

# **New Code of Ethics**

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In the April 2000 issue of the IMIS Journal members were encouraged to comment on a draft Code of Ethics for the Institute by completing a survey form. A total of 73 feedback forms were returned. This may seem a relatively small proportion of the total membership of the Institute, but it is typical for a survey of this kind. For example, a similar consultation exercise on a draft of the ACM/IEEE Code of Ethics generated a comparable level of response, expressed as a percentage of total membership of the ACM and IEEE combined.

Each respondent could cast 40 votes, one for each detailed provision in the code. On this basis, 2608 votes were cast in total (not quite the expected number as a few respondents didn't answer every question). Of these, a total of 1303 votes (exactly 50%) strongly agreed with the corresponding provision and a further 1080 votes (41.4 %) agreed (so 2383 - 91.4% agreed or strongly agreed). Only 163 votes (6.3%) were uncertain, 46 votes (1.8%) opposed and 16 votes (0.6%) strongly opposed (so 62 - 2.4% opposed or strongly opposed). It is perhaps also worth noting that two individuals recorded 10 of the 16 votes of strong opposition.

In addition to signalling their support for, or opposition to, the various provisions of the draft code, a significant number of members also took the opportunity to provide supplementary comments. These comments fall into three broad groups, each of value in a different way.

Some of the comments either address a specific provision in the code or make a more general point about what should, or should not, be included within the code. Many of this type have been very helpful in reviewing the code, and indeed some revisions have been made specifically in response to concerns expressed by members in this way. For example, a number of comments were aimed at explaining a member's opposition to a particular provision. In some cases this highlighted a weakness in logic or wording, and these have been addressed as far as possible. Of course it has not been possible, nor would it be appropriate, to meet all the concerns expressed. For example, some members are simply opposed to a principle that is strongly supported by the great majority.

The second broad group of comments is interesting, not because they suggest any particular amendment to the code, but rather because they serve to highlight areas of ambiguity or conflicts between different provisions. To some extent the issues that have triggered these comments can also be discerned in the pattern of voting on some provisions. To give one striking example, the code's provision number 4.5 embodies a general opposition to covert surveillance. This proved contentious, not because there was significant opposition to it in principle, but because a number of members believe that covert surveillance is justifiable in certain circumstances, e.g. where criminal activity is suspected. Some expressed this view explicitly in the form of a verbal comment while still voting in favour of the draft provision. Others indicated their uncertainty over this provision with their vote but made no supplementary comment. It appears likely that these two responses can be seen as different expressions of a similar ethical uncertainty. We would argue that the wording of provision 4.5 allows in a reasonable way for the ethical ambiguities of this provision: I will actively oppose surveillance undertaken without informed consent of the subjects, unless such surveillance is justified by a greater ethical priority. In any case, both votes and comments reinforce the conclusion that this issue is something of an ethical hotspot.

The third general group of comments relates not to the content of the code itself but to the consequences of its adoption. Typical concerns here relate to the perceived need for other supporting structures and activities to be developed if the code is to have a real impact on the Institute and its members. To give an example, several members expressed a worry that in certain circumstances the code could be seen as asking a professional to place his or her job, career and even personal liberty on the line. For example, provision 1.2 would (under certain conditions) encourage whistle blowing, and provision 2.9 would (under certain conditions) encourage law breaking.

What follows is the revised code which takes into account both the votes cast and comments made.

**Preamble to Code.** The Institute for the Management of Information Systems has a vision to see Information Systems Management regarded as one of the key professions influencing the future of our society. Along with that recognition, however, comes a responsibility for practitioners to adhere to professional level standards of training and codes of conduct.

This Code of Ethics details an ethical basis for the practitioner's professional commitment. It does this by summarising the ethical values that the Institute expects all members to uphold and the ethical standards that a member should strive to achieve. These values and standards should guide the professional conduct of a member at all times.

In common with other Codes of Ethics, the Code is meant to be taken holistically-the conscientious professional should take account of all principles and clauses that have a

bearing on a given set of circumstances before reaching a judgement on how to act. Selected parts of the Code should not be used in isolation to justify an action or inaction. Nor should the absence of direct guidance in the Code on a specific issue be seen as excusing a failure to consider the ethical dimensions of an action or inaction.

It is neither desirable nor possible for a Code of Ethics to act as a set of algorithmic rules that, if followed scrupulously, will lead to ethical behaviour at all times in all situations. There are likely to be times when different parts of the code will conflict with each other. There may also be times when parts of this code will conflict with other ethical codes or generally accepted priorities in the wider world. At such times, the professional should reflect on the principles and the underlying spirit of the Code and strive to achieve a balance that is most in harmony with the aims of the Code. Some indication of relative priority is given within the code where conflict can be anticipated. However, in cases where it is not possible to reconcile the guidance given by different articles of the code, the public good shall at all times be held paramount.

**Fundamental Principles.** Every Fellow and Member of the Institute (including both Professional and Affiliate Membership grades) shall employ all his or her intelligence, skills, power and position to ensure that the contribution made by the profession to society is both beneficial and respected. In accordance with this commitment, he or she shall at all times uphold the following six fundamental principles:

**Principle 1: Society**

I will uphold the health, safety and welfare of wider society, future generations and the environment.

**Principle 2: Organisations**

I will serve my employers and clients honestly, competently and diligently.

**Principle 3: Peers**

I will respect and support the legitimate needs, interests and aspirations of all my colleagues and peers.

**Principle 4: Staff**

I will encourage and assist those I supervise both to fulfil their responsibilities and to develop their full potential.

**Principle 5: Profession**

I will strive to be a fit representative of my profession and to promote the vision of the Institute.

**Principle 6: Self**

I will be honest in representing myself and will continually strive to enhance both my professional competence and my ethical understanding.

**1. Society: I will uphold the health, safety and welfare of wider society, future generations and the environment.**

1.1 I will strive to ensure that those professional activities for which I have responsibility, or over which I have influence, will not be a cause of avoidable harm to any section of the wider community, present or future, or to the environment.

1.2 When there is no effective alternative I will bring to the attention of the relevant public authorities any activity by staff I supervise, colleagues, employers, clients or fellow professionals that is likely to result in harm as described under article 1.1.

1.3 I will contribute to public debate regarding policy formulation in areas where this is in the wider interest, I have technical or professional competence and there is an appropriate opportunity to do so.

1.4 I will use my knowledge, understanding and position to oppose false claims made by others regarding the capabilities, potential or safety of any aspect of Information Systems and Information or Communication Technology.

1.5 I will strive to protect the legitimate privacy and property of individuals and organisations in wider society, where there is a risk that these may be compromised by professional activities for which I am responsible, or over which I have influence.

**2. Organisations: I will serve my employers and clients honestly, competently and diligently.**

2.1 I will endeavour to avoid, identify and resolve conflicts of interest.

2.2 I will accept neither an assignment that I know I will not be able to complete competently, nor an assignment that I suspect I will not be able to complete

competently unless the risks are knowingly and freely accepted by all parties concerned.

2.3 I will not knowingly commit a team to a task that can not be completed within acceptable limits of cost, effort and time, unless the risks are knowingly and freely accepted by all parties concerned.

2.4 I will preserve the legitimate confidentiality of the affairs of my employers and clients.

2.5 I will protect the legitimate property and uphold the legitimate rights of my employers and clients.

2.6 I will adhere to relevant and well-founded organisational and professional policies and standards.

2.7 I will ensure, within the extent of my influence, that sufficient and competent staff are deployed on any professional activity.

2.8 I will ensure, within the extent of my influence, compliance with relevant and well-founded technical standards and methods.

2.9 I will ensure that I do not cause my employers or clients to breach applicable legislation or well-founded rules, unless there is a greater ethical priority of sufficient magnitude.

### **3. Peers: I will respect and support the legitimate needs, interests and aspirations of my colleagues and peers.**

3.1 I will protect the legitimate privacy and property of my colleagues and peers.

3.2 I will refrain from all conduct that inappropriately undermines my colleagues or peers.

3.3 I will give an honest opinion regarding the competence and potential of my colleagues and peers, when it is appropriate to do so.

3.4 I will act in support of colleagues and peers who uphold what is right above their personal benefit and convenience.

3.5 I will promote teamwork among my colleagues and peers, taking my fair share of the burdens and no more than my fair share of the credit.

**4. Staff: I will respect and support the legitimate needs, interests and aspirations of those I supervise and I will encourage and assist them both to fulfil their responsibilities and to develop their career potential.**

4.1 I will adopt and promote an ethical approach to management.

4.2 I will be fair in my dealings with those I supervise.

4.3 I will be open towards those I supervise, unless constrained by a greater ethical priority.

4.4 I will actively oppose discrimination at work except on the sole basis of an individual's capacity for the task, and will take care that my judgement on this issue is not prejudiced by preconceived notions regarding any group in society.

4.5 I will actively oppose surveillance undertaken without informed consent of the subjects, unless such surveillance is justified by a greater ethical priority.

4.6 I will encourage staff education, training, development and promotion, and will represent the legitimate best interests of those I supervise in developing their careers both within and beyond the organisation.

4.7 I will give an honest opinion regarding the competence and potential of staff I supervise, when it is appropriate to do so.

4.8 I will protect the legitimate privacy and property of those I supervise.

4.9 I will promote adherence to relevant and well-founded specialist codes of conduct.

4.10 I will promote teamwork among those I supervise, taking my fair share of the burdens and no more than my fair share of the credit.

4.11 I will not require those I supervise to breach applicable legislation or well-founded rules.

**5. Profession: I will strive to be a fit representative of my profession and to promote the vision of the Institute.**

5.1 I will act with integrity at all times.

5.2 I will be honest unless constrained by a greater ethical priority.

5.3 I will strive to abide by this Code of Ethics and thereby enhance the public image and standing of the profession.

5.4 I will be willing to perform voluntary work on behalf of the profession, provided that I have the necessary time, resources and capability for the task.

**6. Self: I will be honest in representing myself and will continually strive to enhance both my professional competence and my ethical understanding.**

6.1 I will maintain my personal integrity.

6.2 I will not allow personal interests to influence the advice I give on technical and professional matters.

6.3 I will maintain the continuing development of my technical, professional and ethical understanding and competence.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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