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The Analysis of Telecommuting Ethics Using a Multidimensional Ethics Scale

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Introduction

With the increased concerns over the use of information technology as a means of allowing employees to work at home or some remote location, a new dimension of ethics has evolved -- telecommuting ethics. Telecommuting is sometimes used to refer solely to working at home, we define telecommuting as working from any remote site, including a remote office, home, a hotel room, or anywhere there is a telephone line available to access the corporate network. Telecommuting raises interesting ethical issues involving privacy, employee monitoring, and reward structures.

Ethical situations regarding computer usage, privacy, ownership and telecommuting have been previously researched. While early business ethics research focused on ethics as a holistic construct, recent ethics research has produced an ethics scale which measures three dimensions: moral equity, relativism, and contractualism. The purpose of this research is to extend previous research in which computer users evaluated the overall ethics of a particular telecommuting situation. We utilize a multidimensional scale that identifies the ethical rule or principle that was violated.

Literature Review

The growing utilization of computers to accomplish the tasks of a business has created many potential problem areas for firms and workers. Mason (1986) identified four major ethical issues of the computer age: Privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility. Privacy is a particularly important concept for the telecommuter. Does the worker give up the right to privacy in exchange for the privilege of working in a place convenient to the worker or his employer?

Ethical concerns about computer usage have increased as computers have become more powerful, more widely used, and more interlinked. The emergence of new forms of computer work has highlighted a new set of problems associated with the concept of using information technology. Guthrie (1997) identified telecommuting ethics as a major area of concern for firm and workers.

Guthrie (1998), Guthrie (1997), and Harrington (1996), among others, have examined the ethics of computer use using the scenario method. The scenario method, borrowed from the ethics case approach, consists of a short description of an ethical situation. An experimental subject then rates the ethics of the scenario, typically using the a single scale item with two to seven point responses with endpoints of ethical and unethical.

Reidenbach and Robin (1990) and Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson (1991) suggest that the measurement of ethics using a single-dimensional construct is inadequate. Because of the complexity of the ethics construct, they suggest a multi-item, multi-trait approach to the measurement of business ethics. According to their research, ethics consists of three theoretical dimensions: moral equity, relativism, and contractualism. Measurement of these three dimensions requires from eight to 33 items.

According to Reidenbach and Robin (1990) and Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson (1991), moral equity consists of concepts such as fairness and justice. Relativism consists of concepts such as cultural and traditional acceptability. Contractualism consists of concepts dealing with unwritten contracts and unspoken promises.

In this paper, we apply the scales of Reidenbach and Robin (1990) and Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson (1991) to a set of telecommuting scenarios developed by Guthrie (1998). We also extend the previous work by comparing the single item ethics construct to the multidimensional ethics construct.

Methodology

We collected data from 80 subjects. Each subject was given a set of ethical scenarios. The eight-item scale developed by and Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson (1991) followed each scenario. In addition, a ninth item “Ethical” to “Not Ethical” was added.

The subjects were advanced undergraduate students in marketing, MIS, and business ethics classes. The items were given to students to fill out during class time.
The data were analyzed individual regression models for each scenario as follows:

\[ \text{ethical} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{moral equity} + \beta_2 \text{relativism} + \beta_3 \text{contractualism} \]

Results

Initial results indicate that ethics is mainly a function of the moral equity, or lack thereof, the respondents found in the telecommuting scenarios. Relativism and contractualism are sometimes significant in the models, but have no consistent association with the ethical choice. These two variables do provide useful insight in this research when looking at scenarios which are very technical, where privacy is questioned, or where unwritten contracts are not obligated.

Conclusions

Our study identified a potential problem with most ethical studies in the information systems field. Ethics has been identified as a multidimensional construct, but our study showed that the traditional measures used in information systems ethics studies measure only one dimension: moral equity. The other dimension of ethics which have been identified in the literature, relativism and contractualism, are not adequately measured by the single “Ethical” item. In some scenarios, relativism and contractualism even scored in the opposite direction: items viewed as unethical were considered culturally acceptable and not violating a promise.

The good news is that the single “ethical” construct is a conservative measure. In none of our scenarios did something measure ethical if it was culturally unacceptable or violated a promise.

The bad news is that we do not know which of the three constructs is more strongly related to behavior. Several of our scenarios were viewed as ethically wrong, but culturally acceptable. It is not clear from our study whether our subjects might still do something that they describe as ethically wrong but socially acceptable. In other words, are information systems professional more driven by absolute ethical standards or by relativism?

Despite these limitations, the paper points out the need for better measures of ethics among information systems professional.

References


This paper points out the need for more research in this area. The use of information systems professionals as subjects would provide greater generalizability. An alternative testing format which provided a truer test of