

Using Digital Hotlines in an Anti-Corruption Campaign

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, people are just as concerned about corruption as they are about unemployment, poverty, and physical security. Governments can support citizens in their fight against corruption by using digital hotlines to investigate wrongdoing and to strengthen fraud-prevention efforts. Best practices in managing digital hotlines can be packaged into a module that is rolled out to all units of government from the national to the local level.

BACKGROUND

Every year, Transparency International (TI) prepares a barometer of global corruption, and in 2004, TI interviewed 50,000 people in 60 countries. TI reported that for 2004 and 2003, the public perceived political parties as the sector most affected by corruption, followed by parliament/legislature, the police, and the legal system/judiciary. Similarly, when asked to rate the impact of corruption on different spheres of life, people ranked 70% for politics, 60% for business, and 40% for family and personal life.

Petty administrative corruption also was mentioned by 78% of respondents as a concern. Worldwide, one in 10 persons interviewed said someone in their household had paid a bribe in the previous 12 months.

Corruption, especially in the public sector, is a worldwide epidemic that is growing rather than shrinking. TI reported that for 2004, 43% of respondents expected the level of corruption to increase in the next three years (Transparency International, 2005). With corruption on the rise, governments will need powerful and effective tools to combat fraud and abuse.

ESTABLISHING HOTLINES

One such powerful tool is a digital fraud hotline, which should be integrated into an anti-corruption campaign. Even though some countries have passed whistle blower protection laws, their application is riddled with problems, and the whistle blower often ends up frustrated, disap-

pointed, and unemployed (Calland & Dehn, 2004). Furthermore, the original problem that was identified by the informant often is not corrected, which discourages public servants from blowing the whistle (Devine, 2004). A conventional hotline using telephone and mail allows citizens to remain anonymous when filing a complaint, thus reducing the fear of retaliation, which may motivate them to actively fight corruption (USGAO, 1988). A digital hotline multiplies the opportunity for safe reporting to a vastly larger audience.

How Hotlines Function

A hotline is a system that facilitates the reporting of wrongdoing or violations of the code of conduct directly to the sponsoring organization (SO). If the SO initiates an investigation, it may result in administrative sanctions according to the rules of the SO or in legal complaints filed with the national judicial system. Technology for hotlines has advanced from telephones or physical snail mail to Internet technology that now supports sophisticated features such as the following:

- Receiving and storing a large number of complaints from informants.
- Allowing informants to remain anonymous, if they so chose.
- Rapid notices to officials of an SO when a complaint is received.
- Supporting a real-time online dialogue between an informant and officials of the SO who are in different time zones.
- Classifying complaints by a variety of categories and characteristics.
- Ability to quickly adjust the classification scheme of complaints as needed.
- Ability for informant to log in (anonymously) and to track progress on his or her case.
- Maintaining a log of how a case is investigated.
- Recording the outcome of a case, such as actions taken against an employee and whether assets were recovered.
- Quickly customizing reports for detail and summary statistics.

- Preparing and distributing reports automatically on a schedule.

The sophistication of digital hotlines has been fueled by the fact that managing hotlines has become a growth business in the last 15 years. The number of vendors that provide digital hotline services has been growing because fraud and corruption are alive and thriving.

The Global Fight Against Corruption

Many public interest organizations are fighting corruption in both the public and private spheres. Notable international efforts include the drafting of a Convention Against Corruption that is sponsored by the United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC). This convention was ratified by 37 national governments, and it entered into force on December 14, 2005 (UNODC, n.d.(d)).

How Can the Digital HotLine Support Anti-Corruption Efforts?

The UN Convention Against Corruption recommends best practices for governments to foster honesty and integrity of citizens as they fulfill their obligations, whether in the public or private arena. With 71 articles organized into eight chapters, there are four main pillars of the anti-corruption model that are listed as follows (UNODC, n.d.(a)):

1. National anti-corruption policies and mechanisms
2. Strengthening judicial integrity and capacity
3. Promoting integrity in the public and private sectors
4. Denying the proceeds of corruption and recovering illicit assets

Creating a Hotline is a Best Practice

Article 8 of the convention recommends developing a code of conduct for public officials as well as a system to facilitate the reporting of acts of corruption to appropriate authorities

UNODC notes that critical components in enforcing a standard of conduct include ethics training, credible public complaint systems, public awareness about their rights, and appropriate disciplinary measures. (UNODC, n.d.a, p. 6)

Who Owns the Hotline?

Developing national policies, strategies, and action plans is critical to effectively fighting corruption. Article 5, Para-

graph 1 of the convention stipulates that states shall develop and implement coordinated anti-corruption policies that are based on laws and good management principles such as integrity, transparency, and accountability and that encourage the participation of society (UNODC, n.d.(a)).

This can be accomplished by creating a special anti-corruption body, which Article 6 recommends establishing, to oversee and implement the policies outlined in Article 5 as well as to increase and disseminate knowledge about preventing corruption (UNODC, n.d.(a)).

Therefore, Article 6 supports establishing a governing body over the hotline to oversee management, which mirrors the same concept that there should be high-level governance over information technology resources (IT Governance Institute, n.d.). A key responsibility of this governing body over the hotline would be to review all complaints filed to ensure that there is follow-up on all serious cases that are reported and that this oversight would extend to protect the whistleblower, as well (USGAO, 1989). Hopefully, this governing body also would oversee the overall anti-corruption efforts of the government entity, and a hotline would be only one responsibility.

Article 6 also recommends that this governance body be independent and free from any undue influence. It should have the power to advocate for and/or resolve conflicts in laws and regulations so that there is a consistent policy that protects whistle blowers in all cases. Oversight is needed to ensure that public agencies do not bury complaints and punish the whistle blower for political reasons. One troubling trend is that national laws can negate whistle blower rights in favor of protecting national security, which denies the public's right to know about wrongdoing in this sector (Devine, 2004).

Members of this hotline governing body should not come exclusively from public service but also should include members of NGOs and community-based organizations that can bring independence to the exercise of oversight. Governments should reach out to find suitable NGOs to serve on such a body. Once again, Article 13 of the Convention confirms the importance of involving NGOs in efforts to prevent and fight against corruption and to raise public awareness about the threats that corruption poses (UNODC, n.d.(a)).

Content of the Web Site for the Hotline

A digital hotline can harness data processing power to provide a vast amount of information to anyone. Since a hotline sits on a Web server, the site where the informant first accesses the hotline, called the landing page, can be linked to many other Web sites that are devoted to fraud prevention and education.

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