



Ethics of Business Intelligence, Part I

I am not an expert in ethics or in law. I am just an ordinary technologist who has experienced several decades of evolution within business intelligence (BI) and data warehousing (DW). However, I have recently become concerned about where our technology is leading us. I feel that there is an absence of leadership and wisdom about BI ethics and about ethics of information technology (IT) in general.

Legal guidance seems immature and confusing. Yes, there are gems of insight into difficult topics such as privacy. However, most visible are individuals or groups on a crusade pushing their own agenda. Where is the practical advice for the poor BI professionals in the trenches, dealing with the messy issues?

Here is my humble attempt to address this problem.¹

The focus is on “practical ethics” about specific issues facing the BI/DW operation within your company. Most articles and books on ethics deal with general societal issues or academic discussions, both of which often lack an obvious application to issues involving IT and especially BI/DW. The objective is that discussions of ethical situations within your company should result in some tangible benefit for your business.

The aim of this column is to enhance an awareness and sensitivity to BI ethical issues, an understanding of the factors and variables influencing the issues, and skills for dealing with ethical situations. It is hoped that both management and technical people will be involved, leveraging their complementary perspectives.

Ethics is a touchy subject! Most people vehemently want to avoid any ethical discussion, feeling that it might stir up controversy and cause ill will among colleagues. Ethical discussions can be confusing, complex and inconclusive, often resulting in intel-

lectual paralysis. There is a widespread assumption that dealing with ethics is always painful, surfacing solutions that may be expensive and tough to implement. People on a mission or crusade can easily derail such discussions. Finally, there is uncertainty as to where the discussions will lead and how any benefit to the company will result. Therefore, many question the act of engaging in such a seemingly fruitless activity.

Despite these misgivings, there is an increasing need to make ethical discussions part of our normal professional activities. Our world is rapidly changing; hence, the nature and boundaries of ethical issues are also changing, needing continual reexamination. A lot of “cannot” things have become “can” things. Every day, evolving technology is allowing us to perform previously impossible tasks easily and inexpensively. Additionally, the post-Enron era of corporate integrity is causing anxiety among many who are striving to be “squeaky-clean.”

What is ethics? The word comes from the Greek “ethos,” meaning the distinguishing character or guiding beliefs of a society. To put it simply, ethics deals with what feels okay to do within society. It is a judgment by members of society about what is good or bad behavior, implying a moral obligation to do good. In English, the indicator of an ethical judgment is the word “should.” If a person states that we can do X, it implies an engineering or scientific opinion as to whether it is possible to perform X. If a person states that we should do or should not do X, it implies an ethical judgment.

When the person uses the “should” word, there is some basis for making that judgment. The basis could be a religious conviction, the golden rule (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”), common sense or logic, societal good (bet-

ter for the majority), popular opinion (everyone is doing it) and so on. In a discussion of ethics, it is important to understand the basis by which you and other people are making ethical judgments.

There is a myth that if X is legal, then X is ethical. There is a difference between whether something is legal and whether it is ethical. Historically, ethical code precedes the legal code for a society. Hence, evolving areas such as BI have immature legal codes and are in desperate need of ethical guidance.

Should BI professionals be involved in ethical discussions? Several colleagues voiced the position that management sets policies and IT people just implement those policies. Hence, IT people should not be involved in questioning the ethics of those policies. The reality is that IT professionals understand the technology and its continually evolving capabilities. That understanding must be part of ethical discussions. In particular, BI professionals are increasingly involved with outward-facing systems impacting thousands of people who are both internal and external to the company.

Every professional society matures and goes through a struggle with a statement of their ethics. I researched more than 15 such statements by various associations including ACM, DPMA, DAMA, AIIP, IEEE, ASSIST, SCIP and so on. Visit www.bolder.com/ethics to view these statements. Note especially the statements by ACM (most comprehensive) and AIIP (simple and concise).

The best framework that I found for summarizing the ethical issues involved with IT was an article written by Prof. Richard Mason seventeen years ago.² The four issues that were identified are: privacy, accuracy, property and accessibility – or PAPA. Based upon the general PAPA issues, I noted the following hot BI ethical

issues in current trade publications:

- Identity Theft
- Financial Accountability
- Homeland Security
- HIPAA (within the healthcare industry)
- U.S. Patriot Act
- CAPPs II

In future columns, we will explore the general implications of these issues to BI professionals. Meanwhile, here are four practical steps for dealing with ethical situations:

1. Awareness: Make the issue "official" and its discussion acceptable within your company. Give the issue a name and clearly define the boundaries of the issue and the intended objectives resulting from its resolution.
2. Research: Gather the facts; identify the variables. Avoid quick judgments. Discuss it widely, even with people outside your company. Leverage the experience of others who have struggled with similar issues.
3. Judgment: Make a decision at the appropriate time based on adequate information. This may be a policy statement that is eventually approved by your board of directors, or it may be a simple e-mail to members of your group. Either way, terminate the research phase and get on with doing it.
4. Resolution: Doing it is often not easy. You will learn more about the situation, and the variables will


change. Find the proper balance between flexibility and firmness, while avoiding the extremes.

Here are some practical suggestions as to how to proceed:

- Be open and honest when dealing with ethical issues. Hiding the issues always seems to magnify the problem. Live with the ambiguity until those involved can fully understand the issue and the range of alternatives.
- Allow ethical discussions to be acceptable within your corporate culture. Make the argument that good ethics is good business for your company.
- Guide the discussions so that they are always "professional." Continually focus and refocus on the specific situation within your company and on ways of improving business practices for your company. Avoid any attempt to solve the greater societal problem or be derailed by personal crusades. Personal crusades are encouraged only on personal time, not the company's time.
- Seek qualified legal advice. This may be difficult and expensive. The proper legal experts may not be the ones to whom you normally have access. Do not expect a simple yes/no answer. Finally, do not let the legal advice dominate the ethi-

cal discussion. You may properly judge a situation to be unethical even though it seems to be legal.

This column is a brief overview of a very complex subject. Future columns will explore specific issues and implications for BI professionals.

I will be compiling my research into a resource site at <http://www.bolder.com/ethics/>. I am also seeking descriptions of ethical dilemmas that you are facing. By pondering these situations, we can hopefully focus on the real issues and mature our understanding of ethics within the BI arena. Please submit your ethical dilemma to ethics@bolder.com as an *anonymous* description in a *short* paragraph or two. 

References:

1. In addition, a keynote presentation for the virtual trade show at the dataWarehouse.com Web site is available for on-demand viewing from April 16 to July 15 of 2003. Free registration is required.
2. Mason, Richard. "Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age." *Management Information Systems Quarterly*, Volume 10, Number 1, March 1986.

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