

Ethics — the IEEE Asia-Pacific view

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Last July, I sent an e-mail message to 12 IEEE section leaders in different countries in IEEE Region 10 (Asia-Pacific Region). I included the IEEE Code of Ethics and asked three questions:

1) What would you suggest should be added to the IEEE Code of Ethics?

2) Is there anything in the IEEE Code of Ethics that you feel is inappropriate?

3) Are you aware of any instances in your country in which engineers have been:

- ◆ pressured by their employers to agree to the release of products that they did not consider to have been adequately tested;

- ◆ punished by their employers for calling attention to unsafe or illegal products by

their management;

- ◆ pressured by their employer to remain silent about situations detrimental to human health or safety?

I received only one response. A colleague from Singapore responded to say that the IEEE Code of Ethics does cover, without infringing on national and religious obligations, the issues of professional relevance for an engineer engaged in manufacturing, as well as service activities, such as consulting, education, etc. I did not get any response from others, although I sent reminders.

LACK OF CONFLICTS? I am frankly puzzled by the lack of response. Is it that a wide cross-section of IEEE members and volunteer leaders do not come across ethical conflicts in the course of their work and therefore do not find the IEEE Code of Ethics relevant to their

work environment?

On the positive side, "An Automation Policy for Australia" prepared by the Australian Robotics Association does recognize that the use of automation technologies raises matters of contention on ethical grounds. The issues relate to societal implications of technology and to the behavior of engineers and practitioners. The paper notes that there are no prescriptive ways of determining degrees of goodness or of rightness, and ethical assessments are subjective and value-based. As a corollary, it brings in question an unambiguous uniform ethics code.

I recently came across a study by an organization called Transparency International, "the coalition to curb corruption in international business transactions" (e-mail:

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Perception of Corruption

| Rank | Country | Perception Index |
|-----------|----------------------|------------------|
| 1 | New Zealand | 9.43 |
| 7 | Singapore | 8.80 |
| 10 | Australia | 8.60 |
| 17 | Japan | 7.05 |
| 18 | Hong Kong | 7.01 |
| 26 | Malaysia | 5.32 |
| 27 | South Korea | 5.02 |
| 29 | Taiwan | 4.98 |
| 37 | Thailand | 3.33 |
| 44 | Philippines | 2.69 |
| 45 | Indonesia | 2.65 |
| 46 | India | 2.63 |
| 50 | China | 2.43 |
| 51 | Bangladesh | 2.29 |
| 53 | Pakistan | 1.00 |
| 15 | United States | 7.66 |

Source: Transparency International

"ti@contrib.de" or "voglcom@aol.com"), which covers 54 countries.

Part of this study, covering countries in IEEE Region 10 and the U.S., is reproduced here. A corruption perception index of a perfect 10.00 would be a country viewed as totally corruption-free, while an index of 0.0 equals a country where business transactions are seen to be entirely dominated by kick-backs, extortion, bribery, etc.

ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVES. Organizational corruption is frequently the source that ultimately leads some employees of that organization to adopt unethical practices, and others with very strong ethical principles to quit. A major drive is on in several Asia-Pacific nations to eliminate corruption from their

government, business and industrial operations.

This is a move in the right direction and should result in a promotion of adherence to ethics. I am also aware of a major national newspaper in India that prescribed a code of ethics for its employees, including, of course, reporters and columnists.

These issues which can serve as a starter for discussion. An IEEE student member from Australia recently wrote to the IEEE Ethics Committee to say categorically that the IEEE is not doing enough in the area of ethics.

According to this member, real ethical issues must include issues such as the ethics of working in foreign countries that are

known to engage in human rights abuses, and the ethical consequences of working in missile factories that arm other countries. In the words of this member, "IEEE members need to be reminded that having ethical obligations means having a conscience, and that means sometimes putting your career on the line to do what you know to be right, or not to do what you know to be wrong, or to say what you believe."

Send suggestions or comments for the Ethics Committee to Cathy Downer, IEEE Ethics Committee, 445 Hoes Lane, Piscataway, NJ, USA 08855-1331; e-mail: "ethics@ieee.org". The committee maintains a World Wide Web home page at "<http://www.ieee.org/committee/ethics>".