

Critical Social Challenges for IT Developers

Elena Maximova
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For many years the information technology (IT) and IT professionals were standing apart from the system of human values and ethics (Friedman B. and Kahn P., 2003). In my view, one of the most critical social challenges that developers of information technologies are facing these days is in understanding the impact of the technology on social processes and officially embracing the fundamental ethical principles in their professional practices. In other words, the information and communication technologies have the power to change peoples' lives (e.g. the Internet has changed our perspective on communications) and the developers of these technologies should explicitly define what the ethical guidelines are for the members of the profession. The people whose lives are changing through some technology should be able to trust the professionals that make this technology available to them. Many lay people perceive IT developers as potentially dangerous individuals that can easily corrupt others' personal information through the use of computer technology. Now is the time to take proactive steps in obtaining people's trust by showing that IT professionals know what the ethical behavior is and how they can be held accountable for unethical behavior. Therefore, the best solution for this challenge would be the development of ethical principles of professional conduct (something similar to the AICPA Code of Professional Conduct) along with a professional organization that would oversee compliance with such a code.

The code of professional conduct should become one of the basic elements of knowl-

edge that every IT professional should understand and apply as they understand and apply principles of structured programming. Thus, this code should become part of professional education of computer science and MIS students the same way as the AICPA Code of Professional Conduct is for accounting students.

The code may incorporate guidelines for answering other important social challenges that IT professionals face, such as: confidentiality (privacy) of personal information, property rights, quality and reliability of designed products, freedom of speech, accessibility to technology, etc (Dhillon G., 2002).

A wide public awareness of the code will help make professionals and companies who violate it be seen as unacceptable to deal with both for consumers and for their business partners.

Indeed, there have been some disturbing trends in the areas mentioned above that undermined people's trust in our profession. Here are some examples:

Privacy of Personal Information Several companies, such as Microsoft, DoubleClick and RealNetworks have been criticized for trying to determine their customers' individual buying patterns. Sharman Networks Ltd., the maker of KaZaA peer-to-peer file-sharing software, and Brilliant Digital Entertainment conspired to install what is essentially a backdoor in the installation of KaZaA which would make the computers of KaZaA users part of a distributed industrial supercomputer without their knowledge.

Property Rights and Freedom of Speech Intellectual property rights have become a double-edged sword in recent years. While it is important to protect inventors and authors against those who make illegal profit from their work, the system of copyright designed with such a good intention in mind has become an instrument of withholding knowledge from the public, which directly hinders progress, especially in the IT field. Several companies have tried to lay claim of private ownership on what is essentially

a public knowledge, such as attempts by Amazon, Inc., to copyright the concept of a cookie. A disturbing effort in limiting freedom of speech is the attempts by the music publishing companies to make by-ear music transcriptions on the Internet illegal.

Quality and Reliability The pressure to produce new technology and to upgrade the old one faster and faster is especially strong in the IT field. As a result, companies are producing buggy software so that it requires an upgrade, announcing “vaporware,” i.e. software which is so far from release it cannot be considered produced by any measure, etc. Another issue here is the attempts of some companies to produce software that would directly conflict with their competitors software so as to drive that competitor out of the market (such as Microsoft’s decision about a decade ago to introduce bugs into Windows so that it would not work with Netscape).

Accessibility to Technology As we have seen from our class projects the issues of disadvantaged groups in our society (e.g. elderly, battered women, prisoners etc.) mostly have not been addressed by the profession. There are limited number of IT products that would be designed specifically for these groups. By ignoring the accessibility issues IT professionals contribute to widening the gap between the have and have-nots.

The issues discussed above should find their ethical resolution in the ethical code of professional conduct. Even though the code of ethics is not a panacea from stopping unethical behavior of some companies or members of profession, it would set expectations for professionals and provide a referential framework for those who experience ethical dilemmas. Most importantly, the public would expect certain behavior from the IT profession and would be able to socially enforce this code with respect to the developers or companies that deviate from ethical conduct.

References

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