

Ethical Analysis of a Security-Related Scenario

The scenario I chose is the second, where the company's customers' personal data is at stake. The main ethical question in this scenario is whether it is acceptable to share anonymized data collected from users who were promised protection for their personal data. The primary stakeholders I identify are myself, the CEO, the CTO, and the users. The users have a right to privacy. If they've not given permission for their data (even in an anonymized form) to be shared, that information should not be shared, by any means. The CEO and CTO have the right to change their policy and make different decisions about how they utilize user data, though they do not have the right to do that without users providing explicit permission. I probably have the least rights in the situation, as I simply have the right to voice my concerns about not scrubbing the data and to refuse to follow the CEO's directive.

If I were to exercise that right, it's likely that I'd be let go and that the CEO's modified version of my idea would still be utilized (many companies like this require you to sign documents that say any intellectual property you produce under their employment belongs to them). Additionally, I could publicize the issue and expose what the company is choosing to do with user data, but it's likely I'd be sued (and lose) any way that I could approach that, whether it'd be by way of an NDA violation, libel, or other applicable suit. It would be helpful in this situation to know what documents I signed upon being offered employment, whether the CTO plans to speak to the CEO about her concerns, whether the CEO is more fixed or mutable in his beliefs (or even approachable at all) in order to determine exactly how I would approach the situation.

I think it's also important to consider and pay respects to what is at stake for each of the stakeholders I've identified in this scenario. The most is at stake for users who are putting their trust in this company whose foundation was built on the promise of discarding users' personal data. Next, I'd say, is me. If I

were to push back against the CEO of the company and he's not particularly open, it's incredibly likely that I'd lose my place in the company relatively swiftly, especially in a start-up environment. There's also the matter of having built something and worked hard to ensure that my creation falls within the confines of the company's vision, only to either have someone else be given credit for it being done in a worse way (after I'm let go) or have it be scrapped completely. After that would be the CEO and CTO. The CTO risks having sold people a lie, compromising her integrity and falling prey to the surveillance capitalism that she had previously denounced. The CEO risks losing valuable income that could be the difference between the start-up growing into a successful and flourishing company or another great idea that fizzles out into a distant memory.

Luckily, the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct does offer relevant guidance, as it supports me in my hesitancy to go through with the CEO's vision. It demands that computing professionals avoid harm, respect privacy, honor confidentiality, and give and accept professional review, among many other principles that support my viewpoint. There's also a section that outlines how any violation of this code is in conflict with the ACM guidelines and thus, could result in undesired consequences.

If I were in this situation, I would surely request a meeting with the CEO and CTO to speak further about the presentation. During the meeting, I would outline how the revised implementation of my idea could cause us trouble with the ACM and how that could negatively impact us more severely than losing potential revenue from selling anonymized user data. I would also make it a point to connect the ACM guidelines to the company's pitch to users and how a violation of that promise could lead to mass distrust among users and eventually mass rejection of the company. I suspect that framing it as an issue of being in opposition with ACM standards would yield more success than if I were to approach it from a moral-ethical position. When people are forced to consider their own morality and ethicality, it can often put them on the defensive or reveal truths about their personal code-of-ethics that make it difficult to work alongside them in good faith. That said, I stand by my approach and I believe it's the most likely approach to lead to the bottom-line issue: protecting users' personal information as promised.