Case Studies in Ethics

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With case studies from Santa Clara University
Copyright Concerns

- SDX Alliance is a large company that sells computers, computer components, and software. Ralph is hired as an entry-level software engineer at SDX Alliance. His first project was to assist in writing the code for SDX Alliance’s new hard disc controller. He had previously worked on a similar system interning at a start-up and had written a code which greatly enhanced the performance of their product. Ralph quietly re-uses this same code in the SDX Alliance product, and does not think to tell anyone that he has used the code from his last job. His manager is thrilled with the speed improvements this code brings to the product.

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Copyright Concerns

• Before the product is released, it has to undergo a four-month long quality assurance process review. During the review of the product, it was found the code which Ralph developed had been copyrighted by the startup he had previously worked for. Even though Ralph had developed the code, his previous company still owned the intellectual property rights to it.
Copyright Concerns

• When his manager informed Ralph of the problem, Ralph admits he did not realize he had made a mistake because he was not familiar with copyright laws. Ralph then goes on to explain that the start-up he used to work for is now out of business and is unsure if SDX Alliance would be able to get in contact with the owner of the copyright. If SDX Alliance can’t use Ralph’s code, then it will have to rewrite the entire code of the product, delaying its release by many months.
To Ship or Not to Ship

• Rachel works as a Quality Assurance Engineer at a large electronics company. She is responsible for the final testing of her company’s servers and is part of a team which decides when new products will be shipped to distributors for sale.

• Rachel’s company has a contract with another company which makes the chips which are incorporated into the servers Rachel’s company makes. The business model for this product is to release a new generation server approximately every six months, meaning Rachel has a limited timeframe to conduct her Quality Control tests.

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To Ship or Not to Ship

• Because there is such a short amount of time between the release of each next new product, the Quality and Assurance department cannot perform every possible test on the servers to ensure they are defect free. Rachel will not ship a product if there is any possibility that the server could malfunction and cause physical harm to the customer. However, she will ship a product that has a higher likelihood of failure resulting in data loss for the customer, because she knows that if she doesn't, her company's competitor will.

• Is this an ethical way to conduct business? How should she determine when to ship a product with known defects?
Trouble with Training

• Sherry has been working at a computer hardware company for over 25 years. In recent years, many recent college graduates (approximately 100 per year) have been hired into the company. This year, 3 new hires were introduced into her group.

• Occasionally, Sherry must train these hires by leading technical workshops and giving one-on-one advice. However, she feels that, instead of growing from within, the company has spent a lot of resources finding young and talented employees to increase its development of new products. Although she is not a manager, established employees, like her, must often assume responsibility for these hires. Sherry is unhappy because she feels that the time used to train these new employees could have been spent completing her projects.

• Sherry wants to bring her concerns up to her manager or ethics department, but is unsure if it is necessary. What should she do?

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A Violation of Privacy

• Marcus is a computer engineer who has recently developed an app which helps users keep track of medical information, doctor’s appointments, and prescriptions.

• Information about the user is stored in this app, including what prescriptions they are taking and how frequently they schedule doctor’s appointments. As the developers of the app, Marcus and his company have access to this information.

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A Violation of Privacy

• The marketing department requests Marcus supply them with customer-specific information so they can better target ads and app suggestions to the users. Marcus understands that he is part of a company, but also feels that the privacy of the app users should be protected. Additionally, Marcus feels that as an engineer, he should be responsible to those who use his technology.

• How does Marcus determine how much of the user’s information should be shared with marketing? Is this an ethical use of information or a violation of the user’s privacy?
Misinterpretation Mishap

• Tony is a project leader at a company frequently subcontracted to produce code for various U.S. government entities and affiliates. Traditionally, code that was developed for one federal department could be reused for another if approval was obtained by the former.

• One day, Tony’s company was contacted by a privately-owned commercial corporation, FlyHigh, to create code for an avionics-related image processing effort. Since the code requested was almost identical to one used for a past project, Tony’s team decided to, once approval had been obtained from the government, reuse the code.

• After permission was granted through email, however, Tony realized the approving party, a law agency that was contracted by the government, lacked complete understanding of who would benefit from the reused code.

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Misinterpretation Mishap

• Tony wanted to contact the government directly to ensure it had been informed of all vital aspects of the contract, but realized doing so could mean having the initial approval revoked, having to re-code the requested code, and increasing the contract bid up to two million dollars.

• Understanding the contract between his company and FlyHigh was on the line, should Tony move forward with clarifying the situation to the appropriate party?