

Case 3.3 Whose Program Is This?

Ellen Pederson glanced out the rain-streaked windows at the few remaining cars in the dimly lit parking lot. She was once again putting in extra hours to finish an assignment on schedule. She was anxious to

leave but knew she would need to work a few more hours if she was to make the crucial Friday deadline.

Ellen worked for the Apollo Group, a prestigious organization that specialized in providing employment counseling to executives. Apollo was also a headhunting firm that worked with Fortune 500 corporations to help them find the "right" executive for certain key positions. Ellen began her career at Apollo three years ago in the Information Systems (IS) department. When she joined Apollo after graduate school she began working as a programmer on various computer systems for the organization. The department had just expanded and its charge at that time was to construct applications that would provide client information to Apollo account executives, keep track of accounts receivable and accounts payable, and provide a meaningful decision support system for the company's top executives. As Apollo took on more clients and its revenues reached the \$250 million mark, the need for these systems was considered critical.

Shortly after Ellen was hired, the IS department quickly moved into action in order to meet these objectives. It purchased a relational database, a 4GL, and other software tools in order to implement the systems requested by the Apollo executives. The company had an IBM mainframe computer system which would be the repository of the applications. Users were equipped with workstations and IBM PCs with ready access to the company's internal network along with the mainframe system.

Ellen's primary responsibility became the development of an on-line accounts payable system which became known as U-PAY. Users could go on-line, select the vendor from an approved list, and then key in a description of the product or services provided, the amount of the purchase, and any other pertinent information. The system would automatically generate a purchase order or check requisition while encumbering funds from the department's budget. Payments could also be generated for individuals such as consultants who were not on the payroll but were rendering some service to the company. All approvals were handled on-line as well. Once accounts payable received the approved check requisition, it issued a check for the appropriate amount and sent it along to the vendor or the external consultant. The system had many advantages: It expedited the payments to Apollo's many adjunct consultants along with its numerous vendors and it also prevented budget overruns which had been a problem in past years.

Ellen had worked on this system for over two years before it was unveiled last August. It was an immediate sensation in the company. Unfortunately, Ellen's boss took much of the credit for the project despite the fact that his input was really confined to its design stage. Ellen

was the project leader who put in the long hours to make this application a reality. She did receive a decent pay increase and a small bonus for her substantial efforts, but she was quite chagrined that she did not receive the credit or recognition for this project that she deserved. Now she was working on designing a major new database system along with some enhancements to U-PAY.

As Ellen became more disenchanted at Apollo, she began to look around for a new job. The market for programmers with her skills and experience was pretty strong despite a mild national recession. As a result, Ellen quickly secured several interviews. One of the interviews was with Apollo's chief competitor located in a nearby city. They were far behind Apollo in their systems development work and were impressed with Ellen's achievement. On her second interview at this company, the director of information systems asked to see some of her work. Ellen showed him a demo of U-PAY along with some of the code she had written for the system. U-PAY was written for the most part in the computer language PL/1. The director was convinced that Ellen was a consummate PL/1 programmer and he was quite eager to have her on his staff. He offered her an annual salary of \$80,000 (she was making only \$63,000 at Apollo) along with the title of associate director.

During this final meeting when this generous offer was made, the director indicated to Ellen that her first assignment would be to build a system "similar to U-PAY." He also pointed out that since she had already done this at Apollo, she should be able to expedite this project and complete it within a "pretty short time frame." The more he discussed this topic the more Ellen realized the implication of his remarks. The only way a project of this scope could be completed in such a short period of time would be to borrow heavily from her previous work. To be sure, if Ellen used the same design specs she used at Apollo and certain modules of PL/1 code, she could indeed finish the project within a year or so.

When the meeting ended she thanked the director for his offer and told him that she would get back to him with an answer within 24 hours. Ellen was delighted about the high salary and the new title, but she did have some reservations about "borrowing" so much of the work she had done at Apollo. She decided, however, to accept the offer. She also mentioned to her new boss that she would definitely be able to meet his timetable for a new accounts payable system.

Before giving her termination notice at Apollo Ellen made copies of the U-PAY design specs and the PL/1 source code that she and her team had written. Her superiors were sorry to see her go but they did not

make a counteroffer. Ellen was not surprised. She would be quite happy to leave this ungrateful employer.

As she worked late this rainy night just three days before her final day at Apollo, she thought of her decision to take with her the design specifications and source code of the U-PAY system. Occasionally she felt some guilt over this decision, but her guilt was assuaged by her firm conviction that this was *her* work and that she had as much right to it as Apollo. Also, she would not be depriving Apollo of anything. This was a generic application that did not involve any competitive information. As long as Apollo had an efficient U-PAY system, what difference did it make if another company, even a competitor, had the same thing? Where was the harm? Also, she knew full well that this was a common practice among software engineers. She wasn't the only one leveraging the knowledge and experience that had been gained at a former employer. After all, she reasoned, that is the way the game is played these days.

Ellen sipped her Diet Coke as she continued coding the latest series of enhancements to the revised U-PAY system. She was looking forward to her last day on Friday and the going away lunch that her colleagues had planned for her.