

# Ethics and ICT Governance

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Corporate governance is a widely accepted approach to ensuring that organisations are well coordinated in implementing their corporate visions. Views as to the exact nature of corporate governance vary. For example, the European Commission suggest that it is the "rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised.... particularly as regards openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence", whereas the Australian Stock Exchange suggest "Good corporate governance structures encourage companies to create value ... and provide accountability and control systems commensurate with the risks involved".

Following this movement ICT governance is starting to be adopted. Whilst corporate governance is concerned with vertical integration or coordination, particularly at the strategic board level, ICT governance is concerned with horizontal integration or coordination across departments. It is an attempt to ensure joint decision making between IT/IS and line departments and thus countering the silo mentality that pervades organisational ICT.

There does however seem to be shortcomings to this approach. The focus still remains on the drive to be effective and efficient (E2) in the delivery of ICT. This demands engagement with stakeholders but is limited to those within the organisation with direct financial or operational interest. The traditional E2 approach has not a good track record of delivering successful systems in the past so why should ICT governance based on E2 be any different?

What is the missing ingredient? It is ethics. The combination of ethics, efficiency and effectiveness (E3) is appealing. This is because ethics is about understanding right from wrong, efficiency is doing it right, and effectiveness is doing the right thing. Ethics sets the socially acceptable framework within which to operate and moves the perspective beyond only those with a financial or operational interest.

Indeed E3 provides a new perspective on quality. Not addressing adequately all three elements has a detrimental effect on quality. A quality value derived by some form of multiplication of measurement of the three elements, ethics, efficiency and effectiveness, provides a new way of judging quality. In doing this a proposed system deemed to be unethical will mean it is also deemed to be of poor (and unacceptable) quality and therefore needs to be modified. ICT governance based on E3 and quality based on E3 means that the strategic leadership of ICT is directly linked to the operational

implementation of ICT. The goal of delivering fit-for-purpose ICT is more likely to happen by design using the E3 principle.

Consider these two examples of delivered ICT. The first is a robot called ifbot which has been installed in nursing homes to act as a companion for the elderly residents. The robot has the look of an extra from Star Wars with red glowing eyes staring from behind a astronaut's visor. It has a conversational language of a 5 year old. The verdict of this robot is not good. "The residents liked ifbot for about a month before they lost interest. Stuffed animals are more popular" said Yasuko Sawada, director of a Japanese nursing home. "Most (elderly) people are not interested in robots. They see robots as overly complicated and unpractical. They want to be able to get around their house, take a bath, get to the toilet and that's about it," said Ruth Campbell, a geriatric social worker at the University of Tokyo. This piece of ICT maybe efficient in the way it operates, it may be effective in the way it technically delivers synthesised conversations but it is unethical because it fails to take into account the needs of the elderly and treats the elderly in a condescending fashion. It is unfit-for-purpose ICT which would score a negative E3 value.

The second example is an IBM mouse which compensates for the manual tremors that can plague the elderly and those with some forms of physical disability. The mouse treats the hand tremors as noise, and uses algorithms based on image-stabilization systems used in digital cameras. This is a simple device which has been cleverly thought out and addresses a specific need to improve accessibility for a large group of society. It is impressive how it uses techniques developed for one application and adapted for another. It is fit-for-purpose ICT which would score a high positive E3 value.

Professional ICT development must address both the process of developing an ICT product and nature of the ICT product itself. There are clear relationships between these two perspectives. The manner in which development is undertaken colours the resulting ICT product and similarly the specification of the required ICT product dictates the way product will be developed. Ethics must drive the quest for efficiency and effectiveness. Therefore ICT governance must address both the process and product dimensions of ICT development. It must promote a sense of obligation in professional developers and ensuring that ICT products are fit-for-purpose.

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

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