

Don't Forget the 10 Commandments of Computer Ethics

The role of the IT department continues to evolve by leaps and bounds as computers and other information technologies have gone from just helpful tools to an absolute necessity for a business to remain successful and competitive. Along with the near total permeation of computers in the business world, the amount and kind of information members of an IT department have access to about a company and its employees has increased as well. It's a big responsibility that requires a great deal of trust from company leaders, who, with each new advancement in technology, have more concern about the ethical practices of their IT departments.

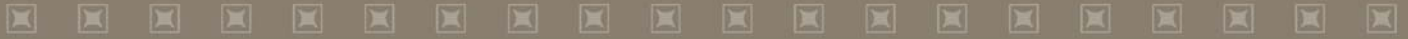
One major issue for many businesses is security. Everything from financial to strategic planning information is most likely saved somewhere on a company's servers, easily accessible by members of the IT team. It's important to know those employees can be trusted not to share information with competitors or use it for their own personal gain. A well-defined system of checks and balances and tight control over how much access each individual member of an IT department has can help deter many unethical security issues.

Privacy can also be an important concern. Not only do members of the IT department have access to sensitive information about the company, but they may also be able to access personal information about other employees, including social security numbers, bank account numbers, and salary. And, most IT departments also have the ability to monitor anything an employee does on their computer. So, it's important to stress to your staff that activities such as checking personal e-mail, online banking, and online shopping should not take place at work, even during breaks.

Beyond security and privacy, other ethical issues IT departments may face include using bootleg software instead of paying to obtain the proper licenses, theft of intellectual property, or abusing access to company resources for non-work related or personal projects.

It's this increased concern about the ethical use of technology that has given rise to a greater emphasis on the study of computer ethics. Now required curriculum for information technology-related degrees at most colleges and universities, computer ethics can be described as a set of moral principles that guide professional and social conduct of computer and information technology users.

The Computer Ethics Institute (CEI) is one of the most prominent advocates for ethical computer usage in the United States. Based in Washington D.C., its members include industry leaders in technology, academics, and public policy who work together to develop ethical solutions to issues created by the development of computer and information technology.



One of the CEI's most recognized contributions to the practice of computer ethics is the Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics. Widely referenced in various publications such as college text books and industry journals, the Ten Commandments were designed as a set of guidelines to help ensure strong ethical computer and information technology practices.

The CEI's Ten Commandments of Computer ethics are:

1. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.
2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.
3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files.
4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.
5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.
6. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.
7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation.
8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.
9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.
10. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.

While these Ten Commandments were established to provide rules of conduct for anyone that uses information technology, they are easily adapted to suit a wide variety of business and IT needs. So, it's a good idea to continually reinforce these values with your IT team because, although most companies may never have to deal with an ethical dilemma, just stressing how important the issue is to you and the company can go a long way toward deterring unethical practices