

FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT

Wow, another year has passed. They say time flies when you are having fun, so it must be that and not that there are not enough hours in a day to do everything we have to.

Feedback in terms of activities for the last three months:

The yearly **Annual Conference**, the 24th conference on “*Managing Organisational Effectiveness for Success in a changing environment*” was held from 22 to 24 October 2014 at the Glenburn Lodge Hotel in Muldersdrift. We received positive feedback from the delegates in terms of the presentations. The team building event, which was bingo, was a hit and enjoyed by everyone that participated. *Thank you to all delegates who attended and the spirit in which you participated is appreciated!*

Planned activities for the next few months:

Our next Annual Conference will be the 25th one – something to celebrate!! To assist the office with planning of the next conference, which will take place in October 2015, I would like to invite you to **send any inputs you might have in terms of the conference** on inter alia, the theme, the format, possible topics, possible presenters, venue, etc. to the SAIMAS office at saimas@global.co.za. The office will pass it on to the soon to be appointed conference organiser for the year.

Our Annual General Meeting (AGM) will be postponed to early May 2015. Final date and arrangements regarding this event will be communicated in due course.

A Workshop will be held before the annual general meeting, details regarding this event will be circulated as soon as all arrangements have been finalised.

Thank you to all for your support of SAIMAS’ activities for the past few months. Thank you to all Council members and Gerda Morrison, our Office Administrator, for all your hard work and support.

Hope you had an enjoyable Festive Season and may 2015 be a peaceful and successful year for you.



SAIMAS greetings

Ria Loubser

ETHICS FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PRACTITIONERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

There is rising importance of the computing sector to the diverse economic, social and political life in South Africa. Moreover, insightful questions have emerged about the ethical practices of information technology (IT) practitioners in the computing profession in South Africa. Professional (and non professional) IT practitioners are found in both business and government workplace environments. A professional is seen as a person engaged or qualified in a profession. To be professional subsumes being ethical and being a registered member of a professional body. Ethics is general and unifying, whereas professionalism gives pride of place to the specific vocation of each profession (Mafunisa, 2001: 325). Professionalism refers to being competent, efficient, masterly and qualified (Sinclair, 1993: 910) and it imbues its practitioners with a code of ethics and a public service ideal.

Ethics deal with values relating to human conduct in dealing with the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. The word 'ethics' is derived from the word 'ethos' and which, means 'habit'. A habit can be defined as an internalised, repeated, or innate principle that naturally springs from within a person without reference to an external rule or commandment.

A paper presents an arguable opinion about an issue - in this case, a consideration of the ethics requirements for IT practitioners in the computing sector in South Africa. The goal of this paper is to convince the reader that the author's opinion (in the form of a short report and discussion of ideas, facts and situations) is a valid contribution to the issue in point.

This position paper is organised as follows: the term Code of Behaviour is introduced, followed by a discussion of professional ethics. Thereafter are the topics of IT practitioners in the IT profession and the Institute of Information Technology Professions South Africa. Then the teaching of values to undergraduate university students are discussed. Implications for professional IT practitioners are suggested. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

Code of Behaviour

A Code of Behaviour is a set of conventional principles and expectations that are considered binding on a person who is a member of a particular group (such as a professional body). An ethical code generally implies documents at three levels:

- Code of business ethics;
- Codes of Conduct for employees; and
- Codes of professional practice.

Sometimes the terms 'ethical code' and 'code of conduct' are used interchangeably but a distinction should be made. A Code of Ethics sets out the values that underpin the code whereas a Code of Conduct sets out restrictions on behaviour and is rules-focused as opposed to principle-focused.

A Code of Practice assists professionals conduct business honestly and with integrity. A Code of Practice (professional ethics) is adopted by a profession to regulate that profession.

Professional ethics

Professional ethics are professionally accepted standards of personal and business behaviour, values and guiding principles. Codes of professional ethics are often established by professional organisations in South Africa (for example, the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), the South African Nursing Council (SANC) and The Institute of Information Technology Professionals South Africa (IITPSA) - formerly Computer Society South Africa (CSSA)) to help guide members in performing their work functions according to sound and consistent ethical principles. Ethical principles are the underbelly of professional codes of ethics. The role of a professional code of ethics is to help clarify values and rules and can be used as a framework for discipline. The 'audience' is the public domain, employers and fellow professionals in the same sector or profession. It should be noted that a code of ethics does not create ethics in a profession – this is achieved through collateral consent.

Most professions have internally enforced codes of practice that registered members of the profession must follow to preserve the integrity of the profession. It also maintains trust in the profession in ensuring that the profession is not undermined by those who may have lower ethical standards. It is important to note that disciplinary codes allow the profession to define a standard conduct and thereby ensure that registered practitioner members meet this standard. If registered practitioners fail to do so, the professional body is able to discipline them accordingly. An example of such disciplinary action is the case (August 2013) of a senior municipal official (occupying a Head of Health post) who was found guilty of unprofessional conduct by the Health Professions Council of SA – the official was fined an amount of R50,000.00.

Practitioners in the Information Technology profession

The IT profession contributes significantly to several domains, including business and government in the South African workplace environment. Information Systems, (IS) are complex systems, require both technical and organisational expertise for design, development, and management” (Topi, Valacich, Wright, Kaiser, Nunamaker, Sipior and de Vreede 2010: 365). According to the *Computing Curricula 2005* (CC2005) report, in “... conceptualizing the role of information systems in the future ... several elements remain important and characteristic of the discipline” (ibid: 369-370). These characteristics evolve around three major areas of the IT profession:

- IT professionals exist in a broad variety of domains (e.g. business, government), non-profit organisations) and must design and implement IS solutions that enhance organisational performance;
- IT professionals must have strong analytical and critical thinking skills to thrive in a competitive global environment; and
- **IT professionals must exhibit strong ethical principles** (bold style added by author) and have good interpersonal communication and team skills (Overby, 2006).

A professional is seen as a practitioner whose practice is based on a significant body of theory, has appropriate tertiary qualifications from a recognised body (in South Africa, usually a university or university of technology), is committed to undergoing continuous professional development, consults good practices before undertaking work, and subscribes to a Code of Behaviour (or Code of Ethics). Professionals in the computing sector “are primarily concerned with the information that computer systems can provide to aid an enterprise in defining and achieving its goals, and the processes that an organisation can implement or improve using information technology” – IT practitioners focus on the information aspects of IT (CC2005: 14).

The Institute of Information Technology Professionals South Africa (IITPSA)

The Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA) is a common reference model for the identification of skills needed to develop effective IS making use of IT. This framework is used in more than 150 countries and uses a common language and logical structure outlining required skills, knowledge and competence. Organisations seeking International Professional Practice Partnership (IP3) accreditation define their professional standard requirements in terms of SFIA at Level 5 – see www.ipthree.org. The IP3 professional standard includes all elements found in ‘traditional’ professions: skills based on theoretical knowledge; demonstration of competence; a defined work autonomy; and adherence to a professional code of conduct; and self-regulation through professional certification.

The IITPSA is a member of the International Federation for Information Processing, which has an arm called IP3 of which the IITPSA is also a member. The IITPSA also has membership to the South African Bureau of Standards and the National Science and Technology Forum. The IITPSA therefore has a responsibility to monitor and enforce continuing development and maintenance of professional competence of its professional members. Clause 2.3 of the Memorandum of Incorporation and Rules of the IITPSA states that one of the objects of the institute is “to enable practitioners to develop their skills and further their careers, and to obtain professional recognition”. A professional means “any person practicing or managing the practice of the skills used in the performance of work in the information and communications technology or related sector who subscribes to the Code of Conduct and Rules of the IITPSA”.

The Foreword to the IITPSA’s Code of Practice (Professional Conduct), which is directed to all professional members of the IITPSA, states:

“The Code of Practice deals with the ways in which all members of the Society are expected to exercise their professional competence for all engaged in the computing profession” – see www.iitpsa.org.za/index.php/codes-of-behaviour

The Code of Practice consists of a series of statements that prescribe minimum standards of practice to be observed by IITPSA members. The code is concerned with professional responsibility. The Code of Conduct stipulates that IITPSA professionals will

- act at all times with integrity;
- act with complete loyalty towards a client when entrusted with confidential information;
- act with impartiality when purporting to give independence advice and must disclose any relevant interests;
- accept full responsibility for any work undertaken and will construct and deliver that which has been agreed upon;

- not engage in discriminatory practices in professional activities on any basis whatsoever; and
- not seek personal advantage to the detriment of the Institute and will actively seek to enhance the image of the Institute.

As can be seen, the IITPSA has approved Codes of Behaviour (Code of Practice and Code of Conduct) for adherence by its members. The IITPSA is widely recognised as the professional body for IT practitioners in South Africa. Some IT practitioners in South Africa are registered as professional members of the IITPSA (designated with post-nominal's PMIITPSA).

Teaching of values to undergraduate university students

South Africa is a diverse society and has 23 public higher education institutions. These institutions comprise 17 universities and 6 universities of technology (the institutions are hereinafter collectively referred to as universities). Most of these institutions have computing faculties. However, many of the habits of university computing faculties and IT graduates will not present themselves as a unitary homogenous set of values. Therefore whatever an undergraduate IT student learns at a public higher education institution will compete with the multiple moral and ethical influences he had prior to the commencement of his studies.

Teaching of values to university computing students means that students are taught to respect key values such as integrity, responsibility, respect and honesty in their conduct towards others. If in such teaching, students understand that their conduct harms others (or disregards their rights), they should then adjust their behaviour. Ethics are guidelines to influence human social behaviour in a manner intended to protect and fulfil the rights of individuals in society (Marshall, 1999).

Ethical issues in the computing discipline differ from general ethical issues as information in electronic form is nowadays more readily available. This raises questions in regard to issues such as intellectual property rights, piracy, plagiarism and privacy when there is less personal contact. The actualisation of ethical values is not something that is learnt like a new skill or a task. Tasks, such as the development of software programs and which require specific technical skills, are laden with values. An IT practitioner could therefore develop software programs for one client (and which retains the intellectual property rights) and thereafter sell it to another. To live ethically, therefore not only requires knowledge of what values mean and society demands but also their actualisation in practice in the South African workplace environment. The ultimate test of successful teaching of values at universities is thus concerned with not only theoretical computing knowledge but also whether it will lead to ethical conduct by the professional IT practitioner in the workplace (Halawi and McCarthy, 2013). The university IT graduate therefore needs to aspire to become a professional IT practitioner.

Implications for professional IT practitioners

Professional IT practitioners need to develop a personal style of practice that reflects this depth of understanding and appreciation. After all, the word 'profession' is derived from the Latin word 'professio' and which means 'worthy of public trust and administration'. It is therefore incumbent upon professional IT practitioners to conduct themselves in such a way that people in South African society can admire and trust them. One of the most important attributes that a professional IT practitioner can possess, is a name which

encompasses integrity, reputation and trust. One cannot have these honourable attributes on a part-time basis – one is an honourable person in totality or not at all. Displaying dishonourable or non-ethical behaviour can have dire consequences as the professional IT practitioner's responsibility cannot be abrogated. Ethics is not a question of rule-on-rule but as a manifestation of one's inner self. Ethics requires the highest exercise of the professional IT practitioner's highest self and requires that he places his client's or employer's interests above his own.

Concluding remarks

Given South Africa's diversity, ethics in society has been impacted by economic, social and political factors. This has 'spun off' to ethics for professional IT practitioners. In South Africa there is a lack of consequence culture and a change of habit and mindset needs to be advocated. Perhaps there is now a need to question whether there is a common understanding of 'ethics' in South Africa and specifically in the computing sector. One suggested approach is to interrogate the difference between ethics and morality. Morality is unique to a person (such as an IT practitioner) and ethics are unique to the computing profession. Getting ethics accepted, understood and applied in this profession is not a simple matter. A good entry point may well be at undergraduate level in higher public educational institutions.

While ethics can be taught at universities, one of the obstacles of undergraduate students are learning ethics (or being taught ethics) which includes students' readiness and willingness to engage meaningfully with ethical issues as well as the university computing staff's readiness. Therefore there is a need for a *compulsory* 'freestanding' course on ethics to be included in the computing curriculum at **all** higher public education institutions. IT students need to be encouraged to appreciate the significance of ethical dimensions in the computing profession. Values relating to human conduct can be spawned in higher public education institutions so that ethics and value reasoning by IT practitioners grow to be an imperative in the computing sector in South Africa.

Acknowledgement

Some text was extracted from the author's earlier article published on the EthicsSA website at <http://www.ethicsa.org/index.php/resources/articles/business-ethics>

Further reading

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