

It is legit that companies focus on their own benefit?

Debates on Ethics of Big Data



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Abstract: "A company is a private organization that must seek viability with no external help. Thus, in the end, a company risks losing money and generating unemployment if it fails. No one can blame them to pull the string and maximize their benefits. Nobody is going to help them if things go wrong. Look at Google. They decided to fire their whole AI ethics team because of a controversial paper highlighting the risks of large language models, which are their current main business model. This is legit, as an employee cannot unilaterally go against her employer and ground this decision on common good when they are paid by that company."

General context

The importance of companies in society is critical. They are the entities that have proven to best capitalize the available resources, by introducing new technologies, processes and ideas. Since the industrial revolution, they have driven the course of humanity, allowing people to live longer and better than we could have ever imagined 200 years ago.

Proposition criteria

Based on our literature review and the criteria exposed during the debate, we considered that companies have legitimate reasons to lay off employees who go against them publicly. The following points of argument shall justify that same.

Points of Arguments

- Firstly, companies exist to generate revenue and create value for their shareholders. Moreover, by focusing on their own benefits, companies can drive innovation [1], create jobs [2], and contribute to economic growth [3], because when companies are profitable, they have more resources to invest in research and development and create new products and services. Also, focusing on the benefits does not mean to do unethical practices. For instance, Tesla is a very well-known electric and autonomous cars company, which was founded to make the transition to a greener world possible. Their ideas struck so hard the market, that, today, most car brands have at least an electric model. Thus, this is an example of a company that has recently been able to change society for the good, while

of course focusing on their profits. Other examples of innovative technologies by private companies focusing on profit include Google's Search Engine, Apple's iPhone and cloud computing Amazon Web Services. This refutes the argument of the opposition team that companies follow ethics only for a better public image. These examples prove that private companies are willing to contribute to the well-being of the world.

- Secondly, we don't see any problem with companies focusing solely on revenue; it can help with other aspects if it aligns with the main business that makes money; according to the UN, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has four different types [4]; a company could help in one of them but not others; for example, Google has the Google Sustainability Project, which aligned with the environmental type of CSR while saving the company money, which increased the company's revenue.
- Not only this, but also ethics are not the same for everyone. Ethics vary from person to person, and from organization to organization. This means that, when seeking for a job, one should take into account if the values followed by the company are in resonance with their own values, because otherwise it is hardly possible to work together towards common objectives, following common practices. For example, if you are against non-renewable energies and you start working in an oil company, you will eventually be fired, you will resign or you will be unhappy, because you would have a conflict of values.
- Continuing with this line of thought, ethics are also dynamic, evolving over time. We need people and organizations to challenge generally accepted ethical practices, because they could be improved. We can find a great exemplification in the Luddism movement. Luddism was an anti-technology movement originated in England during the industrial revolution. They thought that technology was going to hurt the economy in the long term, and decided to destroy as many machinery as they could. Today, the life expectancy in the country with the lowest value, is bigger than the life expectancy of the country with the biggest value in the year 1800 [5] [6]. This is a clear example in which companies, seeking their own benefit, challenging many beliefs and common practices at the time, revolutionized the world.
- Furthermore, the public is the one that ultimately consumes a product or service. Consequently, they can drive the change in companies. There has been many instances of unethical practices of companies negatively affecting the performances of companies. Examples of the public reacting to ethical issues of companies include 2015 Volkswagen scandal of emission tests [7], Wells Fargo fake customer accounts [8] and Enron's unethical accounting practices [9]. For all three, there was a decline in sales and for one even bankruptcy. Also, according to LRN ethics study [10] 43% of consumers stop buying products from companies that they find unethical. This means that society has a mean to tell companies what is acceptable and what is not, and they will react by adapting their behavior to be aligned with what society wants, because, otherwise, they put their benefits in risk.

Final considerations

It is normal for businesses to prioritize their own interests. They can stimulate innovation, produce jobs, and promote economic expansion by doing this. While it is crucial for businesses to act morally and decently toward their workers, it is ultimately in everyone's best interests for businesses to put their own interests first in order to be viable and profitable over the long term, which helps society as a whole. However, employees who don't share the company's principles should quit and look for employment that more closely aligns with their beliefs. Companies should also be responsible for making ethical decisions that are both legal and consistent with their business model, this discussion also left us with unresolved issues:

- Should a worker be placed in a setting where he/she doesn't feel engaged? or he/she should leave the company for another one?
- Should we maintain our current morals and values rather than changing them to accommodate our evolving society?
- Who offers assistance to privately held businesses that file for bankruptcy due to deviating from the business model?

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