

Gender Differences in Ethics Perceptions in Information Technology

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INTRODUCTION

Greater emphasis is now placed on ethics in information technology (IT) which covers a broad range of issues such as privacy, honesty, trustworthiness, software reliability, data storage, the environment, security breaches, hacking, viruses, and acknowledging the intellectual property of others. Further, legal aspects tend to overlap ethics perceptions. For example, issues such as copying computer programs, music CDs, images, or videos are more than just ethical problems; they also pose legal problems. The ethical dimensions also extend to issues such as computer crime and fraud, information theft, and unauthorized information dissemination.

These ethical issues are becoming more complex as continuing advances in IT present many new ethical situations and fresh dilemmas. Developments such as the Internet, electronic commerce, and wireless/mobile communications present a new set of ethical issues and challenge current codes of ethics, copyright laws, and their authors. In addition, computer users' ethical standards may also vary from one situation to another (Wikipedia, 2005).

What is ethical is subjective, and more so in the areas of IT. Perceptions of ethics in IT vary to a degree from individual to individual. Further, there seems to be significant differences in the perception of ethics among males and females. According to Adam (2000), male and female judgment is most often influenced by their personal values and whether an action is considered legal. Woodcock (2002) conducted a study on ethical perceptions among 405 male and female students from universities, technical colleges, and schools in North-Eastern Australia and found significant differences in some ethical situations between males and females.

This article presents common issues and dilemmas that confront IT professionals, students, and the general community. In particular, it presents gender differences in perceptions of ethics and legalities in IT and highlights the different ethical perceptions of male and female students. These insights are particularly significant as the ethical beliefs and perceptions that students have may influence their ethical behaviors during their working careers.

BACKGROUND

The advent of the Internet and affordable computers led to a huge increase in computer users and computer usage. With the influx of many different users with varied qualifications and backgrounds, many types of serious ethical problems and issues confront IT professionals and users (Harris & Weaver, 1994), compounded by new behaviors and new forms of old behaviors facilitated by advances in technology (Adam, 1999). For example, the issue of intellectual property has taken on a completely new twist since the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s. As a result, stakeholders' perceptions and understanding of what is right, what is ethically right, and what is legal or illegal get blurred.

Ethics

Ethics, originally the domain of philosophers, deals with theories of morality and is broadly viewed as:

- Rules or standards of conduct or behaviour of a profession

- Morally right or correct behaviour, where morals are considered as standards of behavior; or conformity with accepted standards of conduct
- Qualities of honesty, truthfulness, and goodness

Thus, ethics tends to be defined by morals that are standards of behavior determined by society, with the additional qualities of rules of professional conduct, standards of a particular profession, and conscious principled decisions.

Ethics in IT

While computer ethics is defined by James Moor (1985) as “the analysis of the nature and social impact of computer technology and the corresponding formulation and justification of policies for the ethical use of such technology,” its scope is quite broad. It also includes areas such as universal access, the environmental impact of computers, impact on employment, issues relating to the computer professional and personal impacts (Baase, 1997). It also provides ways of forming arguments and judgments on particular IT-based activities (Adam, 1999). Computer technology includes computer hardware, software, and networks connecting computers.

Other definitions of computer/IT ethical conduct are:

- “The application of ordinary business ethics to such computer related situation as copying software, obtaining access to certain software or data, and use of hardware” (Chaney & Simon, 1994, p. 19)
- Ethical standards in any environment that is computer-based (Forcht, 1991)
- Information technology ethics includes protection of information from electronic eavesdropping, monitoring e-mail, protection of property including software piracy, and unethical access by unauthorized reading, copying or making use of databases, programs, or other computer resources (Conger, Loch, & Helft, 1995)
- Information systems ethics is an issue that pervades thinking in all areas, from finance to database (Cohen & Cornwell, 1989)

- The three key areas that impact on ethical conduct are ethics, morality, and legality (Beauchamp & Bowie, 1988; Forcht, 1991).

There is also wide collection of codes of ethics from professional bodies and private and government organizations and they present rules and solutions to dilemmas that are present in computer ethics. The Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility organization (2005) further extends the scope of computer ethics. These include environmental issues and health hazards in production, use, and disposal of computers and associated hardware such as monitors and portable computing and communication devices.

DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS IN IT

Ethics in IT spans multiple dimensions. Woodcock (2002) studied the following seven key dimensions of ethics in IT that represent specific situations that often confront computing professionals.

1. Copying software also known as piracy
2. Breaking into computers commonly known as hacking
3. Violating intellectual property, copyright (plagiarism), and copying program code from a business
4. Privacy issues such as the use of private records
5. Personal use of business computers and/or software
6. Employer monitoring of computer usage and e-mails
7. Supplying computer programs with errors

Ethical Perceptions

Ethical perceptions are subjective and may vary to a degree from individual to individual and are often influenced by an individual’s personal values and beliefs and whether one considers a particular action legal or illegal. Ethical perceptions and sensitivities of human beings seem to be shaped and molded from their formative years and subsequently influenced by their educational, work and social settings and

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