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Ethics in Technology

by

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### Abstract

Organizational leaders need to consider how technology and computers are consistently changing and how questions of ethics within their organizations affect quality and productivity. With these technological changes it is necessary to look at what organizational leaders and employees are doing from an ethical standpoint. A look at the possibilities of a universal standard for technological codes of ethics is addressed.

As technology changes and grows, access to information is also changing. Personal privacy becomes an ethical issue. Organizational leaders should know that ethics is a moral philosophy. It should be noted that moral philosophy is a shared belief, and generally believed to be true (Lenarcic, 1999). Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Oklahoma.) defines ethics as "doing what's right even when no one is looking (Walker, 2003)." It is interesting to note that users of the internet leave an electronic trail that system administrators can access and track down information of the users. "Every purchase you make with a credit card, every magazine subscription you buy and medical prescription you fill, every web site you visit and e-mail you send or receive, every academic grade you receive, every bank deposit you make, every trip you book and every event you attend -- all these transactions and communications will go into what the Defense Department describes as a virtual, centralized grand database (Walker, 2003)." Ethical issues dealing with the use of technology can be researched from many perspectives. Organizational leaders of all types using communication technology may benefit from a look at how ethics can affect the way they do business.

Increased use of the internet in business, and with consumers has created a growing sensitivity to ethical issues (Healy & Iles, 2001). Technology is a fantastic medium for marketing, education and commerce. However, there is an increase in possibilities for invasion of privacy. "Technology currently facilitates massive invasions of privacy that were never before possible (Cyber-Rights Working Group)." Therefore, this study and other similar studies should prove useful in this age of technology. It is evident that Americans will be seeing new laws that deal with codes of ethics as it pertains to technology in the years to come, as we learn how to deal with the issues of communication and information. Organizational leaders know how

expensive law suits can be and therefore, should invest in pursuing implementing ethical codes of conduct that set a standard for the organization, taking organizational culture, customers and outside members who do business with the organization.

In recent years, technology is being used in local and international business to transfer information across borders (Eining & Lee, 1997). One important aspect of technology is that it drives globalization, which in-turn breaks down many barriers for commerce and communication, that were once held by borders and mileage limitations (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2003). Advancements in technology has created a whole new market place locally and globally (Whitman, Townsend, & Hendrickson, 1999). Organizational leaders now need to find ways to create, establish and maintain relationships with their suppliers and customers, while at the same time maintain an ethical stand on consumer and employee personal privacy (Ashen, 2003).

When it comes to technology and electronic communication, invasion of privacy can occur in many ways. Many businesses often sell information that was acquired over the internet from online surveys, purchases and internet browser “cookies.” Another technological-ethical form of invasion of privacy occurs in the workplace, with electronic monitoring and surveillance. Electronic monitoring and surveillance brings up the questions dealing with employee rights in the workplace. One ethical question that can be asked includes an examination of questions dealing with ethics of electronic monitoring. It is necessary to look at existing codes concerning some types of electronic monitoring in the workplace. Other technological methods of invasion of privacy include workplace email, electronic surveillance cameras and recorded phone

conversations. Organizational leaders who fail to incorporate some type of ethical code when dealing with technology may find themselves losing valuable employees or customers.

It is interesting to see what employees of Washington State must consider when using technology in the work place. According to the Washington state governmental website:

Do not expect a right to privacy for your e-mail communications. E-mail communications may be considered public records and could be subject to disclosure. Aside from disclosure, employees should consider that e-mail communications are subject to alteration and may be forwarded to unintended recipients...The general ethics standard is that any use of a state resource for other than for official business purposes needs to be brief in duration and frequency to ensure there is no cost to the state and the use does not interfere with the performance of official duties. You should also avoid creating the perception that the intent of your personal e-mail is to avoid the personal expense of making a long distance phone call (Washington, 2003)

In the city of Seattle, city employees also have guidelines that they must follow. The City of Seattle Ethics and Election commission prohibit, "City employees to use city owned or leased phones to conduct personal business, except emergency calls (Seattle Municipal code, 2003)." Seattle code also prohibits and deters city employees from using city email to conduct private communication or personal usage. This code (SMC 4.16.070(2) (b)), limits the usage of city computers for any such personal and non-government usage.

An example of an employee of an organization questioned for ethical usage of a company computer went to court in April of 2003. An employee of Intel Corporation "...had trespassed

on its servers by sending thousands of unwanted e-mails to staff at work. The issue of whether and how organized labor can use e-mail to reach current and potential members has become increasingly heated (Bowman, 2003).” This case will create precedence in which ethical codes of conduct will be modeled for generations of organizations.

According to R. Barger, Ethical principles are relatively constant. Barger maintains that ethical principles should be applied in all areas of interaction with people, information and communication (Barger, 2001). Ethical principles practiced in law and medicine should be no different than those practiced with the use of technology. Technology does, however, leave people wondering how ethics must and can be applied (Barger, 2001). Organizational leaders of tomorrow will need to understand how valuable implementation of codes of ethics can be to the organization due to the use and growth of information technology and the breaking down of international and mileage barriers.

In one workplace, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), they take an ethical stand when it comes to using information technology. IRS employees are monitored during computer activity when they access citizen’s social security numbers. When IRS employees access social security information, three reports are generated: one report is sent to a local office supervisor. Another report is sent to an electronic monitoring group in a regional building. A final report is sent to a regional auditor. This ethical stand taken by the IRS helps protect citizens’ privacy by hindering bribery and other similar types of fraud (Tax Payer Bill of Rights). Leaders within the IRS are taking an ethical stand that may be questioned from the point of view and cost of looking over the shoulder of their employees, but only at the benefit of the tax payer.

Leaders and information system (IS) personnel regard ethical codes as important in many organizations. This is especially true when it comes to distributing information using technology and computers. All IS employees should be made aware of ethical codes of conduct they pertain to using computers (Healy & Iles, 2001). A professional and fair tone is set allowing employees to make better decisions company-wide when ethical codes of conduct are created and implemented (Kelcher, 2003). Leaders must be in full-support of these ethical codes in order for them to be truly effective.

Codes of ethics must be engrained in the fabric of the organization in order for organizations to truly work beyond just following policy (Ashen, 2003). Technology has changed the way businesses look at using and distributing information. These days, ethics is more than just following the law and being honest (Ashen, 2003). Technology has changed and broken down many international barriers, it has now become more difficult to implement a standard and legal norms over the internet (Stahl & Collins, 2003).

In July of 2000, high ranking leaders of our country in congress attempted to amend article 18 of the United States Code. This became known as the “Notice of Electronic Monitoring Act.” This act provided that employers:

“In General.--(1) Except as provided in subsection (c), an employer who intentionally, by any electronic means, reads, listens to, or otherwise monitors any wire communication, oral communication, or electronic communication of an employee of the employer, or otherwise monitors the computer usage of an employee of the employer, without first having provided the employee notice

meeting the requirements of subsection (b) shall be liable to the employee for relief (Notice, 2000).”

Time will tell whether this kind of ethical support by government officials will inspire corporate company and organizational policy makers to implement codes of conduct that reflect this type of legislation. Employers should realize that respecting employees’ right to privacy will pay off over time in the long run. According to Thomas Hilton (2000) of the *Journal of Business Ethics*:

Fortune 500 non-management employees who work in their company's information systems department were polled via a mail survey; of 191 surveys sent (one to a company), 123 (64%) were returned. Virtually all respondents (97%) indicated that management should define ethical computer use for employees. A majority of respondents (60%) reported that the method management uses to do this should be some form of consensus building. Almost two thirds of respondents (63%) reported that the definition of ethical computer use was well known in their organization. Finally, over half of the respondents (55%) had no personal knowledge that computer abuse occurred in their organization - a surprisingly favorable finding. Of responses indicating knowledge of computer abuse, only about a quarter (26%) indicated direct evidence of the problem (Hilton, 2000).

### Ethical Obligations

Another way to look at ethics is to recognize that ethics give a way to understand the social concerns and obligations of other people, while also setting up shared expectations (Taylor

& Moynihan, 2003). Understanding ethics and doing the right thing is very often complicated by technology (Taylor & Moynihan, 2003). Trust becomes very important and should be the center of technologically rooted questions that deal with ethics. Educational institutions offering technology classes now can give students a better education in technology when ethics are addressed in this type of formal studies (Couger, 1999; Saliba, 2001). Leaders in schools that have this insight will create a stronger curriculum that undoubtedly increase the strength of the organizations the students will work for in the future.

Computers and technology have become an important part of American life and are integrated in almost every aspect of our society. However, misuse of technology and distribution of information over technological systems has also caused significant losses to businesses and to society in general (Banerjee, Cronan, & Jones, 1998). On the other hand, it is important to note that when computers are properly used they are significantly beneficial to businesses and society. Inappropriate use of technology has caused major losses to organizations and to citizens with estimated losses in the United States that add up to billions of dollars every year (Banerjee et al., 1998). Because of these losses, more attention these days is being given to ethics in educational institutional curricula and throughout many forms of media (Smith & Hasnas, 1999). Ethics in technology cannot be overlooked by leaders of our educational institutions and corporate organizations alike.

In recent years, the topic of business ethics has become a growing subject, especially as it pertains to education in business (Gill, 2000). Many colleges and university business programs of both the undergraduate and graduate levels now include individual studies and interdisciplinary studies in ethics as either a separate course or as a part of the standard

curriculum (Gill, 2000). Also, many major corporations and organizations of all sizes have adapted some form of ethical code, statement or procedure in policy, employee orientation and for resolving ethical internal issues (George, 2001).

These changes in organizational processes have occurred for many reasons over the past decade (Gill, 2000). The first reason is due to various well-publicized public scandals and issues that deal with the undermining of public trust in many areas of society, including political, institutional, corporate, and other types of organizations. The second reason is due to the change of the face of America. The growth in the diversity of our society makes it virtually impossible to define general-popular tradition or a shared general consensus on how to define what is right and wrong. The third and final reason is due to the increase in court costs incurred from settlements that exposed a lack of ethical and moral guidance and restraint.

Formal studies of business ethics comes in two forms (Gill, 2000). The first way textbooks teach ethics is done through the use of ethical case studies that deal with ethical dilemmas and quandaries. Business ethics is also taught through a look and through discussions of how they are implemented in corporations and other types of organizations.

When case studies are used in educating students about ethics in business, businesses and organizations become safeguarded against future ethical dilemmas and similar costly experiences (Couger, 1999; Gill, 2000). One way textbooks deal with the study of ethics use case study that discuss business and ethical cases then allow students to review laws and codes dealing with the area of ethics. Finally, students analyze the case and come up with answers of their own (Gill, 2000). One benefit of this type of study of ethics is that people become more aware of laws and

history that deals with ethical situations, how they were and can be resolved—preparing organizations for future situations and shielding them from future occurrences.

The method that textbooks and educational organizations use to teach ethics examines organizational and cultural aspects that are deeply rooted in business ethics and other types of societal codes and regulations (Gill, 2000; Smith & Hasnas, 1999). Many studies analyze mission statements, core values, policies and codes of conduct of existing corporations and other types of organizations (Gill, 2000).

Some people, including Couger (1999), believe that ethics are not taught enough or truly taught in a way that students make a choice to incorporate ethical principles into their own decision making processes. Also, there is little evidence that textbooks cover the issues that deal with ethics in modern day technology (Gill, 2000). Couger (1999), contends that educational institutions need to be taking a stronger approach to teaching ethics to students. He feels that teachers need to use a more personalized approach where students are forced to make their own decisions on how they would handle issues of ethical matters dealing with technology.

Educating members of organizations using ethical scenarios are an excellent stepping stone in building organizations that as a whole behave in ethical ways (Couger, 1999). Couger teaches ethics as it deals with technology through lectures that use examples that characterize how organizational members behave in real world ethical situations. Couger (1999) makes learning ethics a personal process for students by helping students understand the aspects of these ethical situations that helps students to come to some personal conclusions on ethical codes. Students are asked to come up with their own decisions and discuss how and why they have decided what they did. Answers are collected and tabulated, then reported to the class. Taking this even

further, the students are asked to compare their answers with the final results and evaluate their conclusions. Taking this approach to educating students on ethics is a powerful way to take students away from a comfort zone and make them see ethics from the eyes of professionals who deal with it in the working world and from the perspective of students with varying backgrounds.

### Issues Dealing with Ethics

Ethical issues are consistently growing and changing as it pertains to technology (Gill, 2000). New opportunities for advancement and growth are often the yielded product of technology. However, as technology changes so does the ways that people abuse it, manipulating and distributing information in non-ethical ways (Gill, 2000). Very often, ethical dilemmas that organizations face are a result of employees not being aware of the possibilities and misuse of technology (Gill, 2000; Oz, 1998). Corporate values must be founded in ethical grounding, but they must also be shared and educated with cultural values throughout the organization (Gill, 2000). Smith and Hasnas (1999), believe that there is a current lack of ethical and moral training in modern day industries at all levels. This will change as the faces of these organizations change if educational institutions make training in ethics a major part of every curriculum.

One ethical dilemma faced by two of America's largest corporations, Best Buy and Microsoft was made public when a customer of Best Buy was signed up for MSN internet service without his permission. Representatives of both companies denied that this was done with the consent of their companies, but was done under the decision of the individual working for Best Buy (Reuters, 2003).

One growing challenge for organizations has to do with employees facing the choice of doing what the organizations expects over what other individuals both inside and outside of the organization want (Oz, 1998). Some employees of these organizations end up misusing technology and get caught doing so by other members both inside and outside of the organization. Evidence of this is shown in the writings of Sibley (1998), who discusses a survey sent to 1,000 CEOs of Canadian corporations. These surveys alluded that only 36 percent of all respondents felt that their organization had a formal system to give employees a way to report computer misuse and misconduct without the fear associated with ultimate retaliation. However, Taylor & Moynihan (2003) believe that from an organizational perspective, the use of organizational codes of conduct are being better utilized and communicated to its members. This is benefiting the organizations as it teaches members what is expected of them and their obligations toward fellow employees and the organization's property. Employees often lose their jobs and are passed over for promotions when they blow the whistle on such abuses (Sibley, 1998). All organizations who utilize codes of conduct must implement policies and systems that protect employees from such retaliation. If no policies and procedures are not in place, employees have no place to turn and the organizations loses out in the long run (Oz, 1998).

Technologically based industries appear to have few ethical codes of conduct in place than organizations of traditional professions, such as law, medicine, and education (Oz, 1998). One common issue dealing with codes of ethics is that the ways in which some of the codes are written can be interpreted in many ways. Also, some ethical codes or principles may conflict with other ethical codes or principles in some situations. With this challenge in mind decision makers in organizations that use technology should find ways to write and implement codes that

are specific in dealing with situations that occur (Association for Computing Machinery, n.d.; Oz, 1998). When they do, they are dealing with potential situations that could end up costing the organization large sums of money over time.

Formalized organizational codes of ethics can be easily written in a way that helps employees make better judgment calls and decisions that benefit the organization (Ashen, 2003). Organizational codes of conduct should discuss issues that deal with the need of understanding and complying to laws. Personal integrity should be addressed in training and codes, as well as awareness for contributing to politics and activity. Also, information that can be considered confidential, including employee and accounting records should be addressed in codes of conduct—specifically. Many organizations include codes and education that deals with accepting gifts and other types of gratuities (Ashen, 2003). The second step after creating and writing codes of ethics within the organization is to educate all the members of the organization so that they can comply and enforce such codes that protect the organization and its members (Ashen, 2003; Oz, 1998). The third step is making sure that proper support of leaders and managers in the organization is in place to assure that codes are enforced and proper rewards, investigation and punishment occurs (Ashen, 2003).

#### Technology and Unifying a Code of Ethical Conduct

In this new age of technology, things are changing at rapid rates. Larger traditional industries have incorporated codes of ethics into their organizations and as a part of the rules that govern their industry. However, as a unified code of conduct pertains to technology in general, there is no such thing as a unified code (Oz, 1998). Many members of organizations that use technology and computers feel that it is time to address the issues of ethical codes of conduct and

come up with a unified code that addresses the uses of technology (Oz, 1998). It is obvious that the technologically based organizations are very similar in purpose and could benefit from the unification that could be brought about through a unified ethical code of conduct (Oz, 1998). Oz (1998) believes that technological organizations could benefit from a unified code of conduct when it comes to sharing information and expertise among members inside and outside of the organizations.

Most organizations today do have some formalized method of regulating codes of conduct. This is difficult, however, to monitor and measure (Calle, 2000; George, 2001). Codes of conduct play an important role in organizations. They help members of the organization make better decisions that are aligned with the organizational values and membership. Codes of conduct also give a way and process for organizations to investigate complaints and pursue a formalized standard (Association for Computing Machinery, n.d.). One common issue that organizations face is that the personal ethics of its members may sometimes be different to what is expected in public law or personal ethical principles (Taylor & Moynihan, 2003). Very often, organizations will have codes of ethics that do not easily align members with technology and goals of the organization (Smith & Hasnas, 1999).

The Institute of Business Ethics reported on research that alludes to an increase in the number of organizations that are writing and incorporating codes of ethics that deal with the activities of their organizations in today's world (Healy & Iles, 2000). It is becoming evident that leaders of today's organizations are seeing how important ethical codes of conduct are in the framework of their organization. In 1991 only 41% of a polled sample had codes of conduct. At

last report, now over 78% of these surveyed international companies had set up ethical codes of conduct in their organizations (Calle, 2000).

#### Benefits of Incorporating Ethical Codes of Conduct

There are many benefits to having ethical codes of conduct in place. Many companies have found once they have implemented an ethical code of conduct within their organization. Codes of conduct have proved to strengthen the way organizational members complied with laws. Implemented ethical codes also increased the reputation the public had about the organization, as well as increased productivity and quality of products and services. Another benefit that has been equated with implemented codes of conduct is improved relationships inside and outside of the organizations (Business for social responsibility, 2001). In fact, organizational leaders are seeing the positive impacts of having ethical codes of conduct in place, that many are hiring outside professionals to analyze the systems, culture and other aspects of their organization and working with them to write codes of conduct that align the organization to reap the rewards of doing so (Calle, 2000).

One study, reported by S. Harrington (2000) of *MIS Quarterly*, examined the effects that ethical codes of conduct had on the judgment and decision making processes of IS workers. This study analyzed the psychological traits and how responsibility was implemented in the workplace as it pertained to denial and ethical behavior. The result of this study showed that ethical codes did have an effect on the decision making processes and intentions in the IS environment. This conclusive evidence should help organizational leaders in their decision to create and implement a universal code of ethics. These codes, once implemented, are only

effective if they are thoroughly trained within the organization and supported by leaders within the organization.

Another study conducted that shows and supports this conclusion suggests that specific characteristics can be associated with and influenced by an ethical dilemma and ethical intentions and behavior of organizational members can be affected when faced with a dilemma. (Banerjee et al, 1998). This study indicates that individual and situational characteristics are influenced by intentional ethical behavior and that having a code of ethics in place does indeed lessen the occurrences of unethical behavior(Banerjee et al., 1998). This 1998 study looked at organizational members' ego strength as it related to the strength of their conviction or personal-regulating skill. The study indicated that employees with a higher level of ego strength tended to resist impulses. Also, these same employees tended to follow their own convictions more than members with lower levels of ego. An assumption that could be concluded from this examination shows that it is possible that a universal set of written codes of ethical conduct may be important role individuals with lower levels of ego. Also, universal codes of conduct could prove to be a preventive measure and a deterrent for individuals with high levels of ego.

Another study conducted in 1999 (Lenarcic) gives indication that there is no real use for a universal code of ethics. This study shows that such a code is not feasible until the topics of cultural relativism are researched more thoroughly. Cultural relativism can be defined as the way attitude and moral values fluctuate from one culture or society to another. Now, with a lack of existence of a universal ethical code of standards existing, and the growth of technological communications, Western philosophy is becoming dominant (Lenarcic, 1999). This imposition of cultural philosophy favors countries whose culture has a language with written scripts. It is

these differences in culture that make it difficult to write and implement such universal codes (Eining & Lee, 1997; Lenarcic, 1999).

It is possible to create a universal code of ethics. However, due to the diversity of cultures, interpretation may be one of the biggest challenges in creating such a code that would help organizational members deal with ethical dilemmas (Association for Computing Machinery, n.d.; Wakefield & Barney, 2001). Legitimate problems and challenges occur for organizations that use communication technology when they deal with individuals and other organizations due to a lack of universal standards and ethical codes. These problems could be alleviated with universal codes implemented because they would assist organizational members to make better decisions and lessen the dilemmas associated with the use of technology (Taylor & Moynihan, 2003). It is evident that as technology grows and becomes more widespread, universal legislation will become needed at a much higher level to oversee decision making processes that deal with ethical issues (Couger, 1999; Smith & Hasnas, 1999). Leaders in organizations that use information technology could play a major role in getting such legislation passed.

### Conclusion

Leaders of educational institutions and organizations of all shapes and sizes should see the benefit of an understanding of the role ethical codes play. One study in 1999 conducted by Couger, implies that leaders in educational programs should personalize the educational experience of learning how ethics work in the real world. This has become more evident, due to the fact that ethics are taught in educational programs, but seemingly have a lower affect when they are not taught to analyzed the studies and come to conclusions on their own. Most educational curriculums and textbooks do not combine an integrated study of ethics as it pertains

to technology. There is however, an increasing need for such studies and textbooks, as technology grows and international barriers come down. The need for education in technological ethics increases, but little attention is apparently being given to this vital subject. Organizational leaders need to become more aware of how having a written and supported ethical code of conduct can positively affect the success of the organization, especially as it pertains to the decision making processes of those who use the organization's technology.

Ethical issues are continuing to rise as technology grows in organizations around the world. It is becoming more necessary for organizational leaders to provide education, research and support in their organizations in the areas of ethics. Organizational leaders should know that there are many long-term benefits that can be derived from the implementation of ethical codes of conduct, including increased quality of goods and services, enhanced organizational reputation and stronger relationships with suppliers and external members of the organization. David Foote of *Computerworld* (2003) said it best, "Character and ethic matter. How we handle ourselves and treat others is even more important in unsettled times, because perceptions are more emotionally charged. Ethical issues aren't simply about right and wrong; they're about making tough choices in a brutal world. Your superiors, customers and peers take character and ethics into account far more than you realize (Foote, 2003)."

One of the biggest challenges that organizational leaders of organizations that use technology face is finding a balance in an ethical code that understands and is tolerant to the values of the members of the organization and also individuals outside the organization that may be impacted by the decisions of the organization. Perhaps the answer to this challenge is a unified or universal code of conduct. This may become more in need and mandated by political

leaders as more international and mileage boundaries are taken down by advances in technology. Without the use of ethical codes in organizations that use communication technology, organizations will become weaker in time and fall to those stronger organizations that ethical standards are implemented and supported by organizational leaders. A unified code of ethics may be the only hope for the future of organizations working on an international level. Such a unified code would be a challenge to create and support due to differences in the philosophies and cultural values of people in differing communities. However, as inconclusive as it may seem to appear, a unified/universal code of conduct would be of a great benefit for any organization that uses communication technology overseas and across international/cultural borders.

Organizational leaders should be aware too that a major part of implementing and supporting ethical codes of conducts may mean giving a greater level of trust to its members. It is inconclusive as to whether imposing electronic surveillance and monitoring of telephone conversations, email and other forms of electronic monitoring is positive ethical conduct or not. More study is needed in these areas and greater awareness of the benefits of ethical codes of conduct within technology using organizations can only benefit the organizations and those whom they do business with.

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