

Civic duty

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**Originally published as ETHicol in the IMIS Journal Volume 11
No 2 (April 2001)**

The new IMIS Code of Ethics was presented in the last edition of the ETHicol. On reading this code it becomes clear that the computing professional has a wide range of demanding obligations to fulfil in the course of their working lives. It is not simply enough to comply with your contract of employment or commission. Being a professional is much more than this. One of the most challenging aspects is your civic duty. The code's first principle demands professionals to "uphold the health, safety and welfare of wider society, future generations and the environment". The demand is a proactive one. We must strive to ensure our work "will not be a cause of avoidable harm to any section of the wider community, present or future, or to the environment". We must "contribute to public debate regarding policy formulation in areas where this is in the wider interest". We must "oppose false claims made by others regarding the capabilities, potential or safety of any aspect of Information Systems and Information or Communication Technology".

It follows that professionals should do what ever they can to remove the digital divide. The statistical consensus is that only about 7% of the world's population is on-line. In global terms the dichotomy of "haves" and "have nots" is vast. With the potential benefit to society and its citizens this virtual divide should be a cause for great concern of all professionals.

Consider some of the facts. According to the US Internet Council's State of the Internet Report for the year 2000, there is considerable disparity within the continent of Africa in terms of Internet accessibility. Africa has more than 10% of the world's population but less than 1% of the world's Internet users. A million South Africans have access to the Web, but practically nobody does in the Congo.

Looking at South Africa in more detail, a 1999 survey of 2000 black South African men and 4000 black South African women by Webcheck revealed dismal Internet access rates among black Africans. The survey concluded that black African users of the Internet have an access rate of about 1%. Out of those surveyed only two men and five women had Web access at home and only 24 men and 24 women had Web access at work.

Turning to India, recent analysis by Nua Internet Surveys and eMarketer reveals similar disparities. Indian e-commerce revenues are set to rise from \$75 million at the end of 2000 to \$254 million by the end of 2001, as cyber cafés enable increasing numbers of Indians to go on-line. The number of active adult Internet users in India was 270,000 at the end of 1999 and had reached 1.5 million by the end of 2000, but this is only 0.2% of

India's adult population. eMarketer attributes the low Internet penetration in India to extreme and widespread poverty, compounded by a poor telecommunications infrastructure and limited PC ownership.

According to the report "Achieving Universal Access" by Booz-Allen and Hamilton, in the UK 14% of those unemployed and 35% of those in full time employment have Internet access. This compares unfavourably with, for example, Australia where 39% of the unemployed and 57% of full time employed are connected. Looking at UK socio-economic groups; DEs represent 29% of the population but only 7% of the connected population whilst ABs represent 21% of the population yet comprise 48% of the connected population.

The report suggests that the divide will get worse. New users are currently joining the UK's on-line population at the rate of 4 million (or 8% of the population) each year. The report suggests that the UK market for Internet access will sustain at least this growth rate over the coming years. At this rate, penetration in the UK should pass 60% 'naturally' by 2003. However, far from evening out the emerging inequalities, the wave of growth is likely to exacerbate them in relative terms, leaving an unconnected or excluded group of over 20 million citizens.

These alarming facts demand action by individuals and organisations. Such action is in line with corporate social responsibility, a notion that is high on the general public's agenda. A 1999 landmark study, "The Millennium Poll", conducted by Environics International in co-operation with The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, surveyed 25000 citizens in 23 countries regarding corporate social responsibility. The survey found that; 90% of people want companies to focus on more than profitability, 60% of people form an impression of a company based on its social responsibility which is defined as regard for people, communities, and the environment, and 40% of people talked negatively about companies that they perceived as not being socially responsible. The computing profession wants to be viewed more favourably by the public. It must understand that the public values social responsibility. Therefore, adherence to the First Principle of the code is paramount.

There are those who would argue that such regard is not in the interests of business but this is untrue. Such regard is not in conflict with your contractual responsibilities indeed a more socially responsible stance is good business. A 1997 DePaul University study found that companies with a defined corporate commitment to ethical principles do better financially than companies that do not. A recent longitudinal Harvard University study found that "stakeholder-balanced" companies showed four times the growth rate and eight times the employment growth when compared to companies that are shareholder-only focused. This holds true for all sectors including computing.

Organisations and individual professionals have a duty to act. If every computing professional was to contribute freely just 1% of his or her time to helping those on the

wrong side of the digital divide just think what a difference it would make to social and economic justice and the restoration of reciprocity.

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

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