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Reflection Paper

Meeting with Derek Johnson for an ethics discussion was a very interesting experience. Ethics is a concept that everyone in the information technology world needs to be very familiar with, and hearing firsthand examples of how someone's ethics will be tested was an enlightening experience. Derek covered a number of topics with his time, and many of them were quite thought provoking.

The topic that Derek spent a large amount of time on was the fact that in business, not everyone's moral compass is the same. This has a large number of ramifications for a person in an information technology job. What if your boss were to ask you to do something unethical? What if they do not realize that their request is unethical? Information technology professionals generally have much more access to a company's data than an average employee, so even a request that seems benign could have unintended consequences. This leads to a fairly difficult problem: do you comply with your boss's request and fulfill their task, or do you refuse and cite ethics as a reason? One option has the potential of you losing your job, and the other option could open up the business to a variety of other issues, like HIPAA violations. This leads fairly well into the next topic that Derek discussed: ethics can change based on what type of job you have and how much access to sensitive information that you have. If an employee has little access to sensitive data, then most requests given to that employee should not have the potential to be unethical. Unfortunately, this is often not the case for professionals in the technology field. I

recently finished an internship with a genetics lab in Nashville, and the amount of sensitive information that I had access to was staggering. Even as an intern, I had access to a database filled with millions of patient records. While I never used this access for anything more than generating reports for management, a more unscrupulous individual could take great advantage of this level of access.

Derek's next topic was brought on by a question: how do you judge the moral compass of another person? Derek had an interesting answer, he said that he always thought back to the scripture "Judge lest you be judged." He stated that instead of passing judgment on his employees he always tries to turn their mistakes into learning opportunities so that they would not repeat the mistake in the future. While this seems to be a fairly common stance to take for many employers, Derek shared an example with us about a much more serious mistake. He stated that during normal backup procedures two companies backup tapes were mixed together. While this may not seem like a large problem at first, the problem was not noticed until after the tapes had been stored offsite. Two different companies now had access to a portion of each other's data, and one company was a health care company with PHI. Aside from being a HIPAA violation, Derek stated that this was considered gross neglect at Peak 10. Most employers would immediately fire an employee that made this large of a mistake, but Derek decided to give the employee a second chance. My knee-jerk reaction would have been to immediately terminate the employee, but after some reflection I reconsidered the situation. Everyone will make a mistake eventually in their job, but some are worse than others. The mistake that this employee made was fairly serious, but the situation was able to be resolved

without one company accessing sensitive PHI. The employee was incredibly negligent in mixing up the tapes, but no real harm occurred to any of the companies involved. While I believe that the mistake should have never occurred in the first place, I am also inclined to agree with Derek's decision to counsel the employee instead of firing him.

Another topic brought up by a student was the issue of giving an employer advance notice when looking for another job. Derek stated that this depends on the level of trust between the employee and employer, but that he prefers for his employees to give notice. He also informed us of a program that Peak 10 has where employees will have a form of career coaching once a month, along with occasionally helping employees find a job with another company. This is a refreshing stance from an employer, as most would obviously prefer for their good employees to stay at the company and not seek work elsewhere. I am rather conflicted on this issue, as telling your employer that you are looking for other work has the potential to backfire. If your employer knows that you are trying to leave the company they may pass over you for promotions or bonuses. In the event that you do not find a new job, your employer may have decided that a coworker who shows no signs of leaving the company deserves to be rewarded over you. This will not be the case at every business, but it seems that in most situations it would be more beneficial to not provide anything more than a two-week notice after finding a new job. The situation at Peak 10 is rather different, as they actively help their employees try to advance their careers.

One of Derek's final topics pertained to the use of social media. Someone asked if a potential employee could expose anything damaging ethics-wise using social media, and if an employer could face potential repercussions for not hiring the person. Derek informed us that most companies heavily investigate potential employees backgrounds, and this includes looking at their social media profiles. He stated that an employer would not face any legal consequences as long as no protected classes were violated. I do not use social media very often, but I recognize that this can be a fairly frustrating issue. Unfortunately, unless you actively adjust privacy settings everything you post on social media will be available to everyone. If the information is freely available it is prudent for a company to examine it before making any hiring decisions. On the other hand, if an employee will show up for work and do their job correctly, should it really matter what they post on social media?

Derek's final topic was about the NSA spying on American citizens. He believes that more restrictions should be placed on the agency, and that search warrants should be used to collect information about citizens. This is in stark contrast to their current methodology of collecting vast quantities of data and storing it in data centers for later analysis. Most of this data is collected from various ISP and telecommunication companies, and normally the company has no way to refuse the NSA's request to collect data. The companies cannot even reveal to their customers that their data is being collected by the agency. Arguments can be made for both sides of this issue, but I have to agree with Derek. The NSA should be required to obtain a search warrant or legal order before being allowed to collect

any data. This ties in to the final thought that Derek left us with: “Just because something is legal and our laws allow it, is it necessarily ethical or moral?” The NSA has been given a large amount of latitude because of how certain laws were interpreted by the courts, but their actions are not necessarily ethical. An argument can be made that the NSA uses this data to protect American citizens, but that does not mean that the NSA’s data collection should continue in the same manner. I am again inclined to agree with Derek, more restrictions should be placed on the NSA to prevent this level of data collection.

Initially I did not expect an ethics discussion to be fairly interesting, but Derek provided a number of thought-provoking examples and questions. He brought up a large amount of issues that I had not considered before, and I am glad that he was able to take time out of his day to share his thoughts with us.