

Native American and Indigenous Peoples' World of Work



Mohawk Skywalkers Build Skyscrapers

**Dianna L. Stone, Kimberly M. Lukaszewski,
Brian Murray**

Research in Human Resource Management

Native American and Indigenous Peoples' World of Work

Research in Human Resource Management

Series Editors: Dianna L. Stone, James H. Dulebohn, Brian Murray, Kimberly M. Lukaszewski.

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Cover photo: Photograph on the cover shows Jay Jacobs and Sparky Rice, Kahnawá:ke Band of Mohawks, skywalkers building skyscrapers. David Grant Noble, Photographer.

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*We dedicate this book to Jay Jacobs, Sparky Rice, and Kahnawá:ke
Band of Mohawks who helped build the U. S., and David Grant
Noble who memorialized their work.*

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x ▪ About the Editors

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CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' WORK VALUES AND REWARD PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

Although Native Americans and Indigenous people have high unemployment rates, and have been excluded from many organizations in the Americas, there is evidence that they view work as extremely important, and are typically driven, skilled, focused, and dedicated to the task at hand (Kachina House, 2017). Despite these accolades, there has been little research on Native Americans' work issues, and we believe that it is important for employers to understand their work values, expected work roles, and reward preferences. Thus, the primary goals of the present article are to (a) identify the potential work-related values of Native Americans based on their cultural values, (b) consider the

factors that may influence their job satisfaction and job choice, (c) highlight their reward preferences and factors that may affect their work motivation and retention rates, (d) present directions for future research on Native Americans' work issues, and (e) offer suggestions that organizations might use to attract and retain them. It is our hope that this article and the other articles in the issue will enhance the work opportunities of Native Americans, ensure that organizations can benefit from their many talents and skills, and give Native Americans the chance to enjoy a satisfying and fulfilling work life.

Keywords: Work values; cultural values; cultural norms; culture; motivation

The photograph on the front of this book reflect the image of the Mohawk people building skyscrapers in New York City (NYC) ([Smithsonian, 2024](#)). It is very unusual to see Indigenous people building high rise towers, but in 1886 members of the Mohawk tribe started building bridges in Canada and skyscrapers in NYC. They were called skywalkers and traveled from the borders of Canada and the Northeast US states to work on towering buildings including the Empire State Building, the original World Trade Centers, the Chrysler Building, the Freedom Tower (i.e., One World Trade Center), and many others. These jobs were very risky, but offered excellent wages and enabled them to support their families and their communities (i.e., Akwesasne, St. Regis Mohawk Reservation). They also took great pride in their work, and performed dangerous jobs thousands of feet in the air without safety nets. They quickly earned reputations for being skilled, courageous, dedicated, agile, resilient, able to concentrate at great heights, and “having real grit.” All of these qualities had been used to describe the Mohawk people throughout their history, so it was not surprising that they brought the same skills, work ethic, and determination to build skyscrapers. The skywalker jobs also became a right of passage for the Mohawk people, and many generations worked as ironworkers. An interview with a Mohawk grandmother, Lynn Beauvais, indicated that “They were also a band of brothers who were extremely committed to each other ... and their work” ([National Public Radio, 2005](#)).

We believe that this is an excellent example of the work ethic of Native Americans (NAs), and it is clear from the example that they can make many important contributions to organizations and our society. It is also evident from the history of skywalkers that they were extremely dedicated to their work, took enormous pride in building skyscrapers, and performed risky jobs with exceptional skill. NA tradition has always viewed work as extremely important, and analysts argued that NAs are typically driven, skilled, focused, and committed to the task at hand ([Kachina House, 2017](#)). Despite these accolades, surprisingly little research has examined the work-related values of Native Americans or Indigenous people, in general (e.g., [Al-Asfour et al., 2021](#); [Dabdoub et al. 2021](#)). There are approximately 1.8 million NAs

in the US population, and 476 million in 90 nations throughout the world (United Nations, 2024). Further, relatively little research has focused on the factors that affect their work motivation, job satisfaction, pride in work, or retention in organizations (e.g., Al-Asfour et al., 2021; Albers, 1996; Dabdoub et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2017). Most of the existing research has focused on the high unemployment rates of indigenous people (i.e., 11.1% compared to 4% for all others) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). It has also tried to identify the reasons for these consistently high unemployment rates (e.g., lack of education, remoteness of reservations, unfair discrimination, alcohol use) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Although Indigenous people experience numerous work-related problems around the world (Statistics Canada, 2024), this article focuses primarily on the Indigenous people in the US, Canada, and Australasia, which is a subregion of Oceania comprised of Australia, New Zealand, and neighboring islands in the Pacific Ocean (De Brosse, 1756). Prior to considering NA work issues, we need to define several of the terms used in the article. First, the term Native American refers to American Indians or Alaska Natives, who are any of the original peoples of North, Central, and South America who maintain tribal affiliation and community attachment to the area (Norris et al., 2012). Second, the term Indigenous people refer to distinct, social, and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands where they live or from which they have been displaced (Amnesty International, 2024). Finally, in Canada they use the term First Nations to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Metis nor Inuit (Indigenous Foundation, 2024). It merits noting that we use the term Native Americans in this article, but many of the issues we consider apply to all Indigenous people throughout the world.

As noted previously, NAs often have high unemployment rates in the US and around the world (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), and this may lead some employers to perceive that NAs are not motivated to work, and do not want to pursue jobs. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The labor force participation rate among Native Americans is 60% which is very similar to that of their counterparts (e.g., 62% for European-Americans) which suggests that they are just as likely to join the workforce as others (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). In Canada, 60.5% of Indigenous people participate in the labor force compared to 65.3% of others (Statista, 2024). Thus, Indigenous people in Canada are just as likely to participate in the labor force as others.

Although there is little research on NAs' work issues, it is important for employers to understand their work values, job choice preferences, and reward preferences. However, there is a paucity of research on these issues, so the primary purposes of this article are to (a) identify the potential work-related values of NAs based on their cultural values, (b) consider the factors

that may influence their job satisfaction and job choice, (c) highlight their reward preferences and factors that may affect their work motivation and retention rates, (d) present directions for future research on NA work issues, and (e) offer suggestions that organizations might use to attract and retain them. Each of these issues will be discussed below. At the end of this article, we also provide a brief overview of the articles in the issue.

Prior to considering the cultural and work values of NAs, we want to emphasize that NA tribes vary in their specific cultural values, but most of them share a common set of cultural values. However, it merits caution that all members of a culture may not endorse these cultural values (i.e., [Betancourt & López, 1993](#); [Triandis, 1994](#)). Thus, when we consider NAs' cultural values in this article, we want to emphasize that these values apply, on average, but do not necessarily apply to all members of a NA culture.

NATIVE AMERICANS' WORK VALUES

An understanding of NAs' work values is important because they are the guiding principles an individual uses to direct their behavior and decision-making in work organizations ([Cherrington, 1980](#)). They reflect what is important to the person and what a person prioritizes in their lives ([Cherrington, 1980](#)). They also help employers ensure that an employee's job aligns with their personal goals and long-term aspirations. To date, we know of no research that has directly assessed the work values of NAs, but we use research on NAs' cultural values to make inferences about their potential work values (e.g., [Jumper-Reeves et al., 2014](#); [Meyer, 2009](#); [Pewewardy, 2002](#)). The predictions made about NAs' work values made from their cultural values are noted below.

NA culture often emphasizes collectivism, cooperation, harmony, the wellbeing of the family and tribe, and sharing with others (e.g., [Jumper-Reeves et al., 2014](#)). For those who are familiar with pow wows they know that NAs often share small gifts with all people who attend. NAs also generally emphasize equality (low power distance), lack of materialism, respect for individual autonomy and freedom, creativity, the connectedness of all living things, and respect for elders and tribal leaders ([Jumper-Reeves et al., 2014](#); [Meyer, 2009](#)). In contrast, European Americans have very different cultural values, and most of the practices and policies of work organizations in the US and many Western nations are based on European values ([Trice & Beyer, 1993](#)). These cultural values stress competitive achievement, individualism, materialism, equality, directness, efficiency, independence, assertiveness, and commitment to hard work ([Trice & Beyer, 1993](#)). As a result, European Americans' work values typically involved a dedication to work which means people work long hours, and emphasize going above and

beyond standard work requirements (Trice & Beyer, 1993). These behaviors are beneficial to work organizations, but they may also create stress and overload among workers.

European Americans' work values also emphasize equality and nondiscrimination, but their behaviors and actions do not always appear to support these values (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Thus, scholars have argued that these beliefs are a paradox because individuals espouse beliefs in nondiscrimination and commitment to equality, but a large percentage of the population (e.g., 80%) has experienced unfair discrimination or observed unfair treatment against ethnic minorities (e.g., African Americans, Hispanic Americans) and religious minorities (e.g., Muslims) (Pew Research Center, 2024; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

In view of the differences in NAs' cultural values and the values of US organizations (Trice & Beyer, 1993), it may be quite challenging for NAs to fit into European-American organizations, and it may also be difficult for European-American managers to attract, motivate, and retain NAs. Thus, it is very important that managers in European-American organizations understand the work values of NAs so that they can attract, retain, and work effectively with them. In the following sections we consider the cultural values of NAs and how they might influence their work values and behaviors.

Work Values Based on Collectivism Cultural Values

As noted above one of the most important cultural values of NAs is collectivism (i.e., including family or tribal groups) which means that they are likely to emphasize organizational or team goals over their personal goals (Meyer, 2009). Further, NAs may also be more likely to value working as part of a team than working alone. Similarly, they should be more loyal to their coworkers and more likely to help them than their counterparts who are individualistic (Meyer, 2009). Their collective value system should also increase collaboration among workers and enable teams to complete tasks more effectively in a much shorter time frame. In contrast, European-Americans emphasize individualism which means that they put the good of the individual over the group (Trice & Beyer, 1993). As a result, they may be more competitive and less collaborative in work organizations than NAs (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

NAs may also prefer a consensus style of decision making rather than other forms of making decisions (e.g., autocratic decision making), and emphasize family friendly work policies or time off to spend with their families. Interestingly, some research has shown that people who value collectivism (e.g., Asians) often have lower levels of conflict, greater social harmony, more respect for others, higher levels of cohesiveness, and support

for other organizational members than those who are individualistic (Gelfand & Realo, 1999). To our knowledge, no research has directly examined the influence of NAs' collectivism on their work values, attitudes, and behaviors. As a result, we believe that future research should examine these relations.

Work Values Based on Equality

Some research shows that NAs are more likely to emphasize equality or low power distance than some of their counterparts (e.g., Hispanics Americans) which means that they may stress the equality of all members in an organization (Jumper-Reeves et al., 2014; Stone-Romero et al., 2003). This implies that they may not be comfortable with an organization that has a strict hierarchical structure or a highly competitive reward system which often results in a hierarchy based on individual performance. Their belief in equality may also affect their reactions to reward allocations, and they may prefer across the board pay raises to those based on differences in performance levels (Stone et al., 2007). Interestingly, the use of across the board pay raises is counter to the underlying values of most Western organizations who believe that pay for performance motivates employees, and across the board raises do not (Trice & Beyer, 1993). European-American managers also believe that across the board raises means that poorly performing employees will get the same raise as highly performing ones, and high performing employees will decrease their performance and motivational levels because they are not rewarded for exerting more effort (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Given that NAs value equality and teamwork, then differential pay raises based on performance may not be particularly motivating for members of this group. NAs may also value equal treatment in job assignments, and promotion opportunities rather than competitive outcomes based on performance ratings.

There has been some research that individuals who have collective cultural values (e.g., Asians) believe that everyone should receive the same rewards (Leung & Bond, 1984). Researchers have also argued that people who endorse highly collective values also believe in the equal allocation of rewards (Steiner, 2001). This contradicts US managers' beliefs that rewards should be allocated based on employees' performance, and workers are more motivated when rewards are competitive than when they are not (Steiner & Gilliland, 2001). Although research supports the argument that workers who emphasize collectivism (e.g., Asians, Hispanic Americans) are more likely to prefer equal allocations of rewards, we know of no empirical research on NAs reactions to different reward allocation systems. Thus, we believe that future research should focus on NAs employees' reactions to different reward allocations.

Work Values Based on Lack of Materialism

Another unique aspect of NAs' cultural values that may influence their work values is that they are less likely to emphasize materialism than European-American individuals (Meyer, 2009). NAs stress that one should only work for what one needs, and they do not believe in stockpiling money over time. Wealth is typically perceived in nonmonetary terms such as caring for one's family or being generous with others (Meyer, 2009). Most US based organizations assume that people work primarily for money, and they use monetary rewards to motivate workers' performance (Trice & Beyer, 1993). However, we believe that these monetary reward systems may be less effective with NAs than with European-American employees. One of our colleagues (E. Stone-Romero, personal communication June 1, 2024) told us about three newly hired NA workers in an organization. The NAs came to work on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the first week, did a good job, but did not show up for work on Thursday or Friday. When they returned to work, their supervisor asked why they only came to work for three days rather than five. They responded that they earned enough money to meet their needs in three days, and did not need any more money that week. As a result, they felt it was not necessary to work the last two days of the week. It should be evident from this example that NA workers may not always be motivated by monetary gain or increased wealth, and their cultural values suggest that nonmonetary reward systems may be more motivating for them than money (e.g., time off to spend with family, recognition for helping coworkers). Given the difference in NA and European-American reward preferences, it is important that research identify the types of rewards that NAs believe are attractive. The example noted above also revealed that NAs may not always understand the expected work roles of employees in US organizations so they may need to be trained in the organization's work roles and work norms. NAs may not be the only ones who are not familiar with work norms or rules. Research has shown that Hispanic Americans may have different work roles and norms, and may have to be trained on organizational roles (Stone-Romero et al., 2003).

Work Values Based on Respect for Individual Autonomy and Freedom

NAs' cultural values also emphasize respect for individual autonomy and freedom (Jumper-Reeves et al., 2014). As a result, they may react more favorably to jobs that offer autonomy over how they perform their work, and respond more negatively to close supervision than others. Given NAs emphasis on autonomy, they should be especially suited to jobs that offer a great deal of autonomy (e.g., physician, house cleaner, research scientist,

business owner, artist, consultant). However, they may be less likely to fit with jobs that require that employees follow strict rules and procedures (e.g., assembly-line work).

Job autonomy refers to the degree to which employees can control decisions over work methods, the sequence of work, and have a voice in how to complete their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Research has shown that job autonomy often has a positive impact on employees' job satisfaction, work behaviors, and retention rates (e.g., Hackman et al., 1978). One reason for this is that autonomy gives employees a sense of control over their work, and it enhances their engagement in work and overall well-being (e.g., Hackman et al., 1978). Studies have also shown that job autonomy promotes information exchange which enhances employees' creativity and innovation (e.g., De Spiegelare et al., 2016). Although research has shown that job autonomy is positively related to the attitudes and behaviors of European-American employees, we know of no research that has assessed these relations with NAs. Thus, we believe that future research should address these important issues.

Work Values Based on the Meaningfulness of Work

Another important cultural value of NAs is that they emphasize that work should be meaningful. The meaningfulness of work is often defined as the view that one's work leads to the accomplishment of worthwhile goals, and valuable contributions to one's group or society (Bailey et al., 2019). Stated somewhat differently, when work is perceived to lead to valuable contributions for families, tribes, or the overall society then employees are more likely to believe that their work is significant and worthwhile (Bailey et al., 2019). In view of this cultural value, NAs are likely to believe that serving one's country in the military, teaching native children, or caring for tribal elders are examples of meaningful work because these jobs make important contributions to others. Based on these examples, we assume, as do others (Bailey et al., 2019), that the meaning of work is typically based on one's ability to express one's cultural values and meets one's personal and cultural ideals and standards (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Quite simply, work that allows one to express their cultural values may be more satisfying and motivating than work that does not fit with one's cultural values.

Research has shown that employees who perceive that their work is meaningful are more likely to have high levels of work performance (Bailey et al., 2019) and experience a deeper level of satisfaction with their work (Duffy et al., 2013) than those who do not perceive their work is meaningful. Studies have also shown that employees who perceive that their work has meaning display more energy and enthusiasm at work (Bailey et al.,