

Gender Influences on Ethical Considerations in the IT Environment

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INTRODUCTION

We become just by performing just actions.
—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4th century, B.C.
(Miner & Rawson, 2000)

From the opening statement, it is evident that ethics has played a part in our everyday lives since the beginning of time, and still continues to do so. Another aspect of our lives that has become increasingly widespread is the use of information technology. In the Information Age, it is not often that we link ethics and information technology (IT).

This article examines the link between ethics and IT, and the influence of gender on ethical considerations in the IT environment.

BACKGROUND

Definitions

Ethics have been defined as, “The behavioural manners and norms of a group or society” (Takala & Urpilainen, 1999). Are males and females classified as one group? Or do their ethical considerations differ?

Multi-Dimensional Scale

A multi-dimensional ethics scale (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990) was used, as opposed to a single-item scale. A single-item measurement scale is inadequate for complex phenomena such as ethics. Ethical decision-making is not always affected by a single factor. In some situations, individuals might consider only one dimension, whereas in other situations, they consider a few dimensions (Grupe et al., 2002). It should be noted however, that this multi-

dimensional ethics scale can only assess community standards, and is not able to assess right versus wrong.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous studies have been conducted on ethical attitudes. In a study examining whether a group of MBA students, when asked if they would attempt an illegal act that would net them or their company a profit of more than \$100,000 if given a 1% chance of being caught, more than one-third responded “yes”. (Lieberman & Etzioni, 2003).

Previous studies have also been conducted on gender influences on ethical attitudes. Christie et al. (2003) investigated the influence of personal characteristics of business managers from India, Korea, and United States. Characteristics included age, gender, personal beliefs and the values of on one’s ethical perceptions, attitudes and conduct. It was found that there was a significant difference in ethical attitudes of business managers due to gender.

Ross and Robertson (2003) also found gender to be statistically significant in effecting the ethical attitudes of professionals. It was noted that some studies on gender differences found females more ethical than males (Arlow, 1991), while other studies found males to be more ethical than females (Fritzsche & Becker, 1983).

Upon review of research conducted on ethical conduct, one study noted that almost half (49%) of respondents said that ethical conduct is *not* rewarded in business today (Anonymous, 2003). However, in the same study, 79% of the respondents said their organizations have written ethics standards, and believed that top management supports those ethics (Anonymous, 2003).

These statistics indicate that the adoption of ethical behaviour is viewed favourably, but yet findings reveal that many do not believe that ethical conducts reaps benefits in the long run.

Further study on ethics is important as there are many benefits in acting ethically such as retaining employees. Studies have found that employees are more likely to remain loyal to organizations who they believe are ethical (Smith, 2000). Ultimately, good employees add to the bottom line. Studies have also found that there are associated cash costs to unethical behaviour, for example, internal fraud (Morse, 2003). Other intangible benefits of ethical behaviour are increases in trust levels (Keefe, 2002), and good reputation (Sheffert, 2001).

A greater understanding of ethics will provide an insight into how ethical behaviour relates to various factors such as educational background and income levels. This study looks at how ethical attitudes are affected by gender differences. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining differences in ethical attitudes, employing quantitative statistical methods. This enables the significance of differences due to gender to be quantified. Such analyses is lacking in literature today. The quantitative method employed is further detailed in the Data Analysis section below.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As we can see from previous studies, varying results were found when gender was examined as a factor for ethical considerations. What role does gender then play in the ethics of the IT environment? This study seeks to understand the differences in attitudes of IT practitioners due to gender, to see if they are consistent with previous findings on other populations.

The objective of this research is to understand IT practitioner attitudes to ethics. Therefore, the research question that drives this study is, "Is there a difference in attitudes of IT practitioners to ethics due to their *gender*?"

The next section addresses the methodology used for the evaluation of the data.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Method

This study uses a quantitative approach for evaluating data collected. Surveys were used as the data collection method. An online electronic questionnaire was selected as the survey instrument.

The hypothesis for this study is:

H₀1: There is a difference in attitudes of IT practitioners to ethics due to *gender*.

The dependent variables are the *scale items* (fair, just, acceptable, etc). The independent variable is *gender*.

Items on Multi-Dimensional Scale

Questionnaires were used together with an accompanying scenario written as a series of four vignettes. Online electronic questionnaires, housed by an online questionnaire-hosting site, Informis (2005) were used. A link to the survey was presented on the Project Management Institute (PMI)'s Web site. As the site is visited by project management practitioners worldwide, a wide variety of respondents were captured from all parts of the world, at no additional cost. The drawback to this is that the exact response rate cannot be determined, as there is no way of ascertaining the number of readers that responded to the survey.

A link to the survey was also included in Harrison International Limited's Web site¹. Harrison International Limited is an international consulting company, providing consulting services in project management and strategic management to organizations around the world. This was deemed a highly appropriate way of recruiting respondents for the study, as respondents would be business professionals, closely related to the target respondents for this study.

The survey and associated scenarios were developed from earlier studies carried out by Reidenbach and Robin (1990) and Tuttle et al. (1997). The associated scenarios were written for business circumstances and based on scenarios that could be present in software development projects.

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