitment to their work, organisations thrive. When work ethic erodes, productivity suffers, quality declines, and competitive advantage dissipates. Yet for all its importance, work ethic is not a fixed trait; it is shaped by the organisational environment, including how employees experience competition, respond to incentives, and relate to their leaders.

In Ghana's private sector, understanding what shapes work ethic has taken on new urgency. The private sector accounts for approximately 80% of formal employment and contributes over 70% of GDP. However, Ghanaian enterprises face persistent productivity challenges: output per worker lags behind regional peers such as Kenya and South Africa, and employee turnover rates in many sectors exceed 25% annually. Managers frequently complain that employees lack initiative, require constant supervision, and prioritise personal gain over organisational success. Employees, in turn, report that compensation is inadequate, recognition is absent, and leadership is unsupportive.

These complaints suggest a failure to align organisational practices with the psychological drivers of work ethic. Competition, incentives, and leadership are three levers that organisations can adjust, yet how these levers actually shape work behaviour in the Ghanaian context remains largely unexamined. This qualitative study addresses these questions by exploring the lived experiences of Ghanaian private sector employees.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite extensive international research on work motivation and performance culture, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific factors that shape work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises.

First, Ghanaian managers frequently borrow human resource practices from multinational corporations without adaptation to local cultural conditions. Performance-based pay, competitive ranking systems, and leadership styles developed in individualistic, low-power-

distance cultures may produce different effects in Ghana's more collectivist, higher-power-distance context.

Second, the relationship between competition and work ethic is undertheorised. Competition can motivate high performers but can also demotivate low performers, increase anxiety, and undermine collaboration. No qualitative study has explored how Ghanaian employees actually experience workplace competition.

Third, incentive systems in Ghanaian private enterprises are often reduced to monetary bonuses, ignoring evidence that non-monetary incentives can be more powerful. Fourth, the specific leadership behaviours that employees perceive as fostering work ethic have not been identified from the employee perspective. Fifth, no qualitative study has examined work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises from the perspective of employees themselves.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate how competition, incentives, and leadership styles shape individual work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises, from the perspective of employees themselves.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore how employees experience competition in the workplace and how competition affects their work motivation and behaviour.
- To examine which types of incentives (monetary and non-monetary) employees perceive as most effective in driving work ethic.
- To identify specific leadership behaviours and styles that employees associate with a strong work ethic.
- To understand how employees balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in shaping their work behaviour.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). SDT posits that intrinsic motivation, the most powerful driver of work ethic, is supported by satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (feeling volitional), competence (feeling effective), and relatedness (feeling

connected to others). Extrinsic incentives can support or undermine intrinsic motivation depending on how they are perceived.

Social Cognitive Theory emphasises reciprocal determinism: behaviour, personal factors, and environmental factors influence each other bidirectionally. Work ethic is shaped by observation of peers (modelling), self-efficacy beliefs, and outcome expectations.

5.2 Conceptual Review

Work ethic is defined as the set of values (beliefs about what is important), attitudes (evaluative feelings about work), and behaviours (actions such as diligence, punctuality, initiative, and accountability) that individuals bring to their work. Competition is operationalised as the presence of performance ranking, sales competitions, or peer comparison. Incentives include both monetary (bonuses, commissions) and non-monetary (recognition, autonomy, promotion, training) rewards. Leadership style refers to the pattern of behaviours leaders exhibit, including authoritarian, transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire approaches.

5.3 Empirical Review

International research has established that non-monetary incentives are often more effective than monetary incentives for complex knowledge work (Pink, 2019). Competitive environments produce mixed effects: they motivate high performers but demotivate low performers (Murnighan & Conlon, 2020). Leadership behaviours associated with a strong work ethic include fairness, psychological safety, and modelling (Bass & Avolio, 2018).

In Ghana, limited research exists. A quantitative study found that salary and job security were ranked as most important by Ghanaian employees, but did not examine non-monetary incentives (Amoako & Asante, 2021). No qualitative study has examined the lived experience of work ethic from the employee perspective.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly suited for exploring the lived experience of a phenomenon, in this case, work ethic, from the perspective of those who experience it daily. The goal of phenomenological research is to capture the essence of the experience, identifying common themes and patterns across participants while honouring individual variations. This design was appropriate because work ethic is a subjective, meaning-laden experience that cannot be reduced to quantitative measurements alone.

6.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between researcher and participant. This approach is appropriate for exploring subjective experiences such as work motivation, which are shaped by individual meaning-making and cultural context.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana, the two largest urban centres and the primary hubs for private sector activity. Accra is the economic capital, hosting the headquarters of most multinational corporations, large manufacturing firms, financial services institutions, and technology companies. Kumasi is the second-largest city and a major centre for commerce, retail, logistics, and light manufacturing. These two cities account for approximately 75% of formal private sector employment in Ghana. Interviews took place in private, comfortable settings chosen by participants, including private offices at participants' workplaces, hotel conference rooms, and quiet corners of coffee shops. The researcher ensured that each interview location offered privacy and freedom from interruptions.

6.4 Study Population

The study population comprised non-managerial and junior management employees working in Ghanaian private enterprises who had at least two years of continuous experience in their current organisation. This minimum tenure ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to the organisational environment competition, incentives, leadership to provide meaningful accounts of its effects on their work ethic.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) current employment in a registered private enterprise in Ghana (manufacturing, financial services, technology, retail, or logistics sectors), (b) minimum two years continuous employment in the current organisation, (c) non-managerial or junior management level (to capture front-line employee perspectives), (d) age 18 years or older, and (e) ability to provide informed consent in English.

Exclusion criteria were: (a) senior management or executive roles (as these employees experience different motivational dynamics), (b) less than two years tenure in current organisation, (c) current employment in public sector or non-profit organisations, and (d) inability to recall workplace experiences due to memory impairment or psychological distress.

6.5 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy combined with snowball sampling was employed (Patton, 2015). Initial participants were identified through professional networks, industry associations (Association of Ghanaian Industries, Ghana Employers' Association), and referrals from human resource managers of participating firms. The researcher contacted HR managers of 20 private enterprises across the five target sectors, explaining the study's purpose and requesting permission to invite employees to participate. Twelve enterprises agreed to participate.

Within each enterprise, HR managers provided access to a pool of eligible employees. The researcher purposively selected participants to ensure variation across sectors, gender, age, and tenure. Subsequent participants were referred by initial participants (snowball sampling), with the researcher verifying that referred participants met the inclusion criteria. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2020).

6.6 Sample Size

Phenomenological studies typically achieve saturation with 15–30 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study recruited 28 participants, which fell within this range and proved sufficient to achieve thematic saturation. Saturation was confirmed when three consecutive interviews yielded no new codes or themes.

Table 1: Participant Demographics. (N = 28)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	15	53.6
Female	13	46.4
Age		
22–30 years	10	35.7
31–40 years	12	42.9
41–50 years	4	14.3
51+ years	2	7.1
Sector		
Financial services	8	28.6
Manufacturing	6	21.4
Technology	5	17.9
Retail	5	17.9
Logistics	4	14.3
Tenure with current employer		
2–5 years	14	50.0
6–10 years	10	35.7

11+ years	4	14.3
Education		
Secondary	6	21.4
Diploma	8	28.6
Bachelor's degree	12	42.9
Postgraduate	2	7.1
Role level		
Non-managerial	18	64.3
Junior manager	10	35.7

6.7 Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. An interview guide was developed for this study based on the theoretical frameworks (Self-Determination Theory, Social Cognitive Theory) and existing literature on work motivation. The guide included open-ended questions organised into five sections: (a) understanding of work ethic and personal work values, (b) experiences with workplace competition and performance ranking, (c) experiences with incentive systems (monetary and non-monetary), (d) leadership behaviours and their influence on work motivation, and (e) peer culture and informal workplace norms.

Sample questions included: “Can you describe what work ethic means to you personally?” “Tell me about a time when competition at work affected how hard you worked.” “What kinds of rewards or recognition make you want to work harder?” “Describe a manager who brought out the best in you. What did they do?” “How do your colleagues influence your work ethic?” and “If you could change one thing about how your organisation motivates employees, what would it be?”

Demographic Questionnaire. A brief demographic questionnaire collected information on age, gender, education, sector of employment, job role, tenure with current employer, and previous work experience.

6.8 Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between August and December 2025. Each participant completed one in-depth interview lasting 60–90 minutes (mean = 74 minutes). Interviews were conducted in English, the primary language of business communication for all participants. All participants were fluent in English, as required by their employment in formal private enterprises.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the study purpose, assured confidentiality, and obtained written informed consent. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews followed the semi-structured guide, but the researcher remained flexible, allowing participants to introduce relevant topics

not anticipated in the guide. Probes were used to deepen responses (“Can you tell me more about that?” “What did that feel like?” “What happened next?”).

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ written consent. After each interview, the researcher recorded field notes capturing observations about participant affect (e.g., enthusiasm, hesitation, emotional response to certain questions), environmental context (e.g., interruptions, privacy level), and emerging themes that appeared worthy of further exploration in subsequent interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Participants did not receive any incentive for participation, though the researcher offered to share a summary of findings upon request.

6.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021). IPA is a qualitative methodology specifically designed for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences in this case, the experience of work and the factors that shape work motivation. The analysis proceeded through six phases:

Phase 1: Reading and re-reading. Each transcript was read multiple times (minimum three times) to achieve immersion in the data. The researcher read without taking notes initially, then re-read while beginning to notice patterns.

Phase 2: Initial noting. Line-by-line notes were made, capturing three types of observations: descriptive notes (what the participant said), linguistic notes (how they said it, including pauses, emphasis, repetition), and conceptual notes (emerging interpretations, connections to theory).

Phase 3: Developing emergent themes. Notes were transformed into concise statements capturing the essence of participant accounts. Each emergent theme represented a significant aspect of the participant’s experience of work ethic.

Phase 4: Searching for connections across themes. Emergent themes were clustered into superordinate themes based on conceptual similarities. The researcher created theme maps, grouping related themes and identifying higher-order categories.

Phase 5: Moving to the next case. The entire process (Phases 1–4) was repeated for each transcript, bracketing themes from previous cases to maintain openness to new patterns. This case-by-case approach prevents premature closure and ensures that later cases can challenge or modify emerging themes.

Phase 6: Looking for patterns across cases. Themes from all 28 transcripts were integrated into a final superordinate theme structure. The researcher examined which themes were

present across most participants (shared themes) and which were unique to specific participants (individual variation).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through member checking (six participants reviewed their transcripts and theme summaries and confirmed accuracy), prolonged engagement (the researcher spent 14 weeks in the field, building rapport with HR managers and participants), and peer debriefing (two colleagues with qualitative research experience reviewed the analysis and challenged interpretations). Dependability was established through an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, including theme development, inclusion/exclusion decisions, and revisions. Transferability was addressed through thick description of participants, organisational contexts, and findings, enabling readers to assess applicability to their own contexts.

7. FINDINGS

Analysis of the 28 participant interviews yielded six superordinate themes, each with subordinate subthemes. These themes capture the essence of how competition, incentives, and leadership shape work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises.

Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Subthemes.

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
1. Competition as Double-Edged Sword	Fuel for high performers; Fear and withdrawal for lower performers; The hidden cost of ranking
2. Incentives Beyond Money	Recognition as oxygen; Autonomy as trust; Growth as motivation
3. The Leadership-Performance Bridge	Psychological safety enables effort; Fairness as foundation; Modelling as silent teaching
4. Intrinsic Motivation as Sustainability	Purpose sustains when bonuses end; Pride in craft; The limits of external rewards
5. Peer Culture as Informal Regulation	Shaming as social control; Peer support as buffer; The visible hard worker
6. The Productivity Paradox of Presenteeism	Being seen vs. producing; Attendance as performance; The waste of hours

7.1 Theme 1: Competition as a Double-Edged Sword

Participants described competition as simultaneously motivating and anxiety-provoking, with effects varying sharply by performance level.

“Fuel for high performers.” High-performing participants described competition as energising:

"I am competitive by nature. When I see the sales board and my name is behind someone else, I work harder. I come in earlier. I stay later. Competition pushes me to be my best." (Participant 09, male, financial services, 4 years tenure)

"Fear and withdrawal for lower performers." Lower-performing participants described competition as demoralising:

"When they post the rankings every month, I know my name will be at the bottom. I stop trying halfway through the month because what is the point? I cannot catch up. The competition does not make me work harder; it makes me want to leave." (Participant 14, female, retail, 3 years tenure)

"The hidden cost of ranking." A participant described how competition undermined collaboration:

"We used to help each other. Now we hide information. I figured out a better way to process claims, but I will not share it because then my colleagues will beat me. The competition has made us enemies, not teammates." (Participant 22, male, financial services, 6 years tenure)

7.2 Theme 2: Incentives Beyond Money

While participants valued monetary incentives, they consistently described non-monetary incentives as more powerful and sustainable.

"Recognition as oxygen." One participant explained:

"The bonus is nice. But what I really want is for my manager to say, 'You did a good job.' Public recognition being acknowledged in a meeting, having my name mentioned that matters more than the cedis. It tells me I am seen." (Participant 03, female, manufacturing, 8 years tenure)

"Autonomy as trust." Another participant described the motivational effect of being trusted:

"My previous manager watched everything I did. He wanted to approve every email before I sent it. My current manager gives me targets and lets me decide how to achieve them. The trust makes me work harder. I do not want to let her down." (Participant 18, male, technology, 5 years tenure)

"Growth as motivation." A younger participant emphasised developmental opportunities:

"I will work extra hours for free if the company is teaching me something valuable. Training, mentorship, the chance to learn new skills that is worth more than a small bonus. Because those skills stay with me for my whole career." (Participant 26, female, technology, 2 years tenure)

7.3 Theme 3: The Leadership-Performance Bridge

Leadership style emerged as the single most important factor shaping work ethic, particularly through psychological safety, fairness, and modelling.

“Psychological safety enables effort.” One participant described:

“My manager creates an environment where I can say ‘I made a mistake’ without being shouted at. Because of that, I tell her early when there is a problem. I fix it before it becomes a crisis. If I feared her, I would hide the mistake until it was too late.” (Participant 07, male, logistics, 7 years tenure)

“Fairness as foundation.” Another participant described the demotivating effect of perceived unfairness:

“We see colleagues who do nothing get promoted because they are friends with the manager. When that happens, why should I work hard? The reward is not tied to effort anyway. Fairness is the foundation of work ethic. Without it, nothing else matters.” (Participant 11, female, retail, 5 years tenure)

“Modelling as silent teaching.” A participant described how leaders set a work ethic through example:

“My manager is the first to arrive and the last to leave. He does not ask us to do anything he would not do himself. I work hard because I see him working hard. Leadership is not what you say; it is what you do.” (Participant 19, male, manufacturing, 11 years tenure)

7.4 Theme 4: Intrinsic Motivation as Sustainability

Participants described intrinsic motivation, pride in work, sense of purpose as more sustainable than external rewards.

“Purpose sustains when bonuses end.” One participant explained:

“The bonus comes once a year. What keeps me working hard the other eleven months? I believe in what we are doing. We are helping small businesses get loans. That purpose matters to me. When the bonus is gone, purpose remains.” (Participant 05, female, financial services, 9 years tenure)

“Pride in craft.” Another participant described internal standards:

“I do not need someone to watch me. I have my own standards. If I produce poor work, I cannot look at myself in the mirror. That pride wanting to do good work for its own sake is what drives me.” (Participant 21, male, technology, 12 years tenure)

“The limits of external rewards.” A participant reflected:

“My company keeps increasing the bonus for sales targets. But after a certain point, more money does not make me work harder. The work is still the work. If I do not find meaning in it, the bonus will not create meaning.” (Participant 27, female, manufacturing, 6 years tenure)

7.5 Theme 5: Peer Culture as Informal Regulation

Peer culture shaped work ethic independent of formal management.

“Shaming as social control.” One participant described negative peer pressure:

“If someone is lazy, we all know. We do not say anything directly, but we stop helping them. We exclude them from lunch. The shame of being seen as the lazy person is a powerful motivator.” (Participant 13, male, logistics, 4 years tenure)

“Peer support as buffer.” Another participant described positive peer influence:

“When I am tired, my colleagues encourage me. ‘Come on, we can finish this together.’ When you see everyone around you working hard, you work hard too. It is contagious.” (Participant 24, female, retail, 3 years tenure)

“The visible hard worker.” A participant noted the visibility of effort:

“We all know who works and who does not. There is no hiding. That visibility shapes behaviour.” (Participant 01, male, manufacturing, 15 years tenure)

7.6 Theme 6: The Productivity Paradox of Presenteeism

Participants identified a uniquely Ghanaian challenge: the cultural expectation of visible presence regardless of productivity.

“Being seen vs. producing.” One participant explained:

“At my company, what matters is not how much you produce but that you are seen at your desk. I can finish my work by 2pm, but I must sit there until 5pm. Or I can do nothing all day but stay until 6pm, and the manager thinks I am a hard worker. It is backwards.” (Participant 08, male, financial services, 5 years tenure)

“Attendance as performance.” Another participant described the contradiction:

“If I produce more in six hours and leave on time, I am considered lazy. So I stay. I produce less. The company loses.” (Participant 16, female, manufacturing, 7 years tenure)

“The waste of hours.” A participant reflected:

“We all know that half the time we are at work, we are not really working. We are waiting for the clock. But no one wants to be the first to say it.” (Participant 25, male, logistics, 8 years tenure)

8. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study provides the first in-depth exploration of how competition, incentives, and leadership shape work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises. Six principal findings warrant discussion.

First, competition is a double-edged sword. It motivates high performers but demotivates lower performers and undermines collaboration. This finding aligns with international research but has particular salience in Ghanaian settings where job mobility is limited.

Second, non-monetary incentives recognition, autonomy, growth opportunities are more powerful and sustainable drivers of work ethic than monetary bonuses. This finding supports Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Third, leadership behaviours particularly psychological safety, fairness, and modelling are the strongest predictors of work ethic. This finding aligns with Social Cognitive Theory's emphasis on observational learning.

Fourth, intrinsic motivation sustains effort when external rewards are absent. Organisations that connect employees to purpose cultivate more resilient work ethic.

Fifth, peer culture regulates work ethic through both positive and negative mechanisms.

Sixth, presenteeism produces a paradox: employees are present but unproductive.

Limitations. Single-country study. Participants were volunteers, potentially over-representing engaged employees. Findings may not transfer to public sector or very small enterprises.

9. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigated how competition, incentives, and leadership shape work ethic in Ghanaian private enterprises. Competition motivates high performers but demotivates lower performers. Non-monetary incentives are more sustainable than monetary bonuses. Leadership behaviours psychological safety, fairness, modelling are the strongest predictors. Intrinsic motivation sustains effort. Peer culture regulates work ethic. Presenteeism paradoxically reduces productivity.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Redesign Competition Structures. Replace individual ranking with team-based goals or tiered competition recognising improvement.

Expand Non-Monetary Incentives. Provide public recognition, delegate autonomy, and invest in employee development.

Train Leaders on Psychological Safety. Include psychological safety, fairness, and behavioural modelling in leadership development.

Connect Employees to Organisational Purpose. Articulate how employee work contributes to meaningful outcomes.

Address Presenteeism Culture. Measure output, not hours; reward productivity rather than visible presence.

Conduct Longitudinal Research. Track how work ethic changes with organisational interventions.

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