
Chapter VII

Ethical Challenges for Information Systems Professionals

Gerald M. Hoffman
Northwestern University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the special ethical responsibilities of information systems professionals based on the fundamentals of ethics as commonly understood in the Western world. We start first with principles from religious texts and the codes of ethics included in them. We then examine codes of conduct promulgated by nonreligious institutions. We conclude that ethics is personal, situational and changes over time. Thus, it impossible to formulate codes of conduct that apply to all real life situations. We identify the special ethical responsibilities that information systems professionals face in their roles as custodians of information technology, as custodians of the information systems that use this technology and as custodians of the data and information that surround information systems. The situations we face from day-to-day as we deal with the ethical aspects of information systems will always require us to decide between ethical imperatives that are in conflict with one another.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is written primarily for information technology (IT) professionals, including everyone from a chief information officer (CIO) to a data base administrator to a junior programmer. But it also applies to a much larger audience. In today's environment of desktop computing with ubiquitous access to the Internet and to private networks, every business executive and every working professional in every field performs some of the functions of an IT professional from time to time. The issues, guidelines, imperatives and strictures developed here apply to everyone who uses or controls information systems, regardless of primary occupation or job title.

A journey through several dictionaries finds that the term “ethics” refers to morals, standards of conduct, differences between right and wrong, and other similar constructs. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ethics as: “[t]he science of morals, the department of study concerned with human duty.” Ethics is about the behavior of people doing their duty, doing things that are sometimes difficult, unpleasant or unrewarding. We take this as the starting point of our discussion.

A good deal of the confusion surrounding discussions of ethics lies in not making a clear distinction between law and ethics—between the illegal and the unethical. The two concepts overlap but are different in important ways. The law identifies certain types of behavior of which society disapproves and attempts to prevent by an orderly and consistent set of rules and punishments. Ethics is at once more personal and more general, dealing with right and wrong beyond what the law sanctions. Every unethical act is not an illegal act and every illegal act is not necessarily unethical. And, as we shall argue below, ethical standards change over time, which is one reason why we amend our laws from time to time.

For the purposes of this paper, we assume *a priori* that all illegal acts are unethical. An individual may feel on occasion that a particular law is wrong and that violating it is ethically permissible, or even compulsory. A potential whistle blower often finds himself in this position. He is ethically required to serve the interests of his employer, yet he feels that his employer is violating some law or ethical principle with respect to the community at large. The whistle blower must make the hard choice of which imperative to honor. This is a small example of the larger issue of Gandhian civil disobedience:

[Mohandas Gandhi, leader of the movement for the independence of India from Great Britain, developed the tactic of civil disobedience (massive non-violent protests) that ultimately forced the British to leave. In our terms, his actions (blocking streets, massive but quiet marches, etc.) were illegal but were by his standards ethical in that they were undertaken for the greater

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