

The Development of a Code of Ethics: An Online Classroom Approach to Making Connections between Ethical Foundations and the Challenges Presented by Information Technology

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Abstract

The Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) web site provides us food for thought when they state, "Technology is driving the future, the steering is up to us.... and we need every hand at the wheel" (Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, 2007).

A broader view of social responsibility is coming into focus; it is one that incorporates some real Information Technology (IT) flash points. Issues that have long been concerns of corporate technology managers, including security, privacy and intellectual property, are increasingly understood as matters of ethics and good citizenship. This perspective is far from universal. The research of CIO (Chief Information Officer), a leading information technology trade journal, shows that while IT managers are very aware of "the larger effect of technology on people's lives," nearly half those surveyed say IT pros are "not very concerned" about it (Cone, 2008).

This more global understanding of technology's powerful role in society is not new. Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, an organization which deals with related issues, was founded in 1983. Much has been written on technology's impact on the way we live and work, including musings on the moral aspects of a wired society. But the sense that these issues pervade the day-to-day operations of corporate IT appears to be gaining popularity.

"It's part of the maturing of IT," says Donald Amoroso, chair of the computer science and information systems department at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. As the job becomes less about the technology itself and more about the information, the definition of responsible corporate citizenship changes, too. "Social responsibility has to do with being a good person in different parts of the community," Amoroso says. "It determines how you will function and do your job in a societal sense, not just as part of the community you do philanthropy with" (Cone, 2008).

At the 2007 conference of the Information Resources Management Association, Amoroso co-chaired a track called "Social Responsibility in the Information Age." Topics included security, privacy, intellectual property, and electronic monitoring of employees, along with more familiar corporate concerns like diversity. Such issues are not just technology problems with regulatory and legal compliance implications; they are ethical concerns that say something important about the people who deal with them daily, and about the corporate culture in which they work. "This is maybe a different frame, a different dimension, to look at these things as social responsibility issues," Amoroso says. "A lot of these things are ethical issues first—everything from developing codes of conduct for the use and management of information, to confidentiality with partners in e-business" (Cone, 2008).

Problems like data security and privacy are more than technical questions or issues of potential liability; they demand that people handling sensitive information have a sense of doing the right thing. "This is about more than the letter of the law; it involves the spirit of the law," Amoroso says (Cone, 2008).

In the last 25 years we have seen an overwhelming technology infusion, affecting business, education, and society. Virtually all areas of our society have been transformed by the usage of technology. The change is important from an ethical perspective in terms of who Information Technology (IT) workers are today and what their tasks are. In the 1980s IT workers were mainly limited to technical fields such as programming, data processing, server administration, and phone services. Today IT workers are integrated into every department of our organizations, they function globally, and they have access to a wealth of knowledge and information (Payne & Landry, 2006).

So how do we prepare for taking the wheel as an individual working with Information Technology (IT) or Information Systems (IS)? Morality of respect doesn't appear, fully formed, at a particular age. Instead it develops, slowly. The story of that development is one of the great dramas of human growth, and one of the major contributions of developmental psychology to our understanding of children. If a child is brought up with care and understanding, then they will feel empowered to distinguish between moral or conventional issues. Yet, higher education--specifically in business schools--needs to take some responsibility in preparing students to ethical usage of information technology and the underlying information within those systems.