



Ethical use of information communication technologies

Organisations continue to invest heavily in computer systems designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Often these systems are introduced to automate manual procedures that are complex and very labour intensive.

Usually new systems are not simply a matter of giving staff a better tool to do the same work but involve changes to the nature of the work itself. These changes will have a flow-on effect on more than just the work practices of employees: they may also have societal effects (for example, loss of employment or the necessity to retrain to perform the same task).

Careful planning and consultation are needed to implement new systems successfully. All those affected by the change must be involved in a timely manner and appropriate way. These may include customers, suppliers, government (for example, the local council), business partners and members of the public as well as employees.

The impact of new systems will usually be judged in terms of whether the gains in efficiency and effectiveness are realised as planned. New systems may involve changes in staffing levels, organisational structure and social groupings. Such changes can affect staff morale within an organisation, as well as external relationships (particularly with customers) to such an extent that they may cause disadvantages to the organisation. These may reduce, or even outweigh, the basic benefits achieved.

There is a growing realisation that **good ethics is good business**. The latest survey by the Institute of Business Ethics shows a dramatic increase in the number of organisations that have a corporate code of ethics.

Given the central and essential role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in organisations, it is very important that this ethical sensitivity filters through to decisions and activities related to ICT. In particular, organisations need to consider:

- how to set up a strategic framework for ICT that recognises personal and corporate ethical issues
- the intellectual property issues surrounding software and data
- the way information has become a key resource for organisations and how to safeguard the integrity of this information
- the increasing organisational responsibility to ensure that privacy rights are not violated as more information about individuals is held electronically.





There is an ethical agenda associated with the use of ICT in organisations. New advances in ICT and new applications may change the agenda. If organisations wish to secure benefits to their business in the long term and enhance their reputation, they have to address a comprehensive agenda.

The following steps provide a way in which organisations can establish such an agenda and address the ethical issues arising in the field of ICT.

- 1 Decide the organisation's policy, in broad terms, in relation to ICT. This should:
 - take account of the overall objectives of the organisation, drawing from such existing sources as the organisational plan or mission statement
 - use the organisation's established values, possibly set out in its code of practice, for guidance in determining how to resolve ethical issues.
- 2 Form a statement of principles related to ICT which would include commitments to:
 - respect privacy and confidentiality
 - avoid ICT misuse
 - avoid ambiguity regarding ICT status, use and capability
 - be committed to transparency of actions and decisions related to ICT
 - adhere to relevant laws and observe the spirit of such laws
 - support and promote the definition of standards in, for example, development, documentation and training and
 - abide by relevant professional codes.
- 3 Identify the key areas where ethical issues may arise for the organisation, such as:
 - ownership of software and data
 - integrity of data
 - preservation of privacy
 - prevention of fraud and computer misuse
 - the creation and retention of documentation and
 - the effect of change on people, both employees and others.



- 4 Communicate practical guidance to all employees, covering:
 - the clear definition and assignment of responsibilities
 - awareness training on ethical sensitivities
 - the legal position regarding intellectual property, data protection and privacy
 - documentation standards and
 - security and data protection.
- 5 While organisations have a responsibility to act ethically in the use of ICT, so do individual employees. Those involved in providing ICT facilities should support the ethical agenda of the organisation, and in the course of their work, should:
 - consider broadly who is affected by their work
 - examine whether others are being treated with respect
 - consider how the public would view their decisions and actions.