

# BCS ETHICAL DILEMMAS REPORT

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*BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT*

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Established in 1957, BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, is the leading body for those working in IT. With a worldwide membership now of more than 55,000 members in over 100 countries, BCS is the qualifying body for Chartered IT Professionals (CITP).

BCS was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1984. Its objectives are to promote the study and practice of computing and to advance knowledge of, and education in, IT for the benefit of the public. BCS is also a registered charity.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the first time, in 2018 we asked BCS members to anonymously share any ethical dilemmas they may have experienced – if they felt comfortable doing so.

This year, we have collated those comments under general subheadings. We present them here without comment or commentary for background reading to the main research we do throughout the year – much of which will inform BCS' Insights 2020 event. Some of the comments we received were not necessarily dilemmas but member views about what concerned them; these are included. These comments have been lightly edited for consistency and clarity.

The question BCS asked was:

**'IN THE PAST YEAR, HAVE YOU OR YOUR ORGANISATION FACED ETHICAL DILEMMAS THAT YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO SHARE? IF YES, PLEASE DO SO HERE.'**

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## 1 BUSINESS PRACTICE AND REPORTING

**'IT IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS WHILST RESPONDING RAPIDLY TO URGENT AND RAPIDLY CHANGING DEMANDS. IN ADDITION, INFORMATION SECURITY REQUIREMENTS CAN OFTEN CONFLICT WITH THE NEEDS OF AN ORGANISATION FOR IMMEDIATE FLEXIBILITY AND EASE OF ACCESSING FACILITIES.'**

- > 'A secure network requirement was proposed to be satisfied by a supplier pitching a solution that was over-priced, inappropriate and without awareness of latest technology... i.e. selling what they had rather than what was required.'
- > 'Company has been too eager to please the client than report appropriately.'
- > 'Deprioritising inclusive design **because there are no regulations.**'
- > 'Extremely damaging management appointments and decisions that have damaged businesses and individuals causing mass resignations and business closures. There needs to be greater training and controls around how managers are appointed and trained to weed out the sociopaths.'
- > 'Finding a way to make data compatible with COTS products whilst maintaining GDPR etc.'
- > 'How do you balance "creative destruction" with the impact on "old" industries and their employees?'
- > 'I have seen managers fraudulently placing personal favours above industrial standards.'
- > 'I won't list specifics but when considering ethical standards at a corporate level, it will form a point of view of compliance rather than something at an emotional, principle or idealistic standpoint... feels like there is a real gap there.'
- > 'In the new era of awareness of digital privacy issues, I am having to make major changes to retention policies in the organisations I help run. This requires internal debates and new thinking over what is right these days.'

- > 'Inappropriate and harassing behaviour, taking credit for others' work.'
- > 'More perhaps to do with privacy of data since GDPR came in. Most adhere to the laws however my concern does arise as more organisations are turning to agile working whether at home or in public places. Some organisations rely on home connections or public access Wi-Fi due to them cutting costs, which cannot be assumed to be entirely safe when accessing work-based networks.'
- > 'Product to time vs certification vs "across disciplines" professional responsibility – sw vs eng.'
- > 'Reduction in training.'
- > 'To use a UK-based company or seek resource near-shore?'
- > 'We were asked to provide consulting to a **foreign military organisation**. We declined.'
- > 'Ensuring as a subject matter expert I offer the advice the client needs in order to make an informed decision when pressured to simply deliver it because the customer asked for it, even when we know it is not the right route to take.'
- > 'I have had to whistle blow earlier in the year – re: approach and style of my leader.'
- > '**Employees sharing their user accounts**, using company computers to store their personal information and do private jobs; poor handling of personal information, some cases of gender inequality.'

## 2 DATA ETHICS

**'AN ORGANISATION'S INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR DATA, IN EXCESS OF THAT NEEDED TO CARRY OUT ITS FUNCTIONS. THIS PROVIDES AN ETHICAL DILEMMA TO ANALYSTS, DEVELOPERS, ETC, WHO ARE ASKED TO BUILD A SYSTEM THEY KNOW IS ASKING USERS FOR TOO MUCH DATA FOR NO GOOD REASON.'**

- > 'Aware of organisations who both check for adequate security and then offer to fix the problems. My company refuses to do both roles.'
- > 'Designing a new care home with access controls and SMART bedrooms, powered by Alexa. There has been so many moral dilemmas regarding access to bedrooms by staff, the ability to lock rooms to allow no access when residents are away and the privacy issues regarding the use of Alexa with clients that might not have the mental capacity to understand the implications of sharing and using social media services. Still working on these issues but starting to build an operational model that might meet all the different needs and mitigate most of the risks sufficiently.'
- > 'How did that marketing company get my details?'
- > 'How open we are about our collection, processing and sharing of data about our customers – we are led by what we can achieve within the law rather than what is right or what a lay person may view as reasonable. We are unlikely to be unique in our sector (retail) in this respect.'
- > 'I work with pharmacy dispensing data which has the power to help outcomes for patients, but ethically we have to be ever diligent to prevent the misuse of data and ensure the data properly protected.'
- > 'Incorrect auditing of transferred personal data between UK and offshore suppliers for support purposes is not monitored sufficiently to maintain compliance.'
- > 'Invisible processing for collaborative (data-sharing) analytics in health – who is the controller? Use of AI on large datasets without adequate checking of data quality.'
- > 'Need to use personal data for testing/assurance given challenge of data scrambling/anonymisation in complex systems.'
- > 'NHS selling our/your data.'

- > 'Numerous organisations that do not pay attention to GDPR, including a political party. If they ignore this law, how many others do they ignore?'
- > 'Personal information being sold to another organisation who used it to promote their products. This was without my knowledge/permission.'
- > 'Poor data protection and GDPR compliance.'
- > 'The collection and use of biometric data to assess human (HCI) performance of mission-critical systems.'

### 3 SUSTAINABILITY

'BUYING USED SMARTPHONES FROM GIFFGAFF TO BE MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE. [IS THAT AN ETHICAL DILEMMA?] NOT USING APPS WHICH MAKE WORK EASIER WHEN THERE ARE PRIVACY OR SECURITY CONCERNS – MEANING WORK METHODS MAY BE A LITTLE CLUNKIER AND LESS UP TO DATE.'

## 4 SOCIETAL ISSUES AND INCLUSIVITY

### 'WE SHOULD HAVE AN IT EQUIVALENT OF THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH.'

- > 'Conflicted on this one. Organisations reflect government & societal norms on ethics. If politicians can be openly unethical, why should people or organisations be any different?'
- > **'How much is accessibility a hard requirement? How hard do you push back against something you think won't benefit equally?'**
- > 'I once was requested to contribute to a decision that would change health care policy for my country through the implementation of information systems to benefit most, if not all, government and public hospitals/clinics or institutions. The decision was influenced by unethical, politically corrupt, and biased so-called professionals who put their selfish interests ahead of the development in quality and service delivery in this already crippled health care system; hence, they purposely ignore the obvious loop holes that have been filled, problems that could be solved and have been solve historically by the use of information systems and the implementation of information security.'
- > 'I was a whistle-blower in the NHS and was made redundant after 12 years' service. I was faced with a practice that I found unethical and could not look the other way.'
- > 'In New Zealand, there is significant nepotism and very low capability maturity, which is frustrating to see and experience.'
- > **'Low respect for females within IT/tech roles.** Typically seen as a "man's job", I find it difficult to excel within my field with constant pressures and pushback on ideas, all because I am female.'
- > 'Promoting diversity, whilst having a lack of diversity.'
- > **'Purging of political opinions which do not fit Blairite socialist fantasies. Zero tolerance of political diversity that is actually mainstream belief.'**
- > 'Technologies like chatbot, AI, process automation, etc., are likely to replace work force so applying those technologies may incur layoff of labour-intensive jobs.'
- > 'Working with narrow minded people gives unsatisfactory feelings and the working environment should be hassle free. In our organisation I have personally faced such experiences during this year.'
- > 'The business contemplated partnering an organisation to implement a simple chat bot. The business was unaware of the detail around the partner and that this was the development of an advanced AI bot to support psychosocial interventions in the place of trained psychologists.'

## 5 SECURITY

'SHIPMENT OF ENCRYPTION TECHNOLOGY ACROSS COUNTRY BOUNDARIES AND ENSURING THE RULES ARE APPLIED CAN CONFLICT WITH COMMERCIAL NEED AND, IN TRUTH, THE GENUINE LEVEL OF RISK.'

- > 'Data breach and password security policy (sharing passwords).'
- > 'Data 'breach' is no longer uncommon: is data breach from system negligence different from data breach from system "compromise"? If the data is "breached" at what level is it the negligence of the business or the negligence of the consumer – should the business penalties be the same?'
- > 'Spam emails and spam telephone calls, these can have bad consequences **such as one's bank account being attacked.**'

## 6 ETHICS COMMENTS

**'ETHICS DO NOT PROTECT SOCIETY FROM UNETHICAL PRACTICES... THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE FURTHER DOWN TOWARDS THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL IF THEY SEE A PROFIT.'**

- > 'Engagement with the tobacco industry.'
- > 'I have no personal experiences but as a social activist, I have got to hear many disastrous facts from the media that were really shocking; year on year, many cases are being reported which makes humanity ashamed.'
- > 'I work as an expert witness and have been called in to report on two cases of defamation. This is not a "dilemma" but is an extreme situation where someone has behaved in an extremely unethical manner causing criminal harm to others.'
- > 'In my research area, I'm encountering and exploring ethical dilemmas all the time relating to education: e.g. **how do we engage with and support students who are being blackmailed by essay mills** they have used to complete work for them? Should I report a colleague for being over-zealous in assisting a student/doctoral candidate to gain a pass? And many more.'
- > 'Whilst ethical considerations aren't important in the IT industry, they definitely SHOULD be. I think we're all (both within the industry and society) testing the boundaries of what is acceptable.'
- > '**It's important to understand the "duty of care" and who it's to.** Having that clearly understood makes it easier to take decisions without being pulled in many different directions by many different factions. **For example, working on air traffic control systems, the clear duty of care to the relatives of those who die if the systems screw up, not whichever companies are involved, or people's careers, or who makes money from whatever deals happen during the project.'**
- > 'While working for a government agency this year, my clearance was revoked (although it was issued earlier by the same agency) and I was escorted from the premises where I had previously worked for 18 months. I have still not been provided with an explanation for this injustice, with money still owed to me. Needless to say, after working on government secure projects with agencies ranging from the police to the foreign office for nearly 20 years, I have taken the decision to no longer undertake any work for UK government agencies of any kind. The evidence suggests unscrupulous, unethical suppliers, through their relationships with elected officials, are interfering with the day to day operations and intent of organisations we

- trust to keep us healthy and safe. BCS has the opportunity to speak out against these escalating unethical tendencies.'
- > 'Working for tobacco manufacturers who have actively lied to the public in the past. Working with financial institutions who have in the past not only negatively affected the global economic system but also engaged in fraudulent contact (and are still not behaving much better). The issue with both the above is that they do not seem to behave much better today. Working with clients in countries with low moral/ethical/legal standards. Working with organisations that develop technologies that could be used for large scale surveillance and are thus open to abuse. Working with organisations in the fast fashion or energy industry and are thus having a negative impact on sustainability. Working with automotive industry. **The issue with these organisations is that while they have the means to make a change for the better, they rarely do.** Finally, I have worked for many organisations with detrimental IT practices and policies perpetuated by management that cannot or do not want to move to better ways of working. This creates an **interesting conundrum in the sense that one might choose not to work with these companies at all, as one might feel they are wasting shareholders' money, but on the other hand, some minor change or demonstration of "what good could look like" may make all the difference.'**

## 7 GENERAL REMARKS

### 'THERE ARE NO ETHICS IN IT.'

- > 'Office politics.'
- > 'Confidentiality, conflict of interest, integrity.'
- > 'Go through proper channels or meeting a government official through personal contacts.'
- > 'No ethical dilemma in reality but carelessness among IT professionals were disclosed. It is a big challenge to change the carefree culture of new entrants in the IT domain, e.g. young professionals would not care to read their emails and would always come up after deadlines with lame excuses.'
- > 'We are an NHS body subject to inspection by four or five external authorities, so the ethics are debated on our behalf and compliance is part of the job.'