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## ***Classroom Minicases***

Editor's Note: This is the second of a series of papers to be published by the Journal of Information Systems Education (JISE) that will provide readers with minicases that are appropriate for use in the IS classroom. We encourage other authors to develop and submit minicases, usually two per paper, that can be used in IS courses. We hope that this is a useful service for JISE readers and that it will become a regular publishing area in JISE.

# **On the Horns of a Dilemma and Executive Hubris**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents two focused minicases that an instructor can use in a typical information systems overview course. The first of these deals with a serious ethical dilemma and the second with the politics of information technology executive management. For each case, a discussion of how to use the minicase effectively and a suggested solution are provided. This is the second in a series of three articles appearing in JISE dealing with the topic of IT Minicases.

**Keywords:** Information Systems Education, Case Method Teaching, Ethics, and Relations between Users and IT

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Small Case Studies**

Teaching using the Case Method is not limited to only large complex cases. The use of small cases as descriptive sidebars to illustrate topics in business textbooks is common. But short cases can also be used to engage the student in an interactive learning experience that requires grappling with difficult issues and formulating well reasoned analyses for problems posed.

It is often useful to supplement classroom discussions with short cases, ones that have been targeted to illuminate one or two precise points that challenge student thinking beyond the usual lecture or textbook. These shorter cases are usually no more than a few paragraphs in length, often a page or less. They are called 'minicases.' The objective of a minicase is to broaden the thinking of students by raising difficult, focused questions. A wide range of topics, of course, can be targeted, and these kinds of cases can greatly enhance the classroom experience for students. Minicases provide opportunities to think carefully about key issues, and often to challenge conventional thinking in ways that textbooks normally cannot do. Also, for professors who are

interested in using the case method in their teaching but are unsure how to do it effectively, using minicases provides a venue for getting experience with the process of case teaching with little pedagogical risk.

#### **1.2 Using Minicases**

Shorter cases can provide the bases for stimulating classroom discussions, with students being asked to read, analyze, and discuss them within the context of a single class. Or, they could be used for homework assignments at an appropriate time during a course after related readings and lectures have been completed. Or, minicases might even be utilized as essay questions on exams or as tools in assessing student learning outcomes.

Good cases provide a way to explore real business problems and significant issues that occur in real business situations (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen, 1994; Krause, 2005; Quattrone, 2006). Exposure to cases is closely akin to having real experience in the situations depicted. For example, suppose a business graduate faces a new situation that he or she has only encountered previously in the classroom as a case study. Even if that graduate has never been in that situation before, the case exposure puts the

graduate in a position as if he or she actually has some related experience. This is because the graduate has already examined many of the issues involved and made some preliminary judgments, just as someone with experience in the area would have done. A graduate who has worked through a range of cases has familiarity with a wide spectrum of practical situations that he or she may one day encounter in business. Clearly, this is a profoundly important aspect of business education. And minicases can play a central role in providing this kind of critical analysis and understanding for business students.

### 1.3 Overview

This paper is to present two minicases that an instructor can use in a typical information systems overview course that offers a survey of topics and principles and is geared to exploring how such information systems are utilized in modern business organizations. The author has often used minicases successfully in such information systems courses in the past. Topics range from information economics, to questions of ethics, implementation issues, user relations, loss of critical resources, concerns about diversity, and beyond. This article presents two minicases, as described below, to demonstrate the kinds of issues and problems that can be addressed in the classroom using this technique.

All of the events depicted in these minicases are true, though the names of the companies involved have been withheld and the names of the participants are disguised. The companies are all successful, global or regional firms that are among the leaders in their industries. In the text that follows, each minicase discussion employs the same three-part format. The first section for each minicase consists of a *recommended approach* for use in the classroom. This includes a review of the subject matter related to the minicase and its intended focus. The second section presents the body of the minicase. This includes the *minicase description* and the associated *discussion questions*. The third section for each case includes a *suggested solution*. It is called a 'suggested solution' because other valid viewpoints may emerge during discussions. The suggested solutions, then, are really a short 'teaching note' to assist the instructor in preparing for discussion leadership. Finally, concluding each of these solutions is a brief summarizing the actual 'real life' outcome for each minicase. These outcomes are not necessarily *solutions* for the minicases. They only reflect what actually happened and should be presented to the students only after case discussions have been completed. The outcomes help to provide the students with closure for the minicase discussions.

Finally, because the order of topics in an information systems course can vary depending upon the text and preferences of the instructor, there is no intended order of presentation for these minicases. Therefore, the cases in the presentation that follows can be utilized in whatever order an instructor determines to be appropriate for his or her course.

## 2. MINICASE: AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

### 2.1 Recommended Approach

**2.1.1 Subject Area:** This is about business ethics. In the wake of Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Global Crossing, and

other recent corporate scandals, business ethics has become a singularly important issue (Kreie and Cronan, 2000; Lopez, Rechner, and Olson-Buchanan, 2005; Lund and Mullins, 2006; Mintzberg, Simons, and Basu, 2002). That managers and executives should practice ethical decision-making is routinely touted in the business press and in business school classrooms. The role of ethics in business is the topic of this minicase, and it tends to bring out a lot of passion in students. Many students take strong moral positions without really considering the consequences, and the discussions can be lively.

**2.1.2 Intended Focus:** Ethical dilemmas are not always black and white, but can involve shades of grey. This case is definitely somewhere in the grey area. Is there or is there not an ethical issue here? Confounding the case is the fact that the dilemma has happened within the context of a 'dream job' that one would be very reluctant to jeopardize. This minicase is about 'drawing the line' ethically in these kinds of situations. And it is far from obvious.

### 2.2 Description and Discussion Questions

**2.1 Minicase Description:** You have a new dream job working in an executive position for a Senior Vice President at a major American bank. You have a family (spouse and kids) and many friends all of whom are impressed and excited about your new job. During the course of your work, after a couple of months on the job, you are given a project to collect and organize some quarterly banking statistics for the state government where the bank is located. You are told that you must certify these statistics for the state banking agency by signing a standardized government quarterly reporting form. It is an insignificant little project and an inconsequential part of your job. You must certify computer production numbers that have been provided to you from another part of the bank. But, you are aware that, beyond your control, the numbers have been finagled in favor of the bank. You resist signing your name and decide to discuss this with your superior. Your boss tells you that this reporting has always been done this way and it is not a big deal. "None of the state agencies really care about these specific numbers anyway," you are told.

You love your new job, and you do not want to risk jeopardizing your position or your future with the bank. Your family depends upon your being successful in this new job and you want to succeed to assure your progression to higher levels in your career. And you have a lot of other work awaiting your attention in your stylish new office, and you need to get back doing it.

**2.2.2 Discussion Questions:** Stress, conflict, and ethics are all illustrated. What are the issues here? How far should one go to maintain the ethical high ground? What do you do? Why?

### 2.3 Suggested Solution

**2.3.1 Student Background and Approach:** This is a case about ethical judgment. Some view this situation as a clear-cut case of right and wrong. "Refuse to sign; *blow the whistle*; and resign if all else fails." Others see a minor problem that is not worthy of jeopardizing a good job situation. Maybe the boss really does know what matters

here, and it really is 'no big deal.' This is a difficult dilemma, and as with most moral judgments, each student ultimately has to decide for himself (or herself) the best course of action here.

These kinds of moral questions are not uncommon in business. It is easy, sitting in a classroom, to take the moral high ground and refuse to even consider signing the quarterly reporting form. But could a real employee in a real business situation afford to take such a strong position in a situation like this one? Maybe, but maybe not. The objective here is not to undermine the students' moral character, not by any means, but to raise the issues and think critically and carefully about the pros and cons of making these kinds of decisions.

**2.3.2 Actual Outcome of this Minicase:** This really is a dilemma, and this is a description of a real situation. The person, who was actually faced with this situation, decided to sign the form and then worked diligently to improve the quality of the numbers reported in subsequent quarters. Over time, the accuracy improved and the person actually enjoyed a long career with the bank.

Students tend to see this minicase as 'black or white.' Often, they refuse to consider that the person depicted here could honorably choose to sign the quarterly report. In the 'real world,' situations are often not as simple as students tend to believe. The dilemma in this minicase is real and the learning comes from being confronted with and recognizing the nature of this dilemma. The students who gain from this case are the ones who reach a level of understanding in which they can appreciate that the answer here is far from obvious, regardless of what they themselves ultimately believe to be an appropriate resolution for the minicase.

### **3. MINICASE: NEVER OFF THE CORPORATE STAGE**

#### **3.1 Recommended Approach**

**3.1.1 Subject Area:** This minicase deals with the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and the role of the CIO in the modern business organization. This role is very complex and is an extremely difficult managerial challenge (Enns, Huff, and Higgins, 2003; Levina and Vaast, 2005; McAfee, 2003; Prahalad and Krishnan, 2002). User executives manage the factors of production in the firm. They are 'line managers' who control how the firm makes its money. The IS organization's primary role is to support these line managers.

CIO's directly manage the information systems organization. They influence other high level executives in a company to adopt and use the best systems technologies for the success of the firm. They support operations and managerial activities in every corner of the firm. Students should come to understand the complexity of this role as part of their quest to understand how information systems technologies impact a firm's core business activities.

**3.1.2 Intended Focus:** This is a case about self-destruction, but it is also a case about the balance between hubris and self-confidence. The real focus here is exploring the relationship between the CIO and other high level

executives. This relationship for the CIO is supportive and advisory, as well as political, in nature.

#### **3.2 Description and Discussion Questions**

**3.2.1 Minicase Description:** Ted was Vice President and CIO of a major oil company based in Houston, TX, a legitimate senior level executive in that oil company and a well-known computer industry leader. Ted was special because he was simply brilliant at recognizing and developing technical and managerial talent, and he consistently hired the very best for his IT organization. He was tough, direct, clear-headed, abrasive, and some would say 'macho in the extreme.' Still, he took good care of his people and ran an effective IT function for the firm. He inspired loyalty; his people both feared and loved him at the same time. Employees would say that once you got through that hard exterior, he was a really great guy.

Then, one evening at a computer industry conference, Ted was sitting at a bar in his hotel late after an evening dinner meeting. He was talking to a fellow he had met the day before at the conference. Ted was a bit 'tipsy' and began talking about how the executives in his company were a bunch of Neanderthals and that they did not understand anything about systems. He complained about having to endlessly baby-sit the users with the technology and spoon-feed the other Vice Presidents time and again. He was specific and he named some important names. It was vintage Ted – irascible yet, in a way, charming. But the fellow with whom he was talking was a reporter for the leading computer industry weekly newspaper, a fact that Ted had either forgotten or ignored. The next issue of this weekly featured an article about Ted prominently on its front page. The headline read, "Industry Leader Says What He Really Thinks About Users!"

**3.2.2 Discussion Questions:** Everyone in the IT industry read the story, as well as Ted's fellow VPs at the oil company. What could Ted do to recover? Can he survive after this? What are the lessons here?

#### **3.3 Suggested Solution**

**3.3.1 Student Background and Approach:** Leaders have to watch what they say. This is an extreme case, but there are always ears listening for the inappropriate comment. In information systems organizations, the politics can be brutal. Users and systems professionals simply speak different languages. Even when they use the same words, they often understand those words differently. When the inevitable problems occur because of communications difficulties, an 'us versus them' mentality develops. Such problems can lead to expensive systems mistakes or even failures, and a lot of blaming each other. Too often, an atmosphere of distrust sits just under the surface of polite discussions. Ultimately, this case is about the politics of distrust that can exist between the users and the information systems staff.

So, into this political situation, Ted launched his tirade. Of course, he should have been careful about his use of alcohol at the conference. And that is an important point. But, what can he do to recover his credibility with the user executives after this has happened? The term often used for making apologies in such situations is "falling on one's own

sword." Will Ted's falling on his own sword with each of the key executives that he has offended be enough for his political survival? This minicase provides a good basis for debating what Ted should do and for highlighting the politics of information systems technology in organizations.

**3.3.2 Actual Outcome of this Minicase:** This is obviously a disguised case, but it really did happen. Ted got summarily fired a few weeks after the article appeared, even though he was widely considered a first rate IS executive. He had been President of the wholly owned Information Systems subsidiary of the oil company where he worked, but he never worked in the information systems technology industry again.

Students find this case unbelievable at first. They are amazed that a senior executive like the one described in this minicase actually could make such a foolish mistake. One lesson here is that corporate managers are always being watched and judged, always 'under the microscope.' But, the learning in this case has ultimately to do with the development of a better understanding of the role of the CIO in the larger corporate organization, beyond the information systems function. If the students gain an appreciation for the strategic and leadership role of the CIO in a modern corporation, then the objectives for this minicase will have been achieved.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

##### 4.1 Summary

The objective of this paper has been to provide two short real-world cases that can be used to supplement the teaching of a university information systems survey course. These minicases are short, focused presentations of difficult situations that challenge student thinking and force students to reconsider basic assumptions. Each minicase deals with a topic that is typically taught in IS courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. These cases may be used to stimulate class discussions, as homework assignments, or as examination questions. For each case, a discussion of how to use the case effectively in the classroom and a suggested solution are provided. Additionally, the actual outcomes of each case are included.

##### 4.2 Toward the Future

The use of realistic and challenging minicases as championed in this article stimulates student understanding and fosters an approach that involves students in active learning. The development and circulation of focused and challenging minicases among Information Systems Faculty would signal a significant improvement for information systems teaching and learning. If a vehicle could be found for sharing such short cases among faculty across the IS teaching profession, then the promise of this approach might be achieved. If IS faculty members could develop and document sets of well-focused and challenging minicases in their respective areas of specialization, the result would be a collection of current, insightful, and easy to use tools for stimulating classroom discussion and student interest in a range of current IS topics. These kinds of minicases could supplement and significantly enhance the curriculum for the typical graduate and undergraduate Information Systems course.

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