IEEE Engineering Ethics Cases

Author(s)

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Description

The cases reported on here all came to the attention of the IEEE Ethics Committee during the 1990s. Most came in via the ethics hotline, while the initial contacts for others was via communications addressed to authors of ethics columns that appeared in the IEEE Institute. Most of these cases have not been carefully investigated, although we are fairly confident that the essential information is correct. The outcomes of most of the cases are not known-in some cases matters are still in a state of flux.

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Introduction

Starting in the early nineties, there was a resurgence of ethics-related activity in the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), the world's largest technical society (currently over 330,000 members world wide.) Important developments included:

1. The annual distribution to members of the IEEE Ethics Code.
2. The inauguration of a bimonthly ethics column in the IEEE Newspaper received by all members.
3. The establishment of an ethics web site
4. Promulgation of Guidelines For Engineers Dissenting On Ethical Grounds. ("Engineer" is used here as a shorthand term for technical professionals in the fields encompassed by the IEEE).
5. The establishment of an ethics hotline to support engineers with ethics related problems.

Also, a proposal was developed for an IEEE Ethics Support Fund, to be financed by voluntary contributions. Unfortunately, in 1997, a backlash at the highest level of the IEEE squelched progress in the ethics area and, among other things, terminated the hotline, which had been operated successfully for a year, beginning August, 1996. But that is another story[(1)](#) [(2)](#) .

The cases to be reported on here all came to the attention of the IEEE Ethics Committee during the past few years. Most came in via the ethics hotline, while the initial contacts for others was via communications addressed to authors of ethics columns that appeared in the IEEE Institute. Most of these cases have not been carefully investigated, although we are fairly confident that the essential

information is correct. The outcomes of most of the cases are not yet known-in some cases matters are still in a state of flux. Names and other information that might identify individuals or organizations have been suppressed or fictionalized.

Some Remarks

Although the IEEE Ethics Hotline was listed in the IEEE Institute and occasionally mentioned in that publication, my impression is that only a small percentage of IEEE members were aware of its existence. Therefore, I suspect that the cases that came to us represent only a small fraction of what is out there. I feel that providing engineers facing ethics related problems with advice from experienced people as well as a sympathetic ear is clearly very useful. But, it should also be evident from the samples provided above, that engineering societies could do a lot more to help. Aside from the obvious value of providing some financial aid, there is also the possibility of low key intervention at the early stages. For example, such intervention in the ICU case and in the air bag case might have had very beneficial effects for all concerned, including not only the engineers and the general public, but also the employers. The mere presence in such cases of a large organization expressing an interest in the engineer's situation and contentions changes the entire picture. It makes it far more difficult for an employer to casually brush off an engineer expressing serious professional concerns. We have seen evidence of this in the past and, in a few recent cases, not mentioned here. An interesting aspect of some of these cases, fully consistent with other such cases previously on record, is the blatant irrationality displayed by some managers. What combination of ignorance, arrogance, stupidity, and greed produced the self-destructive behavior of management in the respirator case?

Acknowledgment

Listing names of people who are part of an important enterprise is analogous to making up a list of people to invite to a wedding. A very short list omits significant contributors, and a longer list makes omissions more painful. Nevertheless, here is

a short list of key figures in the drive to develop and energize ethics support in the IEEE, with apologies to others not mentioned: Walt Elden, Ray Larsen, Joe Wujek, Mal Benjamin, Joe Herkert.

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- [(1)](#)Stephen H. Unger, "What Happened to Ethics Support?", Letter, IEEE Institute, December, 1999, p. 15.
- [(2)](#)Stephen H. Unger, in Spring 1999 issue of IEEE Technology and Society magazine.

Notes

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario