

The Ethics of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Business

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Organisations are continuing to invest heavily in computer systems designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness. These new systems are often complex replacing manual processes that previously defied automation, or are second or third generation systems, introducing new functions into already automated processes. Usually new systems are not simply a matter of giving staff a better tool to do the same work but involve changes to the nature of the work itself. This in turn changes the very fabric of the society in which we live. Careful planning and consultation are needed to implement new systems successfully. All those affected by the change must be involved in good time in an appropriate way. They may include customers, suppliers, regulators, business partners and members of the public as well as employees.

The impact of new systems will usually be judged in terms of whether the gains in efficiency and effectiveness are realised as planned, but that is not all. The new systems may involve changes in the staffing levels, organisational structure and social groupings. These changes can affect staff morale inside an organisation and relationships outside, particularly with customers, to such an extent that they may cause disadvantages to the organisation which reduce, or even outweigh, the basic benefits achieved. There is a growing realisation within the UK that good ethics is good business. The latest survey by the Institute of Business Ethics shows a dramatic increase in the number of organisations that have a corporate code of ethics.

Given the central and essential role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in organisations it is paramount that this ethical sensitivity percolates decisions and activities related to ICT. In particular organisations need to consider:

- how to set up a strategic framework for ICT that recognises personal and corporate ethical issues;
- how the methods for systems development balance ethical, economic and technological considerations;

- the intellectual property issues surrounding software and data;
- the way information has become a key resource for organisations and how to safeguard the integrity of this information;
- the increasing organisational responsibility to ensure that privacy rights are not violated as more information about individuals is held electronically;
- the growing opportunity to misuse ICT given the increasing dependence of organisations on it and the organisational duty to minimise this opportunity whilst accepting individuals have a responsibility to resist it;
- the way advances in ICT can cause organisations to change their form - the full impact of such change needs to be considered and, if possible, in advance, and the way the advent of the global information society raises new issues for organisations in how they operate, compete, co-operate and obey legislation; and
- how to cope with the enormous and rapid change in ICT, and how to recognise and address the ethical issues that each advance brings.

Thus there is an ethical agenda associated with the use of ICT in organisations. This agenda combines issues common to many professions and issues that are specific to ICT. New advances in ICT and new applications may change the agenda. If organisations wish to secure benefits to their business in the long term and enhance their reputation they have to address a comprehensive agenda. The following steps provide a way in which organisations can establish such an agenda and address the ethical issues arising in the field of ICT.

1. Decide the organisation's policy, in broad terms, in relation to ICT. This should:

- take account of the overall objectives of the organisation, drawing from such existing sources as the organisational plan or mission statement;
- use the organisation's established values, possibly set out in its code of practice, for guidance in determining how to resolve ethical issues;
- set the scope of policy in terms of matters to be covered.

2. Form a statement of principles related to ICT that would probably include:

- respect for privacy and confidentiality;
- avoid ICT misuse;

- avoid ambiguity regarding ICT status, use and capability;
- be committed to transparency of actions and decisions related to ICT;
- adhere to relevant laws and observe the spirit of such laws;
- support and promote the definition of standards in, for example, development, documentation and training; and
- abide by relevant professional codes.

3. Identify the key areas where ethical issues may arise for the organisation, such as:

- ownership of software and data;
- integrity of data;
- preservation of privacy;
- prevention of fraud and computer misuse;
- the creation and retention of documentation;
- the effect of change on people both employees and others; and
- global ICT.

4. Consider the application of policy and determine in detail the approach to each area of sensitivity that has been identified.

5. Communicate practical guidance to all employees, covering:

- the clear definition and assignment of responsibilities;
- awareness training on ethical sensitivities;
- the legal position regarding intellectual property, data protection and privacy;
- the explicit consideration of social cost and benefit of ICT application;
- the testing of systems (including risk assessment where public health, safety and welfare, or environmental concerns arise);
- documentation standards; and

- security and data protection
6. Whilst organisations have a responsibility to act ethically in the use of ICT so to do individual employees. Those involved in providing ICT facilities should support the ethical agenda of the organisation and in the course of their work should:
- consider broadly who is affected by their work;
 - examine if others are being treated with respect;
 - consider how the public would view their decisions and actions;
 - analyse how the least empowered will be affected by their decisions and actions;
and
 - consider if their decisions and acts are worthy of the model ICT professional.

Further information about the ethics of ICT in business can be found in "Ethical Aspects of Information Technology: Issues for Senior Executives" published by the Institute of Business Ethics (Tel: 0171 931 0495 Fax: 0171 821 5819).

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

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