

Islamic Work Ethic in Organizations: Principles, practices and contemporary challenges

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Abstract

Qualitative case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with seven Malaysian experts to explore the principles, practices, and contemporary challenges of the Islamic work ethic in organizations. The Islamic work ethic is rooted in *tawhid*, which emphasizes work as worship (*ibadah*) and as a sacred trust (*amanah*) for which every human is accountable. Practically manifested through professionalism, integrity, trustworthiness (*amanah*), benevolence (*ihsan*), precision (*itqan*), and its practice faces internal and external challenges. Consequently, the appreciation of Islamic values and their deep embedding in an organizational work culture can strengthen governance, integrity, and the effectiveness and sustainability of an organization's performance.

Keywords: Islamic work ethic; principles; practices; challenges

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1.0 Introduction

The Islamic work ethic is a concept encompassing moral, ethical, and spiritual values derived from the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. The values found in these two sources will shape an individual's attitude and behavior in carrying out their tasks and responsibilities at the workplace. Wahab and Wahab (2021), in their study of the banking sector in Malaysia, emphasize that the Islamic work ethic comprises elements of trust, honesty, discipline, and sincerity that significantly enhance organizational commitment to work and tasks. This study found that the Islamic work ethic has a strong positive relationship with effective, normative, and continuous employee commitment. They state that when Islamic values are embraced and practiced in the workplace, a more integrity-driven and productive work environment can be created (Hasan, 2024). In line with this, Syahdila (2023) emphasizes that the Islamic work ethic is not only oriented toward material achievements but also serves as a form of worship that brings a servant closer to Allah SWT. In her study, she stated that values such as honesty, trustworthiness, discipline, and diligence in work are manifestations of a person's faith and piety. In this context, work is seen as a form of worship that requires a high level of moral and spiritual commitment. A study by Shahzad et al. (2024) also supports this view, finding that this Islamic work ethic can shape professional, integrity-driven work behavior. Workers who practice these Islamic values in their jobs demonstrate a high level of teamwork, accountability, and social responsibility.

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These values are essential qualities that must be present in every employee to ensure organizational effectiveness and develop a competitive workforce.

2.0 Literature Review

Existing research consistently shows that the Islamic work ethic is vital. It nurtures employees whose values drive organizational success and builds a persona of professionalism and integrity (Wan Azli et al., 2025). Without such core values, society faces grave consequences, including rampant corruption and national decline. Al’Fattah and Rahayu (2023) emphasize that Islamic work ethics positively impact organizational commitment. They found that honesty, discipline, and trust shape a productive work culture, reduce turnover, and improve overall performance. Organizations that champion these principles tend to have more motivated and loyal workers. This strengthens the effectiveness of human resource management (Falach et al., 2023). Sudirman et al. (2024) link the Islamic work ethic with family well-being and job performance through the principle of *maslahah* (public interest). Their findings show that integrating Islamic values in the workplace can benefit society, families, and individuals. These values, grounded in justice, benevolence, and social responsibility, can strengthen family relationships and significantly improve employees’ quality of life.

Furthermore, a study among Jakarta MSME workers by Widiasih and Andriani (2022) found that the Islamic work ethic can encourage positive employee behavior. Qualities like teamwork, social responsibility, and mutual support sharpen an organization’s edge. Research also shows that embedding Islamic values into work ethic not only boosts performance but also strengthens workplace relationships (Latief & Abubakar, 2025). Studies on the impact of the Islamic work ethic reveal that it produces employees with positive attitudes, such as fairness and loyalty. This stabilizes organizations by lowering turnover and avoiding the disruptive cycle of constantly recruiting and training new staff. However, in today’s globalized era, Islamic institutions struggle to ensure these values are practiced in the workplace. Past research highlights how the Islamic work ethic can improve performance and well-being, but today’s reality is more complex. A troubling gap exists: the lack of integration of good values into individuals’ spiritual and social lives can lead to unethical behavior at work (Azizi, 2025).



Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework of Study
(Source: Authors)

Figure 1 above depicts the theoretical framework of the study, developed from a literature review examining the relationships among core Islamic values, employee behavior, organizational effectiveness, and contemporary challenges. This framework emphasizes the theoretical and practical implications, namely the importance of cultivating values, leadership grounded in Islamic principles, and strengthening work ethics as worship (*ibadah*) to ensure organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to explore the fundamental principles of the Islamic work ethic from expert perspectives, examine its practical implementation in organizational settings, and identify the contemporary challenges in its application. Additionally, the study aims to analyze how Islamic values of work ethic can be effectively integrated into organizational policies, leadership practices, and work culture to enhance governance, integrity, and overall organizational performance.

3.0 Methodology

This study was a qualitative case study, with the leading research instrument being a semi-structured interview with seven distinguished experts from public universities (PU) and selected Islamic institutions across Malaysia (refer to Table 1) for three months starting

November 2025 until January 2026, utilizing purposive sampling. The sampling technique used in this study included seven participants (Ahmed, 2025). The interview data were meticulously analyzed through thematic analysis, facilitated by ATLAS.ti9 software, revealing three overarching themes: (i) Islamic work ethic, (ii) Practices and contemporary challenges, and (iii) Islamic work ethic in organizations. The identified themes, meticulously established by the research team, fully align with the study's objectives.

Table 1. Participant's coding of the study

Institutions	Codes
Institute of Islam Hadhari, UKM	P1
Academy of Islamic Studies, UM	P2
Faculty of Human Ecology, UPM	P3
Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM	P4
Center for Islamic Development Management Studies, USM	P5
Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM)	P6
Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM)	P7

(Source: Study Sampling)

4.0 Findings

This section presents the results of the semi-structured interview.

4.1 Islamic Work Ethic

"Clarity of vision based on *tawhid*, focus on goals, self-reflection or evaluation of achievements, and the awareness that work is part of worship and responsibility to Allah SWT." (P1)

"The strength of Islamic work ethics lies in its sources...not only relying on human sources such as human reason and human experience alone, but also based on more authoritative sources, namely textual evidence like the Quran and Hadith...perhaps cultural elements and *urf* should also be taken into account" (P2)

"The Islamic work ethic is based on the concept of *tawhid*, which is the belief in Allah SWT that work is a trust entrusted to humans...work is seen as a form of worship and trust that demands a balance between worldly life and the hereafter" (P3)

"For me, there are two main principles of the Islamic work ethic, which are intention and actions that must align with Islamic principles." If we look at the verses of the Quran, much emphasis is placed on aspects of relationships and transactions, and all these principles can be applied in the context of work. The Islamic work ethic is based on commendable traits and adheres to the manners and morals required in Islam" (P4)

"The main foundation that can be seen from this approach is a strong attachment to the aspect of divinity...based on the oneness of God, followed by worship." In the context of work, it is seen as a trust and moral responsibility. The entire execution of his work is based on the right intention, carried out according to Sharia, and ultimately aimed at *martatillah*, which is to attain the pleasure of Allah SWT... the Islamic work ethic also emphasizes the aspects of integrity and trustworthiness" (P5)

"...in Islam, work is considered a form of worship...it requires intention...in the Islamic work ethic, there are also halal and haram boundaries" (P6)

"...the foundation of monotheism, the right intention, the concept of work as worship and trust, as well as the emphasis on balancing material achievements and spiritual values...management and execution of work with integrity and ethics...can be linked to the emphasis on good governance...all these aspects of work need to be carried out in accordance with Islamic principles" (P7)

4.2 Practices and Contemporary Challenges

"I find a tendency among Islamic scholars to discuss science and work ethics, but without understanding the limits of the scientific framework itself... the Islamic work ethic is built on the right intention, a clear vision, meticulous planning, honesty, justice, and reliance on Allah SWT." This is what distinguishes the Islamic work framework from the Western framework, which places more emphasis on material results alone" (P1)

"If more Islamic work ethics are practiced within an organization, the implications and positive effects would certainly become broader and more significant...the main challenge in practicing Islamic work ethics stems from oneself, in addition to being influenced by the space and opportunities present in the work environment." If someone truly wants to practice Islamic work ethics, it comes down to their own will and determination" (P2)

"In the context of modern work, the Islamic work ethic can be seen through professionalism, integrity, and trustworthiness in carrying out tasks." The values of mercy and kindness also serve as important foundations for ensuring workers' well-being, thereby helping achieve a balance between this world and the hereafter. In the current context, Islam is often misunderstood and associated with extremism or violence. When someone understands the Islamic work ethic, it shapes them into a holistic, universal worker capable of achieving success and happiness" (P3)

"...when a Muslim or an organization practices the Islamic work ethic, the practice is usually done informally... it would be better if this Islamic work ethic is clarified and reinforced in the form of organizational policies... it would be more effective if the organization clearly states that the work is carried out based on Islamic principles... the main challenge in maintaining and practicing the Islamic work ethic is related to awareness... the aspect of holistic human resource management based on Islamic values is very important" (P4)

"When the values of the Islamic work ethic are practiced by a Muslim, it will shape a noble character and be considered good in the eyes of religion." The individual will have strong self-discipline, will not be involved in corruption, will not abuse power, will keep promises, and will carry out tasks with full devotion to Allah. They see the work they do as a field of righteous deeds that will be presented to Allah SWT. The first challenge is society's understanding of the Islamic work ethic. The second challenge is the dominance of a capitalist system based solely on material wealth and profit...the pressure to achieve key performance indicators (KPIs) also becomes a significant challenge" (P5)

"...discipline... avoiding abuse of power or corruption... work with full dedication, yes, based on the concept of *itqan*, being diligent and professional in doing something to the best of your ability, and then maintaining integrity, especially in financial management." The pressure challenges that may arise from the current materialistic culture. Similarly, in today's culture, there are disruptions from technology and social media. "Next, there will also be a conflict between work and worship" (P6)

"...various noble values such as trustworthiness, honesty, efficiency, and other positive values will emerge." These values directly shape the integrity of an employee. The Islamic work ethic produces employees who are not only efficient but also effective in carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to them. As a result, work productivity improves and becomes higher quality. The challenge is the influence of social media and the increasing infiltration of Western elements into society...a work culture that is overly performance-oriented" (P7)

4.3 Islamic Work Ethic in Organizations

"The Islamic work ethic is built on universal values that are inclusive. Therefore, the Islamic work ethic is well suited to practice in Malaysia's multicultural society, provided it is translated wisely, ethically, and in line with current realities" (P1)

"This is because the nature of Islam itself is one of mercy for all the worlds." Anything that is advocated in Islam, especially related to work ethics such as trustworthiness, honesty, responsibility, and other noble values, is actually universal values... when Islamic work ethics are given attention, their implementation usually begins with the formation of an Islamic work ethics policy as one of the organizational policies that must be adhered to and practiced by all members of the organization... the Islamic work ethos is more appropriately evaluated thru the level of appreciation and practice as a work culture within the organization, because that is what ultimately has a real impact on the quality and effectiveness of work" (P2)

"The teachings of Islam have indeed been relevant since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) until now." This teaching remains relevant across various societal contexts... the Islamic work ethic is evergreen and applicable throughout the ages... leading by example is a very important aspect... implementing a more flexible work policy... and using key performance indicators (KPIs) as a measure of productivity. All these approaches, in my opinion, can translate religious values such as trust, benevolence, and compassion into the work practices of contemporary organizations, in line with the principles of Islamic work ethics" (P3)

"The principles of Islam are always interpreted and applied in line with contemporary situations." The Islamic work ethic should be practiced by the entire society, regardless of religion. If we look at the values emphasized in the Islamic work ethic, such as justice, good morals, tolerance, trustworthiness, and responsibility, all these values are universal values that are also taught in other religions. The Islamic work ethic can be measured and observed practically through a comprehensive performance management system, evidence-based, and emphasizing not only work results but also the behavior and attitude of employees" (P4)

"...in translating the Islamic work ethic into the organization, every trust and task assigned must take into account the capabilities and welfare of the employees. The Islamic work ethic can only be effectively translated into organizational policies and leadership styles when there is understanding, awareness, and commitment from the leadership." With wise adjustments, these values can strengthen organizational governance and foster a work culture that is characterized by integrity, fairness, and balance" (P5)

"...these Islamic principles are universal and aligned with the moral values practiced or shared by all religions and cultures...through the concept of leadership, yes." Leadership through trust...a fair and equitable work culture...emphasizing professionalism and diligence...governance free from corruption and implementing the decision-making process through the concept of *shura* practiced in Islam...work quality can also be measured through customer feedback or through annual evaluations conducted by superiors" (P6)

"The values brought by Islam are also universal and suitable for practice by all nations and followers of religions, not limited to Muslims only." It is indeed appropriate to be implemented and practiced in the governance system and work culture in Malaysia...it can be translated into work policies through the establishment and application of clear and agreed-upon organizational values...the Islamic work ethic can be effectively translated through organizational policies and practiced through a value-based leadership style" (P7)

5.0 Discussions

The first theme of the study focuses on the concept of the Islamic work ethic. The Islamic work ethic is based on *tawhid*, which emphasizes work as worship and a trust that is entrusted to humans. According to Khairullah et al. (2022), there are four conditions that must be met for the work we do to be rewarded as worship, namely (i) the work or profession does not contradict Islamic law, (ii) Correct intention, (iii) not neglecting more important fundamental duties, and (iv) performing any transaction or work perfectly. In addition, it requires clarity of vision, correct intention, and alignment between intention and execution, in accordance with Sharia principles. Based on textual evidence, it emphasizes good morals, integrity, trustworthiness, and the boundaries of halal and haram while balancing worldly demands with spiritual values and supporting ethical and effective governance practices. It aligns with the main principles of Islamic corporate governance that emphasize transparency, accountability, responsibility, freedom, and justice (Mohamad Kamil et al., 2025).

Next, the second theme of the study focuses on the practices and contemporary challenges in implementing the Islamic work ethic. The Islamic work ethic practically embodies values of sincerity, professionalism, integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and excellence, which contribute to employees' well-being and to improvements in organizational quality and productivity. It aligns with the study by Rofie et al. (2025), which states that the practice of *itqan* can shape individuals and organizations into competitive, integrity-driven, and quality-oriented entities. However, its practice faces internal and external challenges, including varying levels of individual awareness, limited understanding, pressure to achieve KPIs, the dominance of a materialistic culture, technological influences, Western values, and the absence of formal institutionalization of Islamic work ethics in policies and human resource management.

Finally, the third theme of the study focuses on the Islamic work ethic in organizations. The Islamic work ethic in organizations is based on universal values that are inclusive and characterized by mercy toward the world, making it suitable for practice in a pluralistic society. Its implementation requires contextual interpretation through the formulation of value-based policies, leadership by example, and a comprehensive management and performance evaluation system. Embracing the values of trust, justice, benevolence, and compassion as part of the organizational culture can strengthen governance, integrity, and the effectiveness and sustainability of organizational performance. According to Halik et al. (2024), the work culture of modern organizations demands that employees innovate and adapt, collaborate and cooperate, be open and transparent, focus on performance and results, and embrace diversity and inclusivity.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the Islamic work ethic within an organization is a holistic framework built on the pillars of *tawhid* (oneness of God), *amanah* (trust), and *ihsan* (excellence). It demands a seamless alignment between one's intentions, values, and actions, effectively transforming professional work into a form of worship (*ibadah*). Principles such as justice, integrity, discipline, efficiency, and social responsibility do more than just build a worker's character; they are the backbone of an organization's effectiveness and long-term sustainability. However, in today's world, bringing these ethics to life is no easy task. Organizations face the constant pull of materialistic cultures, the pressure to exceed productivity targets, conflicting values, and gaps in value-based leadership. To truly strengthen this work ethic, total commitment is needed from both management and staff. It requires a culture where values are lived out, leaders lead by example, and support systems align with the *Maqasid Syariah*, ensuring the organization stays competitive without losing its human and spiritual soul. This study is limited by its qualitative design and small sample of seven experts, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The use of purposive sampling may introduce bias, as it reflects the perspectives of selected experts rather than a wider population. Additionally, the study relies on perceptions rather than actual organizational practices, and its focus on Malaysian academic and Islamic institutions may limit its applicability to other sectors or contexts.

This paper offers qualitative insights into the principles, practices, and challenges of the Islamic work ethic in the Malaysian context. It integrates ethical and organizational dimensions into a coherent framework and provides practical guidance for embedding Islamic values in policies, leadership, and workplace culture. To move forward, several key recommendations have been identified. Firstly, organizations should develop a structured Islamic work ethic that is not merely a philosophy but a formal policy. Values like *tawhid* and justice should be woven into human resource policies, performance reviews, and codes of conduct. Secondly, it is by strengthening the Value-Based Leadership. In this context, leaders need specific training to become true role models (*qudwah hasanah*). They must learn to balance the drive for productivity with the well-being of their people, making decisions guided by the higher objectives of Shariah. Thirdly, the organization should implement continuous education. In essence, Islamic work ethics should not be merely symbolic. There must be ongoing programs such as ethics training and reflections (*tadabbur*) on "work as worship" to ensure these values are felt and practiced in daily tasks. Fourthly, systems that support work-life balance and spiritual health are essential to prevent burnout and the "dehumanization" of the workforce. Finally, for future research: There is a need for more "action-based" research to examine how these ethics perform across different sectors. This is especially vital in the face of digitalization and globalization, ensuring the model stays relevant, practical, and impactful.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Working Environment

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