



Chapter XII

Information Systems Ethics in the USA and in the Arab World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores similarities and differences between two cultures, the USA and the Arab World, in BIS ethics, through a survey of American and Arab students on personal use of organizational computers, use of organizational IS resources for non-organization gain, and monitoring of organizational IS resource use. While interesting statistical differences were found in the average strength of several responses, there was no disagreement as to the ethicality or non-ethicality of any survey item. The authors view this consistency as encouraging evidence of a common foundation for IS-related commerce between the two cultures. The findings of this study can be a basis for future cooperation, as legislators, educators, and employers in the Arab World and the USA develop acceptable BIS practices.

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have shown a rapid, though unequal, spread of computers throughout businesses worldwide. Despite this spread, the information systems (IS) field is still considered relatively young (Pierce & Henry, 2000). One result of this youth is a general dearth of IS-related laws and clear-cut codes of conduct to regulate this challenging, fast expanding sphere (Udas, Fuerst, & Paradice, 1996). Thus, ethical issues in the IS field are highly influenced by less obvious factors, such as a nation's general legal system, and other disciplines, such as business law, internal organizational policies, culture, social, etc. (Pierce & Henry).

Research suggests that cultural values and traditions have a substantial influence on many IS ethics issues (Whitman, Townsend, & Hendrickson, 1999). As a consequence, what is considered 'right' IS use by one culture may be considered 'wrong' by another culture. This cultural factor may often supersede internal policies and codes that multinational corporations have issued to guide their personnel in using information systems consistently, ethically, and legally. Certainly such internal policies are necessary, but they are often perceived as ineffective (Loch, Conger, & Oz, 1998).

In our opinion, unauthorized copying of software has received a lot of research attention due to its huge negative effect on developers. Other IS ethical issues, however, have not received a similar level of attention.

This study aims to explore similarities and differences in IS ethics between two different cultures: the USA and the Arab World. The authors hope to begin identifying specifics of how these two cultures vary in deciding what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' in IS ethics issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In building a framework for investigating differences and similarities in information systems ethics among computer users in the Arab world and those in the USA, the following areas of literature are reviewed:

- Ethics defined
- Ethics in the USA
- Ethics in the Arab world
- Law and ethical behavior
- Personal code of ethics as a function of culture

Ethics Defined

Ethics is defined in different and sometimes conflicting ways depending on one's philosophical background (Regan, 1984, as cited by Udas et al., 1996). Therefore, Udas et al. suggest, that a definition of ethics that could be meaningfully applied in the business arena must be flexible. As this study aims to explore

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