

Chapter 12

Ethical and Social Issues in Information Systems

LEARNING TRACK 1: A CORPORATE CODE OF ETHICS FOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS

As a manager, you will be responsible for developing, enforcing, and explaining corporate ethics policies. Historically, corporate management has paid much more attention to financial integrity and personnel policies than to the information systems area. But based on what you will have learned after reading this chapter, it will be clear your corporation should have an ethics policy in the information systems (IS) area covering such issues as privacy, property, accountability, system quality, and quality of life. The challenge will be in educating non-IS managers about the need for these policies, as well as educating your workforce.

Some corporations have developed far-reaching corporate IS codes of ethics, including FedEx, IBM, American Express, and Merck & Co. Most firms, however, have not developed these codes of ethics, leaving their employees unsure about expected correct behavior. There is some dispute concerning a general code of ethics versus a specific information systems code of ethics. As managers, you should strive to develop an IS-specific set of ethical standards for each of the five moral dimensions:

- Information rights and obligations. A code should cover topics such as employee e-mail and Internet privacy, workplace monitoring, treatment of corporate information, and policies on customer information.
- Property rights and obligations. A code should cover topics such as software licenses, ownership of firm data and facilities, ownership of software created by employees on company hardware, and software copyrights. Specific guidelines for contractual relationships with third parties should be covered as well.
- System quality. The code should describe the general levels of data quality and system error that can be tolerated, with detailed specifications left to specific projects. The code should require that all systems attempt to estimate data quality and system error probabilities.
- Quality of life. The code should state that the purpose of systems is to improve the quality of life for customers and for employees by achieving high levels of product quality, customer service, and employee satisfaction and human dignity through proper ergonomics, job and workflow design, and human resources development.
- Accountability and control. The code should specify a single individual responsible for all information systems, and reporting to this individual should be others who are responsible for individual rights, the protection of property rights, system quality, and quality of life (e.g., job design, ergonomics, and employee satisfaction). Responsibilities for control of systems, audits, and management should be clearly defined. The potential liabilities of systems officers and the corporation should be detailed in a separate document.