Chapter 9
IT and Globalized Ethics

In this chapter I will first discuss the individual ethical principles an IT professional is likely to encounter. Then I will consider the impact of the ethics of globalized institutions on the ethics of IT professional. Finally, I will discuss the role of IT professionals in the global social contract to be formulated in Part III, A Social Contract for Globalized Institutions. IT professionals are parties to the global social contract because of their essential role in making globalized institutions possible. So we need to determine how they will participate in this social contract.

IT PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

As an individual, An IT professional has ethical principles and moral principles. In this book, ethical principles are those grounded in social cooperation, as opposed to moral, religious, and philosophical principles, which not everyone shares. Principles of professional ethics have to be ethical rather than moral principles, because IT always appears in the context of an organization, whether business or non-profit. Organizations are cooperative enterprises. Thus IT is always concerned with the development or maintenance of systems in some context of social cooperation.

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The different types of IT professional ethical requirements are as follows:

1. Ethical duties as citizens and as human beings.
2. Duties and obligations to employers as employees or contractors.
3. Enabling professional duties, done to maintain their capability as professionals.
4. Substantive duties to system users.
5. Substantive system duties (infrastructure and application).

Each type of requirement has a different ethical basis. Some of these are enabling duties, for example, things one does in order to maintain one’s capability in a profession—in IT, by staying current. Some are substantive duties, requirements of the practice of the profession.

The first two—duties as citizens or human beings and ethical requirements as employees—are not specific to IT professionals and demand attention only when the IT context requires it. For example, conflicts of interest and using employer’s resources for one’s own purposes occur perhaps with some frequency in IT contexts. Broader social or ethical implications of IT development also need to be considered. Most duties and obligations as employees are also not specifically IT professional duties, although their performance is important to maintaining the integrity of the profession. Confidentiality and not misusing resources are employee duties of special importance in an IT context.

Enabling professional duties need to be performed either to keep one’s own place in working toward the goals of the profession, or enhancing the profession itself. Knowledge-related duties are especially important for IT. Keeping up with the rapid changes in IT is a daunting proposition. IT professionals often have to spend significant portions of their free time “keeping current.” “Keeping current” is essential for being able to fulfill the goals of the profession, as well as doing one’s job well. Also, an IT professional needs to work at making the existence of the profession and its special expertise and goals known to the public as well as to managers and employers. Quality work within IT and cooperation between fellow professionals toward reaching professional goals are also important. In this area, there are potentially difficult and destructive conflicts between proprietary information and the needs of the profession. An important function of patent and copyright is to provide legitimate protection for the originator of the idea to make it possible to recoup development costs and exploit legitimate competitive advantage. But keeping some information proprietary can stifle growth and make everyone worse off. This is how problems of intellectual property rights play out in an IT context.

Finally, there are substantive IT professional duties. To users, IT professionals have the duty to include all affected by a system in requirements design and implementation. They also have a duty not to misuse their technical expertise in dealing with those less knowledgeable. To management, IT professionals have the duty to provide whatever information and expertise they can toward keeping projects on time and on budget. I would count this as a substantive professional IT duty just because the track record of IT projects being on time and on budget is so poor. If an IT professional needs to be reminded of anything, it is this track record. Substantive system duties include helping to maintain data integrity, being responsible for appropriate maintenance standards, and more generally ensuring appropriate ongoing support for systems implemented. These are duties that an IT professional needs to aware of even when management may not have much understanding of their importance. Management failure to support data integrity and provide for appropriate support may require protest if management chooses to ignore them to the possible detriment of the entire system.
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