

33.17: Ethical and Social Issues in Information Technology

Learning Objectives

- Identify privacy issues associated with information technology
- Identify ethical issues associated with information technology

As you'll recall, the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century gave rise to a number of unforeseen ethical and social issues—for instance, concerns about workplace safety, wages, discrimination, and child labor—which led to real changes in worker protections, labor practices, and law. Similarly, the technology revolution of the twentieth century—starting with the widespread use of the Internet and home computers—has spawned a new set of ethical and social concerns that people a hundred years ago couldn't have imagined: for example, how should personal information and online privacy be protected? Who gets to own the information about our habits and “likes”? Before the advent of the Internet, people thought about and controlled their personal information in very different ways. Today, many of us lead complex online lives, and we may not even realize how our personal information is being collected and used. Companies like Caesars can collect data on the purchasing patterns, personal preferences, and professional/social affiliations of their customers without their even knowing about it. In this section we'll explore some of the ethical and social issues related to network security, privacy, and data collection that businesses must address.

Technoethics

Ethical and social issues arising from the use of technology in all areas of our lives—and in business, in particular—have led to the creation of a new branch of ethics: technoethics.

Technoethics (TE) is an interdisciplinary research area concerned with all moral and ethical aspects of technology in society. It draws on theories and methods from multiple knowledge domains (such as communications, social sciences information studies, technology studies, applied ethics, and philosophy) to provide insights on ethical dimensions of technological systems and practices for advancing a technological society.^[1]

Technoethics views technology and ethics as socially embedded enterprises and focuses on discovering the ethical use of technology, protecting against the misuse of technology, and devising common principles to guide new advances in technological development and application to benefit society. Typically, scholars in technoethics have a tendency to conceptualize technology and ethics as interconnected and embedded in life and society. Technoethics denotes a broad range of ethical issues revolving around technology- from specific areas of focus affecting professionals working with technology to broader social, ethical, and legal issues concerning the role of technology in society and everyday life.^[2]

Recent advances in technology and their ability to transmit vast amounts of information in a short amount of time has changed the way information is being shared amongst co-workers and managers throughout organizations across the globe. Starting in the 1980s with information and communications technologies (ICTs), organizations have seen an increase in the amount of technology that they rely on to communicate within and outside of the workplace. However, these implementations of technology in the workplace create various ethical concerns and in turn a need for further analysis of technology in organizations. As a result of this growing trend, a subsection of technoethics known as organizational technoethics has emerged to address these issues.

Technoethical perspectives are constantly changing as technology advances into areas unseen by creators and users engage with technology in new ways.

Technology, Business, and Your Data

Technology makes businesses more efficient, makes tasks faster and easier to complete, and ultimately creates value from raw data. However, as much as technology impacts the way that companies do business, it also raises important new issues about the employer-employee relationship. If you send personal emails from your office computer, do you have the right to expect that they're private? Does your employer have a legal and ethical right to “cyber-peek” at what you are doing with company assets? Twenty years ago this was not an issue; today it's a case before the Supreme Court.



You can [view the transcript for “Cell Phone Privacy”](#) (opens in new window).

Social Media

Employers want to use technology to help them screen applicants and verify information about their workforce, which is understandable. In the module on Human Resource Management you learned about the cost of recruiting, hiring, and training employees. However, what if the company believes that one of the quickest ways to gather information about an employee is to access their social media accounts? A company would never ask for your login credentials for Facebook, Twitter, InstaGram, LinkedIn . . . or would they? And if they did, is it legally and ethically justified? What would you do if you found yourself in the situation presented in the following video?



You can [view transcript for “US Employers Banned from Asking for Social Media Logins”](#) (opens in new window).

Information As a Business

The fact is that technology has put our information at the fingertips of businesses—there for the taking and, in some cases, the selling. Is it ethical for a business to collect data about a person and then sell that information to another business? Many organizations collect data for their own purposes, but they also realize that your data has value to others. As a result, selling data has become an income stream for many organizations. If you didn’t realize that your data was collected by Company A, it’s even less likely you knew that it was sold to Company B.



You can [view the transcript for “Selling You As Data” \(opens in new window\)](#) or the [text alternative for “Selling You As Data” \(opens in new window\)](#).

We have discussed just a few of the emerging ethical issues surrounding business, technology, and personal data. We have yet to touch on security issues and the responsibility business has to protect your data once it has been collected.

? Practice Questions

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/11104>

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/11105>

1. Luppigini, R. (2010). Technoethics and the evolving knowledge society. Hershey: Idea Group Publishing. ↵
2. Luppigini, R. (2010). Technoethics and the evolving knowledge society. Hershey: Idea Group Publishing. ↵

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