Ethical Decision-Making: Identifying the Ethical Issue

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor, Information Assurance
Norwich University, Northfield VT


In this column and two more to follow, I want to apply the ethical decision-making methodology I have been teaching students for many years (see for example “Making Ethical Decisions” <http://www.mekabay.com/ethics/making_ethical_decisions.pdf> and “Ethics, Spyware & Steganography” <http://www.mekabay.com/courses/academic/norwich/is340/26_Ethics_Spyware_Stego.ppt>). This particular approach was brilliantly described by Professors Kallman and Grillo in their 1996 text, _Ethical Decision Making and Information Technology: An Introduction with Cases_, Second Edition. [McGraw-Hill (ISBN 0-070-34090-0), Amazon link <http://tinyurl.com/ywchg8>]. The essential points of the method are as follows:

1. Identify the ethical problem in operational terms.
2. Look for explicit and implicit guidelines relevant to the situation.
3. Identify and apply underlying principles affecting the decision.
4. Explore rights and duties of participants and stakeholders.
5. Respond to intuitive cues.

Today I’ll start with the first step above and examine Vara’s suggestion that workers conceal their use of corporate systems to visit “certain sites -- ranging from the really nefarious (porn) to probably bad (gambling) to mostly innocuous (Web-based email services).”

Let’s assume for the sake of this discussion that an employee, Bob, has signed an appropriate-use agreement with his employer and that he’s not supposed to use his company computer for non-work-related Web surfing. Charles Cresson Wood offers a sample policy for this purpose (see “Chapter 11 -- Sample Internet Security Policy For Users” in _Information Security Policies Made Easy_, 10th Edition <http://www.informationshield.com/ispmemain.htm>). I have modified the policy for use in this discussion as follows:

>Personal Use—Workers who have been granted Internet access who wish to explore the Internet for personal purposes must do so on personal rather than company time. Games, news groups, and other non-business activities must not be performed on company computers. . . . Workers must not employ the Internet or other internal information systems in such a way that the productivity of other workers is eroded. Examples of this include chain letters and broadcast charitable solicitations. Company X computing resources must not be resold to other parties or used for any personal business purposes such as running a consulting business on off-hours.

In identifying the ethical question, Bob should ask himself,

- “What are the actions in question?” The actions are surfing to forbidden sites using
company equipment and then concealing his actions.

- “Who gains from the proposed actions?” Bob gains in the short term by avoiding work and having fun while being paid for nothing.
- “Who suffers?” The stakeholders in the company lose by paying for nothing; coworkers pay by doing extra work to compensate for Bob the slacker.
- “Are those who lose out willing participants?” Generally, no: few employees would willingly sacrifice their time to cover for Bob; and corporate management certainly don’t want their employees flouting their policies in secret and then lying about the violations.

As for Vauhini Vara, I think her decision (and that of her editors) should have been framed as “Should I publish this article telling people how to evade personal responsibility for violating corporate appropriate-use policies.” The people gaining are the lazy, irresponsible and dishonest workers who choose to cheat their employers by breaching their employment contracts; the people losing are the same ones Bob is cheating in our example above, and the same considerations apply to the question of willing participation in the behavior being condoned and encouraged in Vara’s article.

More next time.

* * *

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/> and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

Copyright © 2007 M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to Network World to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.