

Ethical dilemmas in ICT

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The professional world of ICT is littered with ethical dilemmas. Sometimes the ICT professional will recognise such dilemmas and strive to resolve them. Other times such dilemmas will be ignored and might be considered outside the employee's jurisdiction. Often the ethical dimension of ICT is simply not recognised. All ICT professionals need effective training on how to address these issues in a way that leads to acceptable professional practice and consequential acceptable products and services. Dilemma training should be part of the continuous professional development of the ICT professional regardless of job type or seniority.

Consider the following scenarios. How ethical or unethical do you consider the situations to be? What would you do in this situation? What would you do if you supervised the person(s) involved in each situation?

Section A. A computer programmer built small computer systems in order to sell them. This was not his main source of income. He worked for a moderately sized computer vendor. He would frequently go to his office at the weekend when no one was working and use his employer's computer facilities to develop his own systems. He did not hide the fact that he was going into the building; he had to sign a register at the security desk each time he entered.

Section B. An employee provides network and applications support for users throughout the organisation. One day, the employee was undertaking a major upgrade to all the laptops within the company. While working on the laptop of the Finance Director, the employee noticed that this laptop contained thousands of pornographic pictures.

Section C. An employee fills out a survey form on a computer game web page using her work's computer whilst on her lunch break. The survey asks for her email address, mailing address, and telephone number which he fills in. In the following weeks, she receives several advertisements in the mail as well as dozens of email messages about new computer games.

Section D. A trainee at a large finance company learned to use an expensive specialised spreadsheet program in her accounting work. The trainee would go to the finance company's computer suite, book out the cd-rom holding the software, complete her training tasks, and return the software. Notices were posted in the suite indicating that

copying software was forbidden. One day, she decided to copy the software anyway so she could work on her tasks at home on her own computer.

Section E. The project manager suspects a team member of using his company email account to send offensive messages to other employees of the company. She asks the company's network manager to give her copies of team member's email.

Section F. A mobile phone company employee saw an advertisement in a newspaper about a car for sale. The car sounded like a good buy to the employee. The advertisement listed the seller's mobile phone number, but not the seller's address. Being a system software engineer, the mobile phone company employee knew he could determine the seller's address by accessing the seller's mobile phone records. He did this and went to the seller's house to discuss buying the car. The seller was delighted and the sale went through.

Section G. An employee suspected and found a loophole in the organisation's computer security system that allowed him to access other employees' records. He told the system administrator about the loophole, but continued to access others' records until the problem was corrected two weeks later.

Section H. An engineer needed a program to perform a series of complicated calculations. She found a computer programmer capable of writing the program, but would only employ the programmer if he agreed to share any liability that may result from an error in the engineer's calculations. The programmer said he would be willing to assume any liability due to program malfunction, but was unwilling to share liability due to error in the engineer's calculations.

Section I. An ICT professional is employed by a large hospital to maintain and upgrade its patient database. Her aunt, who works for a medical insurance company, approaches her one day to help her get the medical histories and other personal particulars of patients of the hospital who had died of a certain illness, so that her company can formulate a new insurance scheme for such patients. She explains that this will offer a much better financial benefit than currently available for spouses and dependants.

So next time you are at the coffee machine talking with colleagues why not raise one of these scenarios with them and see how they react. Discussing ethical issue related to work in an informal setting is a good way to promote an ethical culture which raises awareness and helps everyone deliver acceptable products and services.

NOTE: Some of the dilemmas in this article are updated and modified versions of some that appeared in the Multi-National Survey of Information Systems Ethical Perceptions conducted by The University of Nevada, USA in 1996.

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

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