Chapter III

Aspects of Social Responsibility in the Information Society

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ABSTRACT

The Information Society must be based on fundamental assumptions about information and human information rights, access, privacy, self-determination and personal control rather than on privilege, power and special interest. Those involved in the planning, development and implementation of the information systems that turn the Information Society into a reality are the custodians of the greatest change agent yet devised. They must recognise their social responsibilities and act accordingly for the benefit of society and its citizens. This chapter serves as an illustration of what types of social responsibility issues need to be addressed, who must address them and how they might be addressed. It discusses some of the basic aspects of social responsibility and the implications for the Information Society, drawing in particular from Corporate Social Responsibility. Five disparate cases illustrate how concepts are turned into real organisational policy. Two example applications, electronic voting and electronic patient records are used to illustrate the types of social responsibility issues that need to be addressed in order to tackle the digital divide and satisfy the needs and aspirations of stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The social impact of computing technologies is growing at an increasing rate. Computers are changing where and how we work, learn, shop, eat, vote, receive medical care, spend free time, make war and establish social relationships. This revolution is not merely technological and financial, it is fundamentally social and ethical. It is a revolution that has spawned an Information Society with the potential to be either empowering or enslaving. In this dangerous world the stakes are much higher, and consequently considerations and applications of social responsibility must be broader, more profound, and above all effective. This will increase the chance of an Information Society that effectively utilizes information and the related technologies to promote human well-being.

There is much evidence to show that there exists a digital divide. DeHann (2000) argues that "in an age of globalization, an age where the gap between the rich and the poor nations continues to widen, business leaders more than ever need to embrace social responsibility as a successful business strategy." Considering the world as a village of 100 people, DeHann says we would find that: 80 would live in substandard housing; 66 would not have safe drinking water; 66 would never have made a phone call; 50 would suffer from malnutrition; six (all from the U.S.) would own one-half the wealth; one would have a college education; and one would own a computer.

There is an increasing awareness among people of such inequalities and the potential of the Information Society to redress the balance. The demand on organizations to act in a socially responsible manner may well increase. In 1999 Environics International undertook The Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility involving representative samples of 1,000 citizens in each of 23 countries on six continents. The report of the poll included the following four public expectations of organizations in the future:

• Demonstrate their commitment to society's values and their contribution to society's social, environmental, and economic goals through actions.
• Fully insulate society from the negative impacts of company operations, and its products and services.
• Share the benefits of company activities with key stakeholders, as well as with shareholders.
• Demonstrate that the company can make more money by doing the right thing, in some cases by reinventing its business strategy.

These expectations set a challenging agenda for those involved in the planning, development, and implementation of the Information Society. However, this public expectation is likely to be dulled because of people's tendency to be somewhat unquestioning about technological advancement and solutions. Indeed Hamelink (2000) claims people have complete trust in technological solutions to personal and social problems, have a tendency to seize any technological advance, and tend to equate technological progress with progress of civilization. There is thus a need to be proactive about social responsibility.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the key aspects of social responsibility within the evolving Information Society with particular emphasis on the role of organizations. The objective is to highlight the types of problems

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