THE USE OF WEB-BASED INTERACTIVE CASES IN ETHICAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT: A VALUABLE UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING TOOL

Edward A. Johnson
University of North Florida
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA, U.S.A.

Abstract

This paper discusses an innovative project that makes use of a series of web-based interactive cases specifically designed to (1) help undergraduate students recognize and become more sensitive to the complex nature of ethical dilemmas within a workplace environment, and (2) provide students with appropriate suggestions and strategies for resolving ethical dilemmas at work. The web-based project is specifically designed for junior-level business students enrolled in a required, introductory management course. Although this paper describes the use of a web-based interactive method for developing ethical skills for business students, the method could also be applied in many courses in other disciplines.

KEY WORDS: Ethical dilemma, workplace, introductory management course

INTRODUCTION

An undergraduate student will have to deal with many different types of ethical dilemmas during his or her professional lifetime. Some of these dilemmas will be relatively insignificant, while others could be serious enough to harm his or her professional career, as well as to have negative consequences for his or her organization [see Johnson, May-June, 2002; Johnson, April, 2002; Johnson, 2001].

Part of the solution to prepare an undergraduate student for a successful professional career is to assist the student to evaluate and become more sensitive to ethical considerations associated with professional decision-making. Although this paper describes the use of a web-based interactive method for developing ethical skills for business students, the method could also be applied in many courses in other disciplines.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to discuss an innovative project that makes use of a series of web-based interactive cases specifically designed to (1) help undergraduate students recognize and become more sensitive to the complex nature of ethical dilemmas within a workplace environment; and (2) provide students with appropriate suggestions and strategies for resolving ethical dilemmas at work.

The web-based project is specifically designed for junior-level undergraduate business students enrolled in a required junior-level, introductory management course at a regional university.
FRAMEWORK

The innovative web-based project will make use of 25 web-based interactive cases specifically selected to sensitize undergraduate students to ethical dilemmas in the workplace. The cases focus on a wide variety of different types of ethical dilemmas a student could experience in the workplace (inappropriate treatment of customers, stealing, falsifying reports and documents, violating company policy, legal violations, treating others unfairly, drinking and using drugs on the job, unauthorized use of company resources, and lying) [Johnson, 2001].

CASE DEVELOPMENT BACKGROUND

The 25 cases associated with the web-based project were developed over the past several academic years and were authored by junior-level undergraduate business students who participated in a Business Ethics Workshop, a required workshop for students enrolled in an introductory, junior-level course in management [Johnson, 2001].

The Business Ethics Workshop, one and one-half hours in length, covered a variety of important ethical theories and principles. After completing the workshop, each student was required to develop a well structured, three-to-four-page case (the Ethical Case Development Project) related to an ethical dilemma that the student experienced in his/her workplace.

With respect to the Case Development Project, an ethical dilemma was defined as a business situation in which a student had to decide whether or not to do something that, although benefiting him/her or the organization or both, might be considered unethical [Schermhorn, Hunt, Osborn, 1995]. Is it ethical to accept a bribe from a vendor? Is it ethical to use a company computer for personal business on company time? Is it ethical to withhold information that a co-worker/friend is stealing money, equipment, or merchandise from the company?

CASE DEVELOPMENT FORMAT

The format used for the development of the case required each student to address the following:

Step 1: Identifying An Ethical Dilemma
(a) Describe an ethical dilemma you experienced in the workplace.
(b) What made the dilemma “ethical”?
(c) How did you resolve the ethical dilemma?

Step 2: Resolving An Ethical Dilemma
(a) Identify the individual(s) and/or group(s) involved in your ethical dilemma.
(b) What were your responsibilities to the individual(s) and/or group(s)?
(c) In what way did your responsibilities and expectations conflict?
(d) What would have helped you resolve the conflict(s)?
(e) How could you have met your responsibilities to each person and/or group involved in your ethical dilemma?
(f) What would have been the best way to handle the ethical dilemma?

WEB-PAGE FORMAT

In 2005, instead of writing a case, each student in the required, junior-level management course will access a web page and read cases of interest to him or her. The 25 cases for the web site were selected from cases written over the past several years by over 1,000 undergraduate students enrolled in the required junior-level course, and the selection of these 25 cases was based upon the various types of ethical dilemmas the students experienced in the workplace and the quality of the cases. Examples of these various types of ethical dilemmas experienced by the students can be found in Table 1.
TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS [Johnson, 2001]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of Customers</td>
<td>Defective merchandise, inappropriate charges, overselling, not charging full price, misleading customers, erasing bills, false advertising, giving merchandise away for free, undercharging, selling wrong products, illegal discounts, dishonest sales presentations, providing poor service, harassing customers, inappropriate use of discounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Money, machinery, medical equipment, office supplies, raw materials, liquor, beer, food, drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falsifying Reports and Documents</td>
<td>Unauthorized time off, safety violations, Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) violations, unauthorized absenteeism, lying about previous jobs, incorrect reporting, leaving job early, creating false documents, falsifying expense reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violating Company Policy/Unauthorized Use of Company Resources</td>
<td>Violating security guidelines, lack of loyalty, doing personal work on the job, violating child care procedures, intercepting e-mail, playing video games on company-owned PC during work hours, not reporting violations of various personnel policies, using company-owned PC for personal use, paying others off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Violations/Drinking and Drug Use on the Job</td>
<td>Using drugs, forgery, misusing steroids, embezzlement, IRS (tax) violations, accepting pay under the table (to avoid taxes), violating environmental laws, fraud, check kiting, violating affirmative action regulations, providing illegal information, taking bribes, illegal use of discounts, sexual harassment, unfair labor practices, racial discrimination, excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair Treatment of Others/ Lying</td>
<td>Disrupt work teams, productivity issues, lack of respect for boss and/or other employees, playing favorites, poor quality work performance, covering up problems, spying on others, romantic issues, lack of loyalty, poor personal hygiene, holding back employee pay, invasion of privacy, unfair pressure, inaccurate performance evaluations, mistreating employees, helping friends cover up, unreasonable requests, promotion problems, salary adjustment issues, lying to co-workers, lying to immediate supervisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 25 cases will be designed for a web-based format. Each case will include a narrative of the specific ethical dilemma experienced by the case author in a workplace environment and will include a discussion of the individual(s) and/or group(s) involved in the ethical dilemma. Examples of narratives are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
EXAMPLES OF THREE CASE NARRATIVES DEVELOPED BY STUDENTS
WEB-BASED FORMAT

NARRATIVE ONE: “STEALING FROM A FITTING ROOM”

While employed as a salesperson at a major retail outlet, I thought I might have witnessed a fellow salesperson, “Fred,” helping one of his friends steal merchandise from a fitting room in the store. I felt that Fred’s friend was stealing merchandise for himself and for Fred. Fred was the only store employee “working the fitting room” and taking care of customers, and I suspected that he was watching out for store managers who were responsible for running the floor. I made eye-to-eye contact with Fred, but I was somewhat unsure of exactly what I had really witnessed.
I was confronted with an ethical dilemma. Stealing is against the law. People who are caught can be prosecuted and arrested. Stealing at my store is not tolerated, and employees who are caught stealing are severely punished. They are arrested, prosecuted, and prevented from entering any of our company stores throughout the world. Fred, who I thought was involved in stealing merchandise with his friend, is a personal friend of mine. When put in a tough situation such as this one, it is hard for me to betray my friend, Fred. On the other hand, I should fulfill my responsibilities and duties as an honest employee of the store. I had a hard time deciding what to do.

NARRATIVE TWO: “RE-USING GIFT CERTIFICATES”

One ethical problem I faced was whether to take advantage of a restaurant whose management was taking advantage of its employees. I learned that the restaurant I worked for as a waiter was taking extra money out of all of the restaurant’s employees’ paychecks to cover for the failing restaurant’s operation. Management was taking money out of our paychecks and calling it a tax deduction.

When some of the employees found out about this, they devised a plan to get some of their money back. The plan seemed to be totally foolproof, and there was no way the employees could be caught, so some of the employees decided to put the plan into effect. The scheme revolved around re-using gift certificates to deduct money from customers who paid their bills with cash. Since this process could be done after the customer left the restaurant, it was in a way as if the customer left an extra tip for the waiter or waitress. Each waiter or waitress repeated this process at least three times per night.

I felt that I was confronted with a serious ethical dilemma. Should I participate in the act, or should I turn in the wait staff who participated in this scheme? I knew most of the people personally, and I didn’t want to get them in trouble, while at the same time, I was not certain that I wanted to risk being caught in the middle of such a serious act. However, since the company was, in fact, taking advantage of us, perhaps the false reproduction and use of the gift certificates might not be that bad – it might be a taste of the company’s own medicine!

NARRATIVE THREE: “PUMPING UP THE NUMBERS”

While employed at a non-profit social service agency, one of my duties involved compiling statistics and providing management with the monthly 32-page statistical report for the facility at which I worked. I had two consecutive supervisors at this facility, both of whom requested that I “pump up the numbers” on my report.

The statistical reports I turned in were used as the basis for requesting funds and applying for grants. They were also used to justify expenditures in particular programs, determine staffing needs, and document community usage of the facility’s programs. Altering these reports would probably be construed as fraud. One of the supervisors occasionally stated that sometimes we must “turn our heads” for the good of the agency or to protect our clients. Since this attitude is contrary to my personal belief system, I repeatedly found myself embroiled in ethical conflict with my supervisors.

After reading the narrative of the ethical dilemma on the web-page site, the student will be required to address a series of “thought questions” related to the specific case that are placed at the end of each case. The student will then input his or her answers directly on a form built into the web page. These “thought questions” will include:
1. From your perspective, what made the dilemma “ethical”?
2. How would you have resolved this dilemma?
3. What would have helped you resolve the dilemma?
4. How would you have met your responsibilities to each person and/or group involved in the case?
5. What do you believe would have been the best way to handle the ethical dilemma?

Although 25 cases will be made available, each student, depending upon his/her specific interests, will be required to complete two of the 25 cases.

After completing the assignment, by clicking the “submit” button, two actions will take place. First, the student’s responses will be sent via e-mail to the professor responsible for the course. Second, a new web page will appear containing the full text of the case, providing immediate feedback to the student as to the actual results of the case they’ve just read. The full text of the case will include detailed information
related to (1) why the case author thought the dilemma was “ethical”; (2) how the author resolved the dilemma; (3) which individuals and/or groups the author identified as being involved in the ethical dilemma; (4) what the author considered to be his/her responsibilities to each individual and/or group involved in the dilemma; (5) what ways the author felt his/her responsibilities and expectations conflicted; (6) what the author thought would have helped him/her resolve the conflicts; (7) how the author felt he/she could have better met his/her responsibilities to each person and/or group involved in the ethical dilemma; and (8) what the author considered to be the best way to handle the ethical dilemma.

In addition to receiving the full text of a specific case and feedback regarding the case author’s response to the “thought questions” noted above, a highly innovative dimension will be added to the project. Several individuals from the community (clergy, human resource specialists, and other professionals) will be asked to respond to specific cases and address the same “thought questions” required of students. The responses of these community participants will be made available to students on another web page. The feedback provided by these various community participants should provide students with a variety of valuable and appropriate suggestions for resolving ethical dilemmas within a business environment.

An example of the steps associated with the web-based approach is found in Table 3. See the Appendix for an example of the web-based format.

### TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student reads the Case Narrative (Web Page 1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>After reading the Case Narrative, student inputs answers to “Thought Questions” (Web Page 2). Student then “clicks” the “submit” button.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student’s response is sent via e-mail to the professor responsible for the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A new web page (Web Page 3) then appears containing the full text of the case, providing immediate feedback to the student as to the actual results of the case. The student reads how the case author resolved the ethical dilemma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>In addition to receiving the full text and feedback from the case author contained on Web Page 3, responses of the community participants will be made available to the student on another web page (Web Page 4). This feedback addresses the same “thought questions” required of the student, and the feedback will provide the student with a variety of valuable and appropriate suggestions for resolving the ethical dilemma described in the case narrative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### EVALUATION

A thorough evaluation of the project will take place at the end of the 2005 academic year. The design and format of the case study delivery system will be carefully reviewed, and an evaluation tool will be developed in order to measure various dimensions of the project in terms of the project’s effectiveness on teaching. Future modifications of the project will most likely be made based upon this review and evaluation.

### CONCLUSION

The information provided in this paper should be especially useful to business professors, as well as professors in other disciplines. Classroom instruction in ethics should be considered a vital part of any student’s curriculum so that he or she might develop appropriate standards of conduct and be better prepared for the professional environment that awaits him or her.

The web-based case project described in this paper can be used in many courses in various disciplines for the purpose of providing applied instruction on ethical issues. The web-based nature of the project allows it to be used in a traditional teaching environment or through a distance-learning format.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

EXAMPLE OF THE WEB-BASED FORMAT
CASE: “PUMPING UP THE NUMBERS”

WEB PAGE NO. 1:

This page contains the narrative of the student authored case:

While employed at a non-profit social service agency, one of my duties involved compiling statistics and providing management with the monthly 32-page statistical report for the facility at which I worked. I had two consecutive supervisors at this facility, both of whom requested that I “pump up the numbers” on my report.

The statistical reports I turned in were used as the basis for requesting funds and applying for grants. They were also used to justify expenditures in particular programs, determine staffing needs, and document community usage of the facility’s programs. Altering these reports would probably be construed as fraud. One of the supervisors occasionally stated that sometimes we must “turn our heads” for the good of the agency or to protect our clients. Since this attitude is contrary to my personal belief system, I repeatedly found myself embroiled in ethical conflict with my supervisors.

WEB PAGE NO. 2

After reading the case narrative, the student answers the “Thought Questions” discussed previously in this article:

1. From your perspective, what made the dilemma “ethical”?
2. How would you have resolved this dilemma?
3. What would have helped you resolve the dilemma?
4. How would you have met your responsibilities to each person and/or group involved in the case?
5. What do you believe would have been the best way to handle the ethical dilemma?

The student then sends his/her answers to these questions via e-mail to the professor responsible for the course.

WEB PAGE NO. 3

This page includes the full text of the case, including the case author’s responses to the questions required of the case author that were discussed earlier in this article.
1. Describe an ethical dilemma you experienced in the work place.

While employed at a non-profit social service agency, one of my duties involved compiling statistics and providing management with the monthly 32-page statistical report for the facility at which I worked. I had two consecutive supervisors at this facility, both of whom requested that I “pump up the numbers” on my report.

2. What made the dilemma “ethical”?

The statistical reports I turned in were used as the basis for requesting funds and applying for grants. They were also used to justify expenditures in particular programs, determine staffing needs, and document community usage of the facility’s programs. Altering these reports would probably be construed as fraud. One of the supervisors occasionally stated that sometimes we must “turn our heads” for the good of the agency or to protect our clients. Since this attitude is contrary to my personal belief system, I repeatedly found myself embroiled in ethical conflict with my supervisors.

3. How did you resolve the ethical dilemma?

Over the course of five years, I tried several tactics in attempting to resolve the dilemma. After each request, I would tell the supervisor that I could not in good conscience falsify the reports and that I was not willing to risk my reputation. She would not ask again for a while, but every six to eight months I would have to justify my unwillingness to alter the numbers. Unfortunately, I was never able to convince either of these supervisors that there was anything wrong in what they were asking me to do. The discussions always ended with my refusal to acquiesce.

I was suspicious that the second supervisor might be doing the alterations herself after she insisted my reports be done in pencil, so I always made a copy before turning in my work. On one occasion, my supervisor’s boss called me because some numbers that should have matched did not. I lied and told him I must have forgotten to make the appropriate corrections when I had found an error. I read him the numbers from my copies, and he made the necessary changes. The next time I saw my supervisor, she wanted to know where I got the numbers I had given to her boss over the phone. When I told her, she forbade me making copies, citing waste of time, paper, and copy toner.

Thereafter, I continued making copies, but took them home for safekeeping. The next time my supervisor asked me to alter statistics and I again refused, she reminded me that she was the boss and ordered me to do what she said. She left the office without waiting for further reply or argument.

One of my job duties involved phoning in a weekly client status report directly to my supervisor’s boss. I took the opportunity to suggest that since we had quite a few new employees, it might be helpful if he could offer some guidelines so that we were all compiling our statistics in the same manner. He thought it was a great idea, and he arranged for all staff who worked on statistics to attend a training session in which he went over the monthly report page by page, giving explicit instructions. After this meeting, whenever my supervisor wanted me to alter my report, I could tell her I had compiled the statistics exactly as her boss had instructed us at the training session. I only had to suggest once that we call her boss for a clarification before my supervisor finally stopped asking me to alter the report.

4. Identify the individual(s) and/or groups involved in your ethical dilemma.

Almost every week, this or some other ethical problem went home with me. My disaffection with my supervisor and my job had a direct affect on my family because of changes in my behavior and attitude. While the ethical conflict was between my direct supervisors and me, this ethical problem involved almost everyone in the agency either directly or indirectly. Upper management would ultimately have been held responsible for any inappropriate activities my supervisor or I committed. The jobs of other employees within the agency could disappear if funding was pulled due to an appearance of impropriety.

The ethical problem also involved a wide range of other individuals and organizations. Grants from various organizations provided funding for this agency. Other agencies were also involved, since they were in competition for some of the same grants. Such private benefactors as individuals and local churches were involved in that they would redirect their contributions in the event of a scandal. Finally, the client population was at risk of losing the services the agency provided them.
5. What were your responsibilities to the individual(s) and/or group(s)?

I owed my family the income from my job without taking the stress of the job home. I owed my supervisors and upper management the best job I could do. I owed other employees a full resolution to the problem, so that it would not recur each time a new employee stepped into the position. I owed funding organizations and other benefactors an accurate and truthful accounting of their contributions. I owed other agencies the opportunity to compete fairly for available funds. Most importantly, I owed it to my clients to ensure that the safety net provided by this agency was not ripped out from under them.

6. In what way did your responsibilities and expectations conflict?

Upon transferring from the volunteer pool to a paid position with this agency, I had expected to be of even more assistance to our client population. I thought I would become a more integral part of solving the social problems that our client population represented. Instead, I found myself at odds with people I had formerly respected.

My personal ethics code disallowed me the option of negating my responsibilities to all of the other individuals and groups involved. As much as I would have preferred to blow the whistle on my supervisors, I believed at the time that it would prove fruitless. In the past, the CEO backed the decision of the supervisor any time there was a dispute between the supervisor and an employee, often without even speaking with the employee involved. Generally, the supervisor would be “magnanimous” about the dispute and claim misunderstanding. However, it was rare for that employee to survive a month after the dispute was supposedly resolved. Usually, they were pressured into quitting. If that didn’t work, they were fired based on unsubstantiated claims of drinking or drug use on the job or some other “legitimate” reason.

I did not want to risk either of those possibilities, so I took the best course I could think of until I was ready to quit. The stress of working under a constant state of conflict greatly reduced my ability and inclination to fully extend myself for my employer or my clients.

7. What would have been the best way to handle the ethical dilemma?

Working for supervisors trained to manage people would have been extremely helpful in solving these conflicts. The agency’s client case managers were also responsible for supervising the facility staff. These case managers were trained in counseling, psychology, and sociology. They had no training in managing employees and frequently voiced contempt for that part of their jobs. They knew little about labor law or management processes. They seemed unwilling or unable to apply their counseling training to workplace problems, and they insisted that they just had a lot of “bad employees.”

8. How could you have met your responsibilities to each person and/or group involved in your ethical dilemma?

Clear guidelines from upper management would have been helpful. Subjects that were specifically covered in the “Policies and Procedures Manual” rarely became conflict issues. In the case of the statistical reports, once clear guidelines were provided, the conflict could at least be deflected.

9. What would have been the best way to handle the ethical dilemma?

I am sure I would have handled this situation differently had I felt I would have been treated fairly and ethically had I gone over my supervisors’ heads. Through watching the treatment of other employees who tried to carry disputes up the chain of command, I know this would not have been possible. I finally gave up and quit the job.

WEB PAGE NO. 4

This page will contain community professionals’ responses to the “thought questions discussed earlier in this article. A short example from one professional is presented below:

This case reports an obvious ethical dilemma, as statistics were falsified in order to obtain better funding, more personnel, etc. It was a very serious dilemma, as the author rightly points out that funding could have been lost, employees could have lost their jobs, and a scandal could have ensued.
Overall, I believe that the case author handled the ethical dilemma as well as she could have, given the difficult situation that she encountered. When reading the beginning sections of the case, I thought immediately that she should have met with her supervisor’s boss to explain her concerns about the statistical reports. However, in the last sections of her case, the author explains that she was extremely concerned about retribution based upon her observations of what occurred when other employees took this course of action; thus, this probably would not have been a viable solution. My next question would be if there were another layer of management between the supervisor’s boss and the CEO to whom she could have gone with her problem. Given the possible severe consequences to the agency if the falsification were to be discovered, it would be appropriate to take this route.

I did question the author’s solution of taking the copies of the reports home, as typically data such as she compiled should not be taken out of the office unless it is for business reasons. I understand that she felt that she could not trust her boss, and if her boss had discovered her copies, her employment would most likely have been terminated, as the boss had given specific directions not to make copies from a copying machine. Perhaps she could have retained a handwritten copy of her data.

The author makes excellent suggestions in the last section about what could have made this situation a much better one in which to deal with such a serious ethical dilemma. I hope that her former agency has adopted some of these practices since the author’s departure.