Chapter XVIII

Aspects of a Viable Social Responsibility Program in the Information Age

Gurpreet S. Dhillon
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Various chapters in this book have addressed a broad range of social responsibility issues. In many ways, each chapter has identified a category of social responsibility concerns which if ignored are going to result in some ethical strain. In the paragraphs below, based on an understanding of potential ethical strains, key elements of a viable social responsibility program are identified and described

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE

As has been noted elsewhere (Dhillon & Moores, 2001) and in this book (Chapter 6), even law and regulatory frameworks call upon individuals to engage in some sort of "self-regulation." However, prior to expecting individuals to self-regulate, it is not only important to make them aware of the various issues, but also to train and motivate them to consider various social responsibility issues.

In a recent paper, Dhillon (2001), while discussing violations of safeguards by trusted personnel, notes that had individuals within Barings Bank been aware and well trained to be socially responsible, the demise of the 223-year-old merchant bank could have been prevented. Since various groups of individuals within the bank lacked the ability to recognize patterns related to abuse of position and circumvention of organizational and technological controls, they failed to recognize any mis-dealings on part of Nicholas Leeson, the accused.

In a similar vein, if an average user of technology is not made aware of the manner in which various Internet businesses infringe the right to individual privacy, they would not be able to even recognize if any transgression has taken place. Such an issue is more important today than ever before (see Chapter 6), since concrete laws either do not exist or are still in the process of being defined.

ETHICAL SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT

Given that majority of IT implementations within organizations result in failure or inappropriate use, there is a need to consider the ethical aspects of the systems development process. Consider the recent Nevada Department of Motor Vehicle's (DMV) systems development fiasco. The goal was to implement one-stop shopping for driver's licenses and registration, Internet and telephone transactions, registration at smog check stations, and of course the reduction of abnormally long waiting times. This was to be achieved using a $35 million computer system that was, unfortunately, not implemented skillfully, full of bugs and slower than expected; it certainly did not help the backlog that the DMV was struggling with initially. One and a half years later, lines are finally shorter and clients are less unhappy, for they are seeing some results and improvements. Still, the project is not totally complete, employee morale is low and turnover high, the public bothered, and the new system at the branch level is not much easier, and not any quicker, than the old.

At the heart of the DMV's problem with the computer system is not so much a technological issue, but a sheer lack of ethical standards and inadequate social responsibility. Clearly a lack of good management and poor planning and design undermined the good intentions. The political (and contractual) constraints on time and staffing, as well as other problems that come with being a state agency, set the stage for a "mission impossible." Still, the legislature believed two consultants were up to the task, and for enough money they took it on. These are ethical and social responsibility IT project management issues as identified by Gilbert (2002) in Chapter 15 of this book.

There are several issues that contributed to the poor implementation, untimely completion, and unsatisfactory result of the DMV computer system. Among these are poor project management, the confusing role of two consultants, non-replaced downtime of existing employees for training, and other human resource matters. As has been argued elsewhere (e.g., see Wood-Harper et al., 1996; Rahanu et al., 1996), such issues could have been rectified by focusing on project management and systems development ethics. Clearly the system analysts had a social responsibility to elicit the right requirements, systems developers the responsibility to design a system to fit the needs of the current environment, and project managers the responsibility to meet stakeholder expectations.

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