Being Ethical in Developing Information Systems: An Issue of Methodology or Maturity in Judgement?

XiaoJian Wu, Simon Rogerson and N. Ben Fairweather
Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility
Faculty of Computing Science and Engineering
De Montfort University
The Gateway Leicester LE1 9BH UK
Tel: + 44 (0) 116 250 6143
Email: wxj@dmu.ac.uk  srog@dmu.ac.uk  nbf@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper constructs and compares two practical approaches toward being ethical in developing information systems. Firstly, it looks into the prevailing practice of relying on rational decision-making procedures to address ethical challenges, then an alternative view on being ethical is scrutinised with the focus on moral virtues and maturity in development of moral judgement. Through a study on real ISD project, it is suggested that the two approaches could somehow complement rather than supplant one another, and the combination of both sorts of consideration represents an effective practical paradigm for assessing ICT workers’ ethical activities and performance in developing information systems.

1. Introduction

The necessity of including ethical consideration in Information Systems Development (ISD) has been seriously explored in recent decades, numerous books and journal articles as a result have been produced by both academics and practitioners in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) [4, 22]. This literature, undoubtedly very constructive or even ground breaking for information ethics, has often been conducted from a restricted perspective and thus is short of a comprehensive or practical assessment of their impacts. Confusion or even conflicts in either moral principles or frameworks for their application are inevitably experienced.

This paper takes a critical view on current ethical practices in ISD. It compares two different models that are of practical significance to ICT workers. One such model is the methodological or procedural approach [12] which seeks to ethically sensitise professional activities in ISD either through clarifying embedded values and principles, or by prescribing procedures or steps for observance. Another contrasting approach, however, places emphasis on the personal moral character of individuals, and the maturity level of ethical judgement in an organisation. Following the study on theoretical and practical features of these two models, a real ISD project in China will be introduced for examination in terms of its ethical sensitivity and system developers’ moral considerations, thereby providing practical insights into the application of the suggested models. This paper demonstrates through the case analysis that being ethical in ISD concerns not only the development process and the methodologies, but also, more essentially, the people working on the development project, both as individuals and as a collective. The models for being ethical, as outlined in the paper, can indeed complement rather than supplant one another, and the combination of both considerations represents an effective and practical paradigm for examining or evaluating ICT workers’ ethical activities or performance in developing information systems.

2. Methodological Approach towards Ethical Performance in ISD

The term ‘Method of Ethics’ was initially introduced for considering practical ways toward being ethical. It implies rational procedures by which one can understand or observe “what kind of thing individual human beings ought to – or what it is right for them – to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary means” [20]. During the last two decades, more and more ethicists and computing professionals have focused their attention on the