Cheating: a crime or a minor misdemeanor

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These are the findings of the GfK Custom Research international study on cheating

Nuremberg/Frankfurt am Main, June 27, 2008 â€“ Deceiving people is not an option, according to two thirds of the respondents to a survey on cheating carried out in 19 countries by GfK Custom Research and commissioned by The Wall Street Journal Europe. Unlawful behavior when it comes to tax and business was considered a particularly difficult issue, with around three quarters of respondents identifying this as a major problem in their home countries.

Almost half of all respondents thought that more cheating goes on now than ten years ago, with a mere 10% believing that fraud levels have fallen. Where business is concerned, more than half those asked thought that more people are fiddling the books these days. There were disparities from country to country. A good 70% of Turks, Hungarians and Greeks believed that tax fraud and cheating in business was more common today, and the same percentage of respondents in these countries perceived a stronger tendency towards tax evasion. What is remarkable is that only just under a third of Dutch and 40% of Russians and Bulgarians thought that tax fraud had increased. Germany is somewhere in between, with a slim majority believing that there was more tax fraud now than ten years ago. A third of Germans thought there had been no change.

Fair play reigns supreme
Six out of ten respondents considered that some degree of subterfuge was going on in sport and games. However, there were a few countries whose respondents identified a clear trend towards cheating in this area. These nations include Sweden, Portugal, Greece and France in particular.

The Swedes, above all, are of the opinion that more people are cheating at school and university than ever before. The Germans, on the other hand, were the only country where the majority did not believe that the situation had changed in their country. Looking at all countries as a whole, 36% of respondents shared this view, with 42% of the opinion that incidences of cheating had increased. One in six of those asked thought that cheating was unacceptable in exams.

Similarly, 60% of respondents were of the opinion that when it came to matters of the heart, honesty was the best policy. However, more than 40% did not take this matter as seriously as before. The Turks (76%) and the Greeks (69%) in particular testified to this development, followed by the Americans (58%). This issue was least important to the Bulgarians and Romanians.

Dishonesty in the workplace towards colleagues is the only area where peopleâ€™s perceptions have changed relatively little compared with ten years ago. 41% said they did not think there had been any change in the level of honesty, with just 35% indicating that they thought there had been some deterioration.

Business ethics called into question
Seven in ten respondents regarded tax and business fraud as a significant problem. In particular, 92% of Turks and Italians had little faith in the business ethics in their own countries, followed by the Hungarians and Greeks. When it came to the subject of tax evasion, around nine in ten Turks, Italians, Hungarians and Greeks believed there to be a sorry state of affairs in their own countries, and the Portuguese followed closely behind. The Germans take on the situation was similar to the Western European average, with three quarters of Germans regarding tax fraud and unlawful business practices as a major problem.

Two thirds disapprove of cheating
As for the question of whether cheating could ever be considered acceptable, 66% of those asked believed that untruths could never be acceptable. This view was shared especially by Americans, Portuguese, Turks and Hungarians. Around eight out of ten of the respondents from these countries disapproved of any kind of cheating and three quarters of Germans, Greeks, Dutch and Czechs shared this opinion. Across all the countries, just 15% of the respondents accepted cheating, but only if this involved a minor issue. A total of 12% said they turned a blind eye to cheating if this would wipe out past misdemeanors. The Russians take this moral issue least seriously of all: just four Russians in ten said they believed that deceitful behavior was unacceptable.

One in three of us cheat
Three in ten respondents admitted to having cheated at school or university and one in five to having cheated on their partner. In sport and games, 13% owned up to having cheated and almost as many to deceiving their work colleagues.

Just 7% confessed to having committed tax and business fraud.