



## Work ethic and grit: An examination of empirical redundancy



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between work ethic and grit. Several direct relationships were examined at the dimension and broader construct-level, as well as each variable's relationships with external variables. Work ethic and grit were moderately correlated at the broader construct-level, both related to conscientiousness, and several dimensions of the constructs were related. Work ethic explained significant incremental variance in job satisfaction and turnover intentions above and beyond grit. However, grit explained incremental variance in stress above and beyond work ethic. Study implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

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Work ethic has seen renewed interest as an individual difference variable in recent years. The work ethic construct can be defined as a multidimensional set of values reflecting the importance of work in an individual's life (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002). Concurrently, grit has emerged as a personality trait relevant in similar contexts, and is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Both work ethic and grit are individual differences related to important outcomes in work, education, and other domains. Given their conceptual similarities, it is important to examine the extent that these constructs are empirically distinct or redundant (Le, Schmidt, Harter, & Lauver, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationships among work ethic and grit. Similarities in dimensions of work ethic and grit are directly examined, as well as the unique variance in external variables explained by each construct.

### 1. Relationships between work ethic and grit

Work ethic pertains to situations where an effort–performance relationship exists, including work as well as other contexts such as academic/educational pursuits. Modern conceptualizations of work ethic reflect ideals underscoring the importance of work in a person's life, consistent with the concept of work values. Work ethic, as measured by the multidimensional work ethic profile (MWEP), is composed of seven sub-components: (a) *self-reliance*, (b) *morality/ethics*, (c) *leisure*, (d) *hard work*, (e) *centrality of work*, (f) *wasted time*, and (g) *delay of gratification* (Miller et al., 2002). Table 1 presents dimension names, definitions, and sample items. Meriac, Woehr, Gorman, and Thomas

(2013) developed a short form of the MWEP, which demonstrated equivalent psychometric properties compared with the full MWEP.

Grit is similar to work ethic as it is an individual difference variable related to one's effort toward task accomplishment. However, grit focuses more specifically on committing to consistently and loyally pursuing long-term goals over years, despite challenges along the way (Duckworth et al., 2007). In their work on defining the grit construct, Duckworth et al. (2007) delineated two dimensions: (a) *consistency of interests* and (b) *perseverance of effort* (See Table 2). Duckworth et al. defined grit as a personality trait closely associated with conscientiousness and related to achievement motivation. Duckworth and Quinn (2009) developed a short form to measure grit, with measurement properties comparable to the full grit scale.

Given the conceptual/content overlap between work ethic and grit, it is important to investigate their similarities and differences. As constructs proliferate in related research areas we tend to find extensive content overlap among them (Le et al., 2010). To determine whether constructs are redundant or distinct, evaluations must be made on theoretical and empirical levels to reduce the uncertainty that exists on each construct's discriminant validity in their broader nomological network (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

Although no direct empirical investigations of the relationships between work ethic and grit have been undertaken, these variables are expected to be related. Foremost, both constructs are relevant for situations where an effort–performance relationship exists. Broadly speaking, work ethic reflects an orientation toward work in general, where individuals with higher levels of work ethic are more likely to remain engaged in performance-related tasks. Likewise, grit appears to be more focused on consistent task persistence when one encounters adversity. Both variables appear to overlap when examining the item content. It is possible that the work ethic dimension of hard work is

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**Table 1**  
MWEPE dimension definitions and sample items.

Dimension	Definition	Sample items
Self-reliance	A drive toward independence and not having to rely on others in task accomplishment.	One must avoid dependence on other persons whenever possible.
Morality/ethics	The tendency to engage in just and moral behavior.	It is never appropriate to take something that does not belong to you.
Leisure	A high value on down-time or non-work activities.	The world would be a better place if people spent more time relaxing.
Hard work	The belief that an increased level of effort or continued persistence is the key to goal achievement.	If one works hard enough, one is likely to make a good life for oneself.
Centrality of work	The belief that the act of working is important in its own right.	Even if I inherited a great deal of money, I would continue to work somewhere.
Wasted time	One's belief in the importance regarding the productive use of time.	I constantly look for ways to productively use my time.
Delay of gratification	The tendency to delay rewards until a later time after work is completed.	Things that you have to wait for are the most worthwhile.

Note. A full list of items is available in Meriac et al. (2013).

positively related to the perseverance of effort dimension of grit, given that individuals with high levels of these variables would be more likely to continue to persist on tasks. In addition, individuals who are able to maintain their focus on a task may be more likely to put off rewards until a later time. Accordingly, the grit dimension of consistency of interests should be positively related to the work ethic dimension of delay of gratification.<sup>1</sup>

**Hypothesis 1.** Work ethic and grit will be positively related.

**Hypothesis 2.** Perseverance of effort (grit) will be positively correlated with hard work (work ethic).

**Hypothesis 3.** Consistency of interests (grit) will be positively related to delay of gratification (work ethic).

## 2. Relationships among work ethic, grit and conscientiousness

Work ethic and grit tend to be positively correlated with a third variable, conscientiousness. Specifically, Miller et al. (2002) found that work ethic dimensions were correlated with conscientiousness on average, at .34 and .17 in two samples, but work ethic explained incremental variance in work attitudes beyond conscientiousness. Christopher, Zabel, and Jones (2008) demonstrated that several dimensions of work ethic were related to facets of conscientiousness. Similarly, Duckworth et al. (2007) found that grit was correlated with conscientiousness in two different samples at .77 and .64, but also found that grit explained incremental variance in outcomes beyond conscientiousness.

Given that work ethic and grit are both related to conscientiousness, one could reasonably expect that they should be positively related. However, grit has been specifically framed as a component of conscientiousness, albeit distinct from other common facets (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013). In contrast, work ethic is broader in that it appeals to more work-related activities and should theoretically have less shared variance with conscientiousness than grit. Thus, we expect that both work ethic and grit will be related to conscientiousness, but the relationship between grit and conscientiousness will be stronger than the relationship between work ethic and conscientiousness.

**Hypothesis 4.** Work ethic will be positively related to conscientiousness.

**Hypothesis 5.** Grit will be positively related to conscientiousness.

**Hypothesis 6.** Grit will be more strongly related to conscientiousness than will work ethic.

<sup>1</sup> The consistency of interests (grit) and leisure (work ethic) subscales were reverse-coded to convey the findings more clearly and for the purpose of creating composite scores.

## 3. Incremental variance explained by work ethic and grit in outcomes

Previous research on work ethic and grit has been conducted in separate domains. Generally, work ethic has been examined in the organizational sciences literature and examined as a predictor of work outcomes. In contrast, research on grit has primarily been conducted in educational/academic contexts. However, findings from both contexts are expected to generalize to other domains, such as work and hobbies. Although the two constructs have different origins, they are both expected to be relevant to situations where an effort–performance relationship exists.

Work ethic has been demonstrated as a robust predictor of job satisfaction (Meriac et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2002). Given that work ethic reflects the intrinsic value of work in one's life, individuals with higher levels of work ethic may satisfy needs through work itself. Only recently have researchers begun to examine grit as a predictor of work attitudes. In a student sample, grit was positively related to life satisfaction (Singh & Jha, 2008). However, in a study of physicians, grit was not associated with job satisfaction (Reed, Schmitz, Baker, Nukui, & Epperly, 2012). Collectively, work ethic has consistently been shown to be positively related to job satisfaction, while there has been less conclusive evidence for grit's effect on job satisfaction. Here, it is expected that work ethic will explain incremental variance in job satisfaction beyond grit.

**Hypothesis 7.** Work ethic will explain incremental variance in job satisfaction above and beyond grit.

Previously, work ethic and grit have been examined separately in relation to turnover. Saks, Mudrack, and Ashforth (1996) found that individuals with higher levels of work ethic were more likely to remain employed with their organizations. Similarly, grit has been demonstrated as related to turnover in a variety of settings, including military academy cadets (Duckworth et al., 2007) and sales representatives (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). Likewise, work ethic has been demonstrated as an effective predictor of turnover intentions, such that individuals with higher levels of work ethic are less likely to turnover (Meriac et al., 2013). Theoretically, individuals with higher

**Table 2**  
Grit-S dimension definitions and sample items.

Dimension	Definition	Sample items
Consistency of interests	Maintaining one's focus on a goal until it is completed.	I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
Perseverance of effort	An individual's persistence toward goal pursuit when facing obstacles or challenges.	I am a hard worker.

Note. A full list of items is available in Duckworth and Quinn (2009).

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