

Case Study: Ethical Dilemma

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The Situation: Violation of Privacy

Marcus is a computer engineer who has recently developed an app which helps users keep track of medical information, doctor's appointments, and prescriptions. Information about the user is stored in this app, including what prescriptions they are taking and how frequently they schedule doctor's appointments. As the developers of the app, Marcus and his company have access to this information. The marketing department requests Marcus supply them with customer-specific information so they can better target ads and app suggestions to the users. Marcus understands that he is part of a company, but also feels that the privacy of the app users should be protected. Additionally, Marcus feels that as an engineer, he should be responsible to those who use his technology.

How does Marcus determine how much of the user's information should be shared with marketing? Is this an ethical use of information or a violation of the user's privacy?

Credits to Clare Bartlett (SCU-2015)

Case Analysis

As a computer engineer, Marcus is faced with a dilemma regarding the privacy of the users of his app. The app stores sensitive medical information about the user, which the marketing department is requesting to use for targeted advertising. Marcus understands that as a part of the company, he has a responsibility to his employer, but he also feels responsible to those who use his technology. In this case study, we will analyze the situation through the lens of ethical decision-making and explore potential solutions to this issue.

Moral Clarity

Marcus is in a challenging situation where he must balance his ethical obligations to the users of the app and his professional responsibilities as a computer engineer. The app that Marcus developed collects sensitive personal information about the user's medical history, appointments, and prescriptions. While the marketing department of Marcus's company wants to use this information to improve the app's performance and personalize their advertisements, Marcus must consider the user's right to privacy. The ethical issue at the heart of this case is the violation of the user's privacy. Users of the app have entrusted their sensitive medical information to Marcus and his company, and

the marketing department is requesting access to that information for targeted advertising. There are clear conflicts between Marcus's obligations to the company and his responsibilities to the users of his app. Marcus must consider the ethical implications of his decision and weigh the benefits of sharing the information with the marketing department against the harm it may cause to the users' privacy.

Know the Facts

Several real-world scenarios demonstrate the ethical dilemmas associated with personal information sharing. In 2018, Facebook came under scrutiny for allegedly sharing user information with Cambridge Analytica without the user's consent. The company used this information to influence political campaigns, highlighting the ethical issues that arise when personal information is not protected. Additionally, in 2020, Zoom faced criticism for sharing user data with third-party companies without user consent, including personal details such as name, location, and device information. These cases illustrate the importance of protecting user information and respecting their right to privacy.

Options for Consideration

Option 1: Marcus could agree to share user data with the marketing department to help them better target ads and personalize the app's content. This option may improve the app's performance and increase user engagement, which is a benefit for the company. However, this option may violate the user's right to privacy and trust, which could damage the company's reputation and result in negative consequences in the long run.

Option 2: Marcus could agree to share limited user data with the marketing department, such as the user's zip code or age. This option may be more ethical than sharing all user data and may still help the marketing department personalize the app's content. However, this option may limit the marketing department's ability to effectively personalize content, which could result in decreased user engagement and app performance.

Option 3: Marcus could share only anonymized user information with the marketing department, meaning that the user's personal information would be anonymized and not identifiable to the individual. This would allow the marketing department to better target ads and app suggestions without violating the user's privacy. However, this may not be as effective as sharing identifiable user information, as the marketing department would not be able to target specific individuals.

Option 4: Marcus could decline the request from the marketing department and prioritize the privacy of the app users. This would align with the ethical responsibility of engineers

to protect the public and the environment, as outlined in the IEEE Code of Ethics. However, this may also impact the revenue generated by the app, potentially leading to consequences for Marcus and the company.

Making a Reasonable Decision

Based on the IEEE Code of Ethics, engineers have a responsibility to prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of the public. In this case, sharing user information with the marketing department would be a violation of the user's privacy, and would not align with this ethical responsibility. The option of sharing only anonymized user information could be considered, as it allows for better targeting without violating privacy. However, it may not be as effective as sharing identifiable user information. Therefore, the most reasonable decision would be of declining the request and prioritizing user privacy. Marcus could communicate to the marketing department that sharing identifiable user information would be a violation of the user's privacy and is not aligned with the ethical responsibility of engineers. However, he could suggest sharing anonymized user information instead, as a compromise. Moreover, Marcus could explore alternative methods of generating revenue for the app that do not violate user privacy, such as charging for premium features. By prioritizing user privacy, Marcus and his company would be upholding their ethical responsibility and building trust with their users, which could lead to long-term success.

Conclusion

As an engineer, Marcus has an ethical responsibility to prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of the public. In this case, sharing user information with the marketing department would be a violation of the user's privacy and would not align with this ethical responsibility. Therefore, the most reasonable decision would be to decline the request and prioritize user privacy. Marcus and his company could explore alternative methods of generating revenue for the app that do not violate user privacy. By upholding their ethical responsibility, Marcus and his company can build trust with their users, leading to long-term success.