The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age
by Pekka Himanen

Reviewed by David W. Gill  www.ethixbiz.com

Pekka Himanen is a philosopher with connections to the universities of Helsinki and California (Berkeley). Linus Torvalds, creator of the Linux OS, and Manuel Castells, Berkeley professor of sociology and information age expert, provide a prologue and epilogue to Himanen's text.

Himanen defines "hacker" as someone enthusiastic and passionate about computer work (or, for that matter, any kind of work activity: it is that attitude that counts). In the popular mind, hacker means someone who "hacks" their way into cyberspace where they don't belong (Pentagon, bank records, etc.). Himanen calls these crooks "crackers" not "hackers."

Himanen describes a new "ethic" or value system that is supplementing the older "Protestant work ethic" described famously by sociologist Max Weber. First, rather than a grim Calvinistic duty, work in the hacker ethic is full of passion, joy, and entertainment. Second, rather than being motivated by pecuniary gain, the hacker attitude toward money is cavalier: hackers share widely and freely what they have (as Linus Torvalds has with the Linux operating system. Thirdly, hacker social relations occur in a "nethic"--a web-facilitated network of free and open exchange of ideas and of ready access to all the people.

The historical, sociological, and theological arguments of this book would be fun to debate. I grant the existence of the caricatured Protestant work ethic but would argue that it was in part a product of technological innovation (the clock, for example) and it is unlikely to have its weaknesses corrected by further technological innovation. More importantly, I see little evidence of any sense of calling (vocation) in today's work force and without this there is no recognizable Protestant work ethic---nor is there much sense of Sabbath. Forces other than either the Protestant work ethic or the hacker ethic are ruling our work world today and this book does not engage them very directly. The Protestant work ethic is an anachronism and a straw man.

Nevertheless, Himanen's hacker ethic is a beautiful ideal which I heartily applaud. I doubt that even 1% of computer technologists really share these ideals in any real, lived-out way, but the book is well-worth buying (it's not hacker-ethic-cheap, unfortunately!) and discussing.