Can Cultural & Social Pressures overshadow Work Ethics?

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1   Introduction

Ethics can be described as an individual's judgment of right and wrong. Every individual is guided by this judgment when making decisions in life. In our lifetime, we are faced with many situations where we struggle with our own conscience to make an ethical decision. When caught in an ethical dilemma, can cultural and social expectations become the dominant principle influencing a person's decision?

2   The Story

Sam is from Samoa, where the word family is not limited to the mother, the father and the children. Family, includes uncles, aunties, nieces, nephews and grandparents.

After Sam lost his father at the age of 10, his uncle, Savaii, who was the Director of the Ministry of Works in Samoa, took up the responsibility for Sam's education.. Savaii also helped Sam to get a Government scholarship, to do his degree in Computer Science from University of Auckland in 1996.

In 2004, as part of their foreign aid program, Australian Government offered funds to the Ministry of Works, to procure software that will be used to store land registrations, and other information archived by the Ministry. The Ministry of Works needed to recruit a Tester to join the testing team that would be responsible for evaluating and testing the software. The funds would be released only after the software was approved by the testing team.

Sam was the successful candidate for the position. As a lead tester he will be required to report on the suitability of this software and its ability to meet the requirements of the Ministry.

The software development company is owned by the Director's brother-in-law. The company is running out of time to meet the deadline. The foreign aid committee needs tested and approved software, to release the funds.

Sam's test results are not matching the Ministry's requirements as the software does not fully meet the access level security requirements of the Ministry. Sam's uncle has asked Sam to change the test results so that the software is approved and funded.

Ethical Issues	Ethical Principles	Dominant Ethical Principles
• Inaccurate recording of results • Bribery and Corruption • Nepotism • Not adhering to technical standards • Exercising self interest • Abuse of Power	• Honesty • Respect for Person • Reciprocity • Loyalty • Accountability	• Loyalty • Respect for persons • Reciprocity

3   Alternative for Sam

Alternative 1: Change the test results and allow the Ministry to go ahead with the purchasing of the Software.

Alternative II: Change the test results conditionally, so that the funding is not delayed .The condition would be that the developing company commits to fixing all the problems before the software is implemented..

Alternative III: Sam refuses to make any changes to the test results. Insists that the developers make changes as per the Ministry's requirements before he signs off the project.

4   Conclusion

This case study was presented to a group of 20 students and they were asked to choose from the three alternative. Two students opted for alternative I, the rest of the class opted for Alternative II.

Their choice is hugely influenced by the sense of obligation and immense respect that Sam feels for his uncle.

This clearly shows that most often cultural pressures force individuals to compromise on their ethical principles. Or rather, the ethical principles based on culture and social expectations become the dominant principle influencing a person's decision.

This case study clearly reflects how cultures, conflict of interests, vested interested and self interests can overshadow our drive for higher ethics in the IT world.