An Assessment of Ethical Implications of ICT usage at the workplace: A Kenyan Human Resources Perspective

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Abstract: Information Communication Technology (ICT) has enabled and extended the ability of employees to capture, store, process, understand, use, create, and disseminate information at a speed and scale which had never been thought possible before. However, the advent of ICT has also brought about various ethical implications in human resource management. These include cybercrime, insecurity, invasion of privacy, lowered work productivity, implications brought about by freedom of information and other emerging issues. Various organizations have policies regarding the use of ICT facilities. The key issues that this paper will address are; to what extent does an organization harness the existing human capital for the organizations good; what are the ethical implications surrounding the use of ICT; what policies if implemented, should guide the organization in the ethical usage of ICT facilities.

Key words: Information Communication Technology; Human Capital Human Resources Management; Information Ethics; Freedom of Information

Introduction

ICT plays a pivotal role in making information available to anyone, anywhere, and anytime. ICT is a gateway to information; however, the gateway is controlled and managed by people. Therefore, proper management of information depends upon how ICT is managed. Every business is engaged in exchanging goods and services, employing human resources in the process.

Even if the data are collected within ethical guidelines, businesses should make sure that the data should not be used for the purpose other than their intended use. In this
scenario, the business manager may try to save money or time and use the data for multiple purposes without informing the individuals (Mayur and Embse, 2008). This also applies to human resource entities.

**Theoretical Background for information ethics**

Whitecomb and Fallis (2009) state that The philosophy of information is concerned with the nature, management, and use of information. Thus, it should be able to help us make better decisions about how to manage information (e.g., decisions about intellectual property laws, collection development policies, and Internet evaluation techniques). These decisions have knowledge acquisition as one of their principal goals. Thus, one way to improve these decisions is to clarify our epistemic values. In this article, we combine epistemology and decision analysis in an attempt to assist people in this important task.

Information ethics stems from practical challenges and issues arising from the impact of IT on contemporary society. Over the years, the misuse of and unethical behavior towards IS have caused significant losses to businesses and societies (Leonard and Cronan, 2005).

Himma (2007) observes that a number of theorists have attempted to justify the study of computer ethics as a field by arguing that computer ethics is unique in some theoretically significant sense. On this line of analysis, the use of computing technologies gives rise to unique meta-ethical, ethical, or epistemic difficulties that warrant treating those problems as a theoretically unified class that requires specialization. While a number of authors argue that computer ethics is distinct in some theoretically significant way (henceforth the uniqueness thesis), they differ with respect to the sense in which they think it is unique.

Some ethical concerns for HR experts would include
(1) **Privacy.**

Privacy issues arise from the information that people reveal about themselves or their associations and include the conditions under which this type of information is revealed and how it is subsequently safeguarded (Mason, 1986).

A more recent view of information privacy emphasizes one’s right to control the circulation of information concerning him or her (Collste, 2008). This view clearly indicates a close relationship between privacy and personal information in the information age. Tavani and Moor (2001), however, argue that privacy is best defined in terms of restricted access to personal information, not control. Nowadays, privacy legislation usually centers on the regulation of the collection, storage, processing, use, and circulation of personal information (Murata and Orito, 2008, p. 234). Therefore, privacy concerns may include the information that others should be able to access about a person with or without his/her permission and the safeguards that should exist for a person’s information protection.

(2) **Accuracy**

Accuracy issues refer to the authenticity of data and information in the information systems. Systems that collect information concerning people can portray a wrong profile of someone if the information is inaccurate. Therefore, there is a need for responsibility and accountability in order to ensure the authenticity, fidelity, and accuracy of information. Information accuracy concerns may include responsibility for the reliability and accuracy for information, accountability for errors, responsibility for keeping information correct, and remedial actions. In the development and introduction of software and systems, an ethical dilemma stems off of the question of who is responsible for the outcomes of the decisions that are made by the systems or by those using them.
(3) Property

Property issues reflect the ownership and pricing of information and its transmitting channels (Mason, 1986, p. 5; Martinsons and Ma, 2009, p. 819). One of the more controversial areas of information ethics concerns the intellectual property rights connected with software ownership. Who owns information? Who owns the channels of distribution and how should they be regulated? How is compensation determined? Software companies would only invest time and money in software development if they could get their investment back. Examples of issues in this area include softlifting, copying of digital art forms, and the ease of transferring electronic contents (Phukan and Dhillon, 2000, p. 240; Grosso, 2000, p. 23).

General theories of information ethics

There have also been a wide variety of substantive theoretical claims about the nature and methodology of information ethics. Some of these theories are limited to describing the nature of solving problems in information ethics and its relationship to solving problems in other areas.

Others attempt to articulate methodologies or substantive principles that should be employed in solving problems in information ethics. Yet others take information ethics as a starting point for developing a broader methodology for addressing issues in applied ethics. A brief summary of some of these views follows below.

Bernard Gert (1999) has argued that problems in applied ethics, including problems in information ethics, should be resolved by referring to the “common morality.” The common morality, as Gert defines it, is “the [shared] moral system that people use . . . in deciding how to act when confronting moral problems and in making their moral judgments”
Contribution of technology to effective and efficient HR provision

Singh and Karn, (2012). Rightly state that we live in an age that has witnessed a technological revolution that allows information to be transmitted easily and swiftly around the world. Even so, over the last few years, there has been an increasing demand for greater accessibility to information, mostly with a view to curbing corruption and promoting greater accountability of government agencies towards the citizens. These is also realized in substantive measures within the HR function.

Administrative development

When ICT is used to implement administrative reforms, it may help in the following areas:

- ICT helps in the automation of administrative processes. A truly e-governed system would require minimal human intervention and would rather be system-driven.
- ICT operates to reduce paper work with communication taking place via electronic routes, and information stored and retrieved in electronic form.
- The administration of service-provision is improved when governments make use of ICT to deliver services to their citizens with greater accountability, responsiveness and sensitivity.
- The use of ICT may help in the elimination of hierarchy, reducing procedural delays caused by hierarchical processes in the organisation. Through intranet and LAN, it has become possible to send information and data across various levels in the organisation simultaneously.

ICT plays an important role in effectively delivering services to people, on a national landscape, in the following ways:
• Transparency of information sharing through dissemination and publication of information on the web. This provides easy access to information and accordingly makes the system publicly accountable.
• It helps in economic development. The deployment of ICT reduces transaction costs, thus making services cheaper.
• It helps in social development: open access to information empowers citizens and an informed citizenry can participate in decision-making and voice their concerns, a requirement that can be accommodated in the programme/project formulation.
• ICT helps to put strategic information systems in place which are readily available to management to allow them to make routine and strategic decisions.
• The differences between traditional administrative and service-delivery procedures and those that make use of ICT are itemised thus.

The Freedom of Information Bill(2012)

As already alluded to above, the Freedom of Information Bill has for some considerable length of time been pending in Parliament[1]. It is vital to consider some of the salient features therein albeit if only for comparable reasons to discern the direction being taken in promotion of the right of access to information in Kenya. This also has a direct bearing on HR departments in diverse organizations.

The Freedom of Information Bill 2012[33] is more progressive than the Constitution if the Ruling under consideration herein is anything to go by. As a starting point some of the vital aspects in section 26 are thus:

1. Every citizen has a legally enforceable right to access information held by, or under the control of, a public authority, in accordance with this Act.
2. Subject to this Act, every citizen has the right to access information held by, or under the control of a private body where that information is necessary for the enforcement or protection of any right.
3. Subject to this Act, a person’s right to access information is not affected by –
4. any reason the person gives for seeking access as the right to access of information is independent of a person’s interest; or
5. the public authority’s belief as to what are his reasons for seeking access
6. A person has the right to access information of a public body or private body expeditiously and inexpensively;
7. A person has a right of access to information generated, received and or held by public bodies, subject only to such limitations as are necessary for public interest;
8. this Act shall be interpreted and applied on the basis of a duty to disclose. Non disclosure shall be permitted only in exceptionally justifiable circumstances;

**Implications for Human resource practitioners**

With the above data enshrined in the Freedom of Information Bill, it is therefore vital for HR practitioners, to understand that they are operating within an information society where the rights of information for citizens are well protected.

Information, information technologies, and information systems are an integral part of society (Wallstrom, 2007), and more so for human resource practitioners. Therefore, information ethics has become important. Information ethics is therefore part and parcel of enhancing the management of human capital.

To help reinforce the benefits and reduce the losses, ethical theories have emerged to help predict behaviors. Behavior includes decision making. The process of ethical/unethical decision making is believed to be moderated primarily by a person's own preferences and values (Brady and Hatch, 1992). Those preferences and values are formed and influenced over the years by a variety of environmental and genetic factors. In their conceptual work, Boomer et al, (1987) suggested a behavioral model of ethical and unethical decision making, which may be recommended for HR practitioners here in Kenya, in the quest for managing information, human capital and ICT knowledge portals. These are presented in three six independent constructs, believed to influence the ethical/unethical decision making process that may be relevant for HR managers.
i. Individual attributes
These include personal goals; motivation, position, demographics. It would be important for a HR manager to understand, the motivation behind storing data, or even why employees need to solicit certain types of information.

ii. Personal environment
When a Human Resource Practitioner would like to relay information or solicit information from employees, personal environment should be considered. It should not be detrimental to the employee in that it intrudes on privacy. This aspect of personal environment should guide the manager in making well informed decisions.

According to Searle(2006), there is a need to focus more critically on the impact of new practices in attraction, search and assessment, in order to be able to identify tensions and potential incompatibilities for the main stakeholders, and to understand the wider impact of web-based measurements process and practices. Going by Searle, it would therefore be vital to structure HR data that can protect personal entities.

iii. Professional environment
This environment comprises of codes of conduct; professional meetings; and other licensing issues. An organization draws different types of professions. It is therefore imperative that a HR expert understand the various underlying codes of ethics that govern the various professions. This will in turn assist in understanding on how to ethically make decisions regarding data gathering and dissemination in these areas.

iv. Work environment
The work environment comprises corporate goals; stated and outlined policies; corporate culture which have a direct bearing on human capital. A HRMIS for instance, has to bear
the appropriate information ethics to prevent aspects of malpractice and misrepresentation of information. Therefore the application of a set of ethics to govern the data gathering and provision should be in place.

v. Government/legal environment
This includes legislation; administrative agencies and judicial system. It is high time that HR practitioners get the legal fraternity on board to discuss various issues pertaining to information ethics and the law. As embedding of technology advances within organizations, there is the need for human capital to be protected, and hence the need of understanding of the underlying provisions from the laws of Kenya.

Conclusions and Recommendations
This paper has reviewed literature that relates to information ethics in regard to enhancing human capital in organizations. In the course of the research, not so much was found to have been published in regard to information ethics and the human resource perspective in sub Saharan Africa. This paper recommends therefore, a need for research on the implications of the legal environment as it affects the information ethics in HR within organizations.
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The Freedom of Information Bill (2012)