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PANEL 11

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND ETHICS: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Panel Chair: Sue Conger, Baruch College, City University of New York

Panelists: Karen D. Loch, Georgia State University
Effy Oz, Wayne State University
William H. Starbuck, New York University

In 1968, Richard O. Mason published a think piece on the four main issues in ethics and information technologies. Mason's four issues are privacy, ownership, access and accuracy (Mason 1986). While these issues sound appropriate, the lack of research on them raises some doubt. There are approximately forty published research works relating to business ethics and information technologies and none has categorized the issues in simple terms such as Mason's. Of the forty works, none builds or develops theory and few have sufficiently "clean" definitions of the variables not to have confounding results (Derry and Green 1989).

Coupled with the lack of theoretical research, we also have an increasing call for codes of ethics relating to information technologies (ITs) (Gotterbarn 1982; Oz 1992). Codes of ethics assume consensus on the issues relating to the code development. In fact, new research shows that ethical consensus is not present on such issues as who owns computing resources or the ethicality of, for instance, personal use of company computers (Loch and Conger 1993). Before a meaningful code of ethics can be developed, we must first develop a consensus on what ethicality relating to information technologies is all about. Kahn (1990) calls for debate as the first step in developing ethical consensus. This panel is an attempt to initiate a debate on the issues relating to ethical use of ITs. We hope to start a continuing dialogue to build a consensus on what is (un)ethical with respect to using ITs.

Two assumptions will be debated. First, we assume that IT has unique characteristics that cause ethical dilemmas. This question becomes: What are the characteristics of IT that make it unique in ethical decision making?

Second, we assume that ethical issues relating to ITs and IT use are not completely identified. The question debated is: What are the ethical issues relating to IT? Are Mason's four issues — privacy, access, accuracy, ownership — adequate? How must these issues be refocused or changed to address ethical issues?

Specific dilemmas to be debated include the ethicality of using company computing resources for personal use, taking work products home as personal property, developing accurate programs, and monitoring compliance to policies about computer use.

At the end of each debate on a dilemma, the audience and panel will "vote" on the ethicality/nonethicality content and audience attitude will be summarized. The voting will give some indication of the presence, or lack thereof, of consensus within IS academia on ethical issues.

Finally, are policies and codes of ethics effective? Can we develop a general policy to fit all situations? Where do we go from here? These questions will be opened up for audience participation.

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