

# Objective Ethics for Managing Information Technology

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## INTRODUCTION

Businessmen have faced ethical dilemmas throughout history in many varying contexts. Today, chief information officers (CIOs) and information technology (IT) managers, in particular, face many ethical dilemmas from not only traditional business dilemmas, but also in managing IT. Traditional ethical issues of business, such as receiving gifts and promotional items from vendors, affect any manager in charge of purchases. In addition, IT managers must also make decisions with regards to technological issues such as information privacy, security, and accountability. IT facilitates action, both good and bad. This means that individuals can act *good* with far more efficiency and act *bad* with more malevolence. Actions that may not have been possible without IT now become issues because people have the means to do them. Managers need not only to adopt a moral code for themselves, but to encourage their employees to adopt a moral code or guard against and appropriately deal with behavior that violates that code.

Identifying and understanding an objective ethical framework is critical for the rapidly changing nature of information technology. Without an appropriate ethical standard to guide choices and actions in ever more complex and subtle situations, IT managers and professionals will find choosing morally acceptable solutions ever more difficult, leading to dangers in the long-term success of the organization. CIOs need to cut through the haze of conflicting demands to make decisions for the benefit of the organization. CIOs also need to be confident that their employees will act in appropriate, non-arbitrary manners when making decisions. The need to research ethics with regard to IT has been demonstrated numerous times (Davison, 2000; Rose, 2006; Stewart & Segars, 2002), yet none has provided an objective standard for making decisions. While several research efforts have explored normative and applied ethical theories as applied to IT (Davison, 2000; Walsham, 1996; Wood-Harper, Corder, Wood,

& Watson, 1996), none has questioned the underlying assumptions nor provided a compelling case for a non-arbitrary, objective moral code. Reviewing existing ethical theories should lead us to a standard that is applicable and beneficial to IT managers.

## BACKGROUND

Ethics is the study of morals and moral choices. It is the study of individual purposes and values that guide life. Ethics examines which values and virtues are necessary vs. which are optional, and defines the ultimate source of values. In an increasingly complex world, these guiding principles direct how we should live by providing a moral code—"a code of values to guide man's choices and actions" (Rand, 1964, p. 13). Individuals need a moral code to guide their decisions and actions. This is true for their private lives as well as in social situations, such as in business.

Three branches of ethical theory include *meta-ethics*, *normative ethics*, and *descriptive ethics*. Descriptive ethics does not promote any one theory over any other, but merely tries to explain the observed ethics of others individuals. Normative ethics attempts to define what types of behaviors are acceptable. Meta-ethics takes a more abstract view by asking what "goodness" means and if there are any standards for morality.

Research in business ethics usually focuses on normative or descriptive ethics, without consideration to underlying meta-ethical assumptions (Miner & Petocz, 2003). When meta-ethical perspectives are considered, they do not prescribe an ideal, rather they state that there is disagreement between perspectives (Karmasin, 2002). This stance, where all meta-ethical perspectives are equally valid, leaves CIOs and IT managers without an objective standard by which to guide their actions. Because a meta-ethical perspective deals with the foundation of ethics, a flawed foundation leads to flawed conclusions in IT ethical issues.

One general meta-ethical discussion can be found in Tara Smith's *Viable Values* (2000). In this book, she critiques four dominant ethical perspectives: intuitionism, contractarianism, rationalism, and intrinsic value. All four of these ethical perspectives fall short of providing an objective and rational basis for morality. A fifth ethical perspective, objectivism, based on the writings of Ayn Rand, successfully develops and supports an objective standard for ethical decisions. In the next section, we review each of the meta-ethical perspectives, provide examples of IT managers' behavior using that perspective, and examine a specific case using the different perspectives.

## **Case**

A recent controversy over Sony's Digital Rights Management (DRM) rootkit provides a case analysis for understanding the meta-ethical perspectives. In this controversy, Sony was installing a DRM program on user computers when purchasers of Sony-copyrighted audio CDs copied the songs onto their computers. As part of the end users' license agreement (EULA), the users acknowledged that a DRM was being installed to prevent illegal copying of songs. As justice requires, users not satisfied with copyright protections are free not to buy the product. However, the controversy over the DRM that Sony installed is that the EULA does not disclose that some of the files are cloaked and the whole program is uninstallable. This creates vulnerabilities on computers where the DRM is installed, violating the respect for property of those customers.

## **ETHICAL STANDARDS**

### **Intuitionism**

The first school of thought on why be moral comes from the intuitionists. In this view, obligations are viewed as self-evident (Prichard, 1952). For intuitionist IT managers, merely looking at a technological issue tells them what is morally right and wrong. Denying the self-evident is tantamount to denying their senses. No amount of argument will reveal the truth. Smith (2000) unravels this theory by asking what exactly is intuition. Is it a thought? Is it an emotion?

Intuitionists' claim that morality is self-evident disavows any method for determining what is moral

and what is not. It becomes impossible to replicate the thought process in discovering morals because they identify no thought process. An example may be an IT manager identifying computer hacking as a bad behavior without being open to discussion or argument about *why* it is bad. As Smith (2000) notes, "Intuitionists completely fail to explain what distinguishes the claim 'I know it by intuition' from the claim 'I believe it.' Consequently, intuitionist's account of morality... is completely arbitrary" (p. 28). If we are to have any hope in identifying a standard for ethics in IT, use of intuition will not help us.

In the Sony case, it is impossible to know how an intuitionist would judge Sony's actions. They may claim that copyright violations are obviously wrong, therefore Sony is morally obligated to protect their property by any means necessary. They may alternatively claim that it is self-evident that Sony was malicious and therefore Sony is immoral. Either way, the arbitrary assertions lack a clear standard for determining what is right or wrong.

### **Contractarianism**

Contractarianists, on the other hand, believe that moral authority is established through a contract to be moral. IT managers should be moral because they have agreed to be moral. Variations of contractarianism argue such agreement may be explicit or implicit, actual or hypothetical, and even individually or socially oriented. Contractarian philosopher David Gauthier (1986) declares that "moral principles are introduced as the objects of fully voluntary *ex ante* agreements among rational persons" (p. 9). People agree to honor contracts because it is in their own self-interest to do so (Hobbes, 1968). If they do not, their reputation may be destroyed, resulting others eschewing any further involvement with them.

The commonsense, simple approach to contractarianism attracts many proponents, especially among businessmen. However, there are flaws with this approach to morality. First is the relativism of contractarianism. Is any code of ethics valid as long as people agree to it? Is software piracy valid if everyone agrees it is? Relativism is not a fatal flaw, but certainly begs the question as to what exactly is the foundation for this theory.

Contractarianism says that contracts should be honored. Yet, there are no means of identifying why

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