

Applying the ACS Code of Ethics

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The IT professional unlike professionals in other disciplines does not have to abide by the strictures of a professional society. In Australia the professional IT association has a Code of Ethics that, while easily accessible, needs clarification to apply it in the real world. Though the ACS code is distinctly Australian in the way it has been formulated, it sits easily within the general tenets espoused by similar associations in other countries. Although cultural issues have influenced the moral philosophy of the ACS code, there are lessons from other countries that apply in the Australian context. Interpreting the code and applying it to one's situation can be facilitated through seeing how others have applied the code and through understanding its underlying tenets.

Key Words: code, clients, employers, ethics, profession, public

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with a discussion of what a professional code of conduct and in particular a code of ethics aims to achieve. It focuses in particular on how professionals in Australia have interpreted the Australian Computer Society (ACS) Code of Ethics (code) in its various forms over more than twenty years. Next the major tenets of the ACS code are examined in the light of its historical development and in the light of similar tenets by two similar organisations, the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and of the British Computer Society (BCS). The paper then restates the ACS code in its current form, before going on to apply that code to nine case studies. These case studies have been used in a similar context by other IT professionals as a reasonable representative sample of likely scenarios IT practitioners may encounter.

2. WHY CODIFY ETHICS?

There are numerous instances in one's professional life that call for judgement not so much in technical matters, as in matters of professional efficacy. The Australian Computer Society (ACS) has sought to help members and the wider professional body in Australia by codifying the minimal acceptable standards for an IT professional. This Code of Ethics and its associated Standard of Conduct (together referred to as "code" throughout most of this paper) have existed for some years, yet frequently members have expressed the view that the code is not well understood, or that it does not cater well to their circumstances. The first of these issues is addressed in this paper. The second

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