

An ethical perspective for ICT Managers

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There continues to be reported incidents of so-called computer abuse. Recent reports of a computer virus disabling many installations around the world, growing opposition from civil liberty organisations against workplace monitoring and the poorly designed electronic commerce system that allowed a child access to go on a mammoth shopping spree are examples of this growing problem. About a year ago the Audit Commission published their periodic report on computer abuse, entitled "Ghost in the Machine". They reported a 9% increase to 45% over three years of organisations experiencing incidents of computer abuse. With organisations and society becoming increasingly dependent of information and communication technology (ICT) the upward trend of computer abuse incidents seems set to continue.

In contrast there are calls from governments to realise the potential of this technology for us all. In its introduction to the 1999 research and development work programme, the European Commission gives a clear indication that technology should be developed and applied in a wider social context. It states, "The main focus ... is on enhancing the user friendliness of the Information Society: improving the accessibility, relevance and quality of public services especially for the disabled and elderly; empowering citizens as employees, entrepreneurs and customers; facilitating creativity and access to learning; helping to develop a multi-lingual and multi-cultural information society; ensuring universally available access and the intuitiveness of the next generation of interfaces; and encouraging for all." It explained that a wider focus must be adopted "in order to pay due consideration to the needs and expectations of typical users ... in particular the usability and acceptability of new services, including security and privacy of information and the socio-economic and ethics aspects."

For such laudable goals to be realised there has to be greater emphasis placed on the ethical and social considerations relating to ICT practice. Computer professionals must address such matters urgently for they are the custodians of this powerful technology and as such are in a position of power and influence. They must recognise this privileged position and do whatever they can to reduce incidents of computer abuse. They must understand and accept their obligations as suppliers of systems, as users of systems and above all as members of the wider community. Clearly there are many issues to address some much more important than others. The sensible thing to do is to focus on those

issues where there is a relatively high risk of ethical mistakes and where such mistakes have significant consequences for society, its organisations, or its citizens.

An ACM working group has been considering the practical management of computer ethics (albeit related to the university sector) for some time. Perhaps there is something to drawn from this for the ICT manager who must tackle these complex issues. The ACM working group proposed a set of rules of managing computer ethics (these can be found in a report available on the World Wide Web at John W Smith's website: (<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~jws3g/Publications/PracticalManagementOfComputerEthics.htm>)). Those which are more applicable to the ICT manager include:

- make time to consider the ethical issues
- help your users understand the culture and hence the ethical stance
- when you do act regarding an ethical issue do so assertively
- do not let your manager get caught by surprise over an ethical issue
- remember that you have legal responsibilities which might affect the way in which you deal with an ethical issue
- do not give up your right to see what you need to see
- be consistent and fair
- do not discuss specific issues in public

Such statements might appear common sense and possibly vague but they do put a different emphasis on the management culture within ICT. So often the focus has only been on the economic and technological feasibility of a proposal. These are obviously very important but so is ethical and social acceptance. It is not that ethics has been put aside rather that in the past it had not been recognised as a significant issue. This cannot be allowed to continue. As John Smith puts it, "Ethical problems and their potential consequences can be too serious to leave to chance. If you are responsible in any way for computing you cannot ignore these problems or leave them to others to deal with." ICT managers and their staff should embrace this mindshift and be proactive in self regulation. If not then it is only a matter of time before governments impose stringent controls on the profession through, for example, legislation that requires computer professionals to hold a licence in order to practice.

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

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