

ITEC810 Ethics Assignment

Sidney Shek (41419979)

Personal response to the ethical problem

Prima facie, my in-principle response to this ethical problem is to continue to apply for the tender. This is based on a rule utilitarian ethical framework with guidance from the IEEE Code of Ethics¹. The reasoning for my response is presented below. However, as with many ethical issues more information is required. Therefore, prior to submission of the tender more detailed investigation should be performed, which then may affect my proposed course of action.

Looking at the facts presented in the problem statement and the confidence in each fact, the position of my company is known; the company is in financial difficulties and two employees will be fired if this project bid is not won. However, the use of the proposed software is not completely known as:

1. It is based only on a suggestion; there is no information about the friend's source. It may either be a biased or reputable source. There is a responsibility to the prospective client to be fair as this suggestion is only from one side who could potentially be an opponent of the client.
2. The software would be used sometime in the future. Even if the prospective client were a cigarette manufacturer, it is possible that they are attempting to move into a different product space.

Since the facts about the future use of the software are not known, more investigation is required. Note that this would nominally be part of a project bid in any case, as tender responses typically need to be targeted at the prospective client and their intended use. The investigation would need to be done using publically accessible information such as reported news and information on the company's web site, with appropriate level of confidence assigned.

Applying only the known facts to my responsibilities to the society, my employer, and my employees, I arrive at the following justifications:

1. Social responsibility – While it is harmful to society if the software is indeed used to target cigarettes to teenagers and hence unethical (which would override other ethical arguments), since the future use of the software is not confirmed there is no guarantee of harm. Responsibilities towards my employer and employees then take precedence.
2. Responsibility to employer, peers and employees – Given that my employer is in financial difficulties, it would be unethical not to pursue the tender as it is known that two of my employees will be fired. Also, without the project the company is extremely likely to be in more financial difficulties which could jeopardise the future of the employer and other employees.

¹ I am a member of the IEEE, and I agree with their code of ethics over Engineers Australia's code of ethics.

It is also important to evaluate possible future ethical issues resulting from my response. Even in the future if the software is used for targeting cigarettes towards teenagers, my ethical position is defensible as based on the known facts at the time (after investigation into the friend's suggestion), the future use could not be known for certain. The ultimate end-user of the software is responsible for the effects of its use as the software is not inherently designed to harm.

Analysis of ethical problem by applying ACM Code of Ethics

The ACM Code of Ethics can be divided into three main areas: (1) General Moral Imperatives, (2) Specific Professional Responsibilities and (3) Organisational Leadership Imperatives. Relevant aspects of the code for each of the areas are discussed below:

1. General Moral Imperatives: Of particular importance is the guideline to 'attempt to ensure that products will be used in socially responsible ways'². It is not known whether the software will be used to target cigarettes toward teenagers; this is only a suggestion. Therefore further investigation needs to be done into the planned use of the software. This investigation needs to only make use of publically accessible information in order to respect the privacy of the client³.

Also, it is important to 'Be fair and take action not to discriminate'⁴. The suggestion from the friend is only from one perspective; there is no information to refute or confirm it from the prospective client.

Using the facts known, and disregarding the suggestion from the friend for now, our work on the system would not knowingly do harm to others. However if we do not apply for the tender we would be knowingly harming the two employees to be fired and the employer which would be unethical according to the guidelines.

2. Specific Professional Responsibilities: The key guideline in this area is the need honour assigned responsibilities⁵. As an employee of the company, I have an assigned responsibility to apply for the tender and do so whole-heartedly (which also aligns with the guideline to strive to achieve the highest quality of work product⁶). Unless there is a reason why the tender response cannot be completed such as due to the ethical standards of the company (which is not provided as part of the problem statement) or some other facts arise during investigation as suggested above, then the task must be completed.
3. Organisational Leadership Imperatives: As a manager, I would have a responsibility to ensure the developed system does not degrade the quality of working life⁷. This is not strictly

² ACM Code of Ethics section 1.1

³ ACM Code of Ethics section 1.7

⁴ ACM Code of Ethics section 1.4

⁵ ACM Code of Ethics section 2.6

⁶ ACM Code of Ethics section 2.1

⁷ ACM Code of Ethics section 3.1

applicable in this case as the system is for another organisation, however without the development of the system, the quality of working life for employees of my company would suffer as two employees would be fired. Of lesser importance is the guideline of creating opportunities for members of the organisation to learn principles of computer systems⁸. If the tender is won, there is a huge opportunity for my employees to learn about advertising systems which is a lucrative and active area of research. Therefore it would be unethical not to apply for the tender.

Based on the above analysis, applying the ACM Code of Ethics arrives at the conclusion that more investigation is needed to understand the future use of the software, but on prima facie evidence the tender should be applied for whole-heartedly. This is the same conclusion as reached using my selected ethical framework.

Possible improvements to the ACM Code of Ethics

While my application of the ACM Code of Ethics to this ethical problem appears to provide the same outcomes as my own ethical framework, it does hinge heavily on the fairness principle to justify disregarding the friend's suggestion. There is room for interpretation of the principle; therefore the ACM Code of Ethics could be adjusted to close this loophole. However, I understand that the Code of Ethics is only designed to be a guide so it would not be possible to specify outcomes in all cases.

⁸ ACM Code of Ethics section 3.6