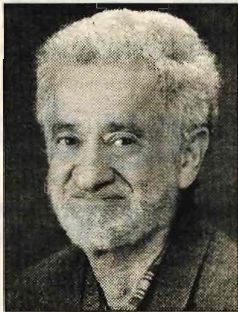


Ethics hotline and other EC activities

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The IEEE Ethics Hotline, activated in 1996 August by the IEEE Ethics Committee (EC), has been used by IEEE members for a variety of purposes. Some have requested specific or general information for use in preparing courses or individual talks on ethics. Some have commented on ethics code provisions or on ethics columns in THE INSTITUTE. Others have called attention to perceived ethics code violations or of IEEE procedures in the operations of various IEEE entities. Perhaps most interesting are requests for advice and support on behalf of engineers who have suffered actual or threatened retaliation in the workplace when they acted responsibly in accordance with the ethics code. I will summarize



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a few of these cases. Following this, I will outline other EC activities carried out during its first two years of existence and describe our current plans.

C1, a senior software systems engineer hired by a start-up company to develop commercial software, discovered that programs being used as a starting point were the property of other companies, and were being used illegally. After unsuccessful efforts to persuade the company to desist from this practice, C1 reported the matter to the victims of the theft, which led to the initiation of criminal proceedings against the perpetrators. C1 was fired.

ASSISTANCE. The EC assisted C1 in searching for appropriate legal counsel and advised him to seek formal IEEE backing by applying through the IEEE Member Conduct Committee for support. At this writing, the MCC has just sent its report to the IEEE Executive Committee.

C2, an experienced bio-engineer working for a company that produce medical devices, was asked by a colleague to examine one of the company's products, a respirator for infants. He found that, due to the improper placement of a relief valve, infant lungs might, under certain circumstances, be exposed to dangerously high pressure. C2 called this to the attention of management,

but, after a period of many weeks, it became evident that they had no intention of remedying the defect, which would not have been difficult to do. When he stated that, unless something was done, he would report the matter to the Food and Drug Administration, the cognizant regulatory agency, he was discharged. After another bio-engineer with extensive experience in this type of technology spoke with C2 and reported that he appeared to be a very competent engineer and that his analysis of the respirator problem seemed clearly valid, the EC suggested that C2 apply to the MCC for formal backing — which he did.

We have given advice to a number of other people, and several cases are still in progress. We can probably be most helpful when contacted at an early stage, when more options are open.

WEB SITE. During the past half year, the EC has activated a Web page (see the end of this article for the address) that includes or points to a good deal of interesting and useful information pertaining to engineering ethics. For example, engineers who feel they may be getting into situations of the types sketched above, or indeed into any conflict situations in the workplace, may benefit from a study of Guidelines for Ethical Dissenters, an EC document available on its Web page.

The EC has done much to promulgate the IEEE Ethics Code — for example, by arranging to have copies mailed to members with their membership cards. An important new project that we are now initiating is to develop a set of guidelines for the code. The idea is to produce, for each provision of the code, a commentary, possibly including illustrative cases, to clarify the meaning and application of the provision. This will be an ongoing operation, with suggestions and comments invited from IEEE members and from others. Information about the process will be made available on the EC Web site. We are also in the process of compiling a list of people competent to speak on the subject of engineering ethics at meetings sponsored by IEEE entities.

In addition to giving advice and moral support, we are developing, in accordance with a 1994 November directive of the IEEE Board of Directors, a plan for an ethics support fund to provide a measure of financial assistance to engineers in positions such as C1 and C2. This is to be funded by voluntary contributions.

The URL for the IEEE EC Web site is "<http://www.ieee.org/committee/ethics>"; to contact the EC, telephone 1-908-562-6590; fax 1-908-981-9515. Stephen Unger can be reached via e-mail at "unger@cs.columbia.edu".