

Chapter X

Professionalism and Ethics: Is Education the Bridge?

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ABSTRACT

In today's fast-paced world, where more and more emphasis is being placed on ethics and ethical behavior in the workplace, the IT industry remains such an area where little or no evidence has been presented to sustain claims by employees on whether preconceived notions of ethics lead to professionalism among employees. To this effect, this chapter tests the knowledge of IT professionals on ethical issues such as usage of e-mail, net surfing, net privacy, copyrights, and others as recognized by professional societies such as Association of Computing Machinery (ACM), Institute of Electronics and Electrical Engineers (IEEE), and Australian Computer Society (ACS). The study further investigates the root cause of unethical behavior at workplaces as pre-knowledge, or knowledge gained through high school and university education. The chapter follows a grounded surveying approach to find out students' extent of awareness towards ethical issues such as cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, software piracy, misusing the telephone, or Internet access; thus correlating the findings to suggest causality between "student education and consciousness of ethical issues" to the "awareness of ethical issues among future IT professionals." Among others, the chapter also proposes suggestions to school and university curricula to include subjects that highlight ethical issues in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Any organization in any industry emphasizes the need for “ethics in the workplace” among their employees to build and maintain “professionalism.” Ethics are standards or codes of conduct that define right from wrong and form the basis of civil societies; whereas, “*professionalism includes integrity, courtesy, honesty, and willingness to comply with the highest ethical standards*” (Oregon State Bar, 2005) among others.

However, how do employers ensure the employees they hire have a grounded sense of ethics that they will be able to apply to their workplace in order to maintain professionalism?

In this chapter, we consider the problem to be two tiered. In the first tier, we look at the future employees of the IT industry—the students; their understanding and exposure to ethical issues such as plagiarism, cheating and software piracy. In the next part, we look closely at IT professionals’ awareness to organizations such as ACM, IEEE, and ACS; and to ethical issues in the workplace such as misuse of telephones, e-mail, and software piracy. We then consider through grounded survey method how education of ethical issues at high school or tertiary level might increase awareness among young adults to help them develop into employees who can carry themselves with utmost professionalism in the workplace.

PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICS: HOW THEY ARE PERCEIVED AND WHY THEY ARE SO IMPORTANT

In today’s world, professionalism and workplace ethics go hand-in-hand. Professional and prestigious societies such as ACM (1992), IEEE (1990), and ACS (2005) all have their own sets of codes that they expect their members to follow and adhere to. However, “computer ethics” in the workplace are not the discovery of the 21st century, despite popular beliefs. It can be dated to as far back as

the World War II in the 1940s when MIT professor Norbert Wiener helped build an anti-aircraft canon to shoot down fast planes (Bynum, 2001), which ultimately led him to some revolutionary “insightful ethical conclusions” about information and communication technology (for further readings see Wiener, 1948, 1954). However, it was not till the 1960s that this concern took the shape of Code of Professional Conduct when Donn Parker began to examine unethical and illegal uses of computers by computer professionals. Parker’s work eventually grounded into the codes of conduct for members of the ACM in 1973 (Bynum, 2001). By the 1990s, computer ethics was a full-blown topic of discussion at conferences, workshops, universities, journals, and such.

Today, individuals and businesses alike, view ethics as something synonymous with religious beliefs. Although ethics can be seen as value management, misconceptions exist that have filtered into the field of computer ethics. Often enough, ethics is viewed as a “matter of religion,” “discipline best led by philosophers and academics,” “good guys preaching to the bad guys,” “new concept,” “not in trouble with law,” and “being of little practical relevance” (McNamara, 1999). Other beliefs include “being a matter of following one’s feelings,” “is the same as following the law” or “doing whatever the society accepts” (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, & Meyer, 2006).

Despite these perceptions of ethics in the workplace, more employers are becoming aware of the competitive advantage of hiring and retaining ethically “aware” employees. A survey by the Aspen Institute and management consulting firm gives evidence that highlights the “*focus on ethics and values [especially after] the business scandals [surrounding the] dot-com market*” (Verschor, 2005). It also shows that “...of 89% of the companies that have a written corporate values statement, 90% specify ethical conduct as a principle” (Verschor, 2005). Other statistics show that companies lose over \$20 billion a year

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