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The Ethics of Technology

By GARY A. OLSON

HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

A senior professor recently asked permission to post an announcement promoting an antiwar rally on our college's official e-mail announcement list. Although the rally was to take place on the campus, it was not a university-sponsored event.

When I explained that it would be inappropriate, and indeed unethical, to use the college's official communication medium to announce events unrelated to the conduct of official college business, he seemed shocked and replied, "Surely, everyone in the college is against the war." I pointed out that regardless of an event's worthiness, university resources may not be used for personal communication.

In a similar case, I know of a department chairman at a public university who was reprimanded for using his office computer and university e-mail account to engage in day trading on the stock market. He closely monitored stock fluctuations throughout the day, constantly buying and selling shares. He had even bragged to colleagues that he was "raking in the dough."

That chairman was genuinely stunned when his behavior came under the scrutiny of university auditors and he was judged guilty of misusing state property and engaging in personal activities during work hours -- clear conflicts of interest for which he nearly lost his job.

Those cases are representative of what turns out to be widespread misunderstanding about the appropriate use of university technology.

Many professors, staff members, and even administrators see campus computers and e-mail accounts as their own private property -- a type of employment benefit provided with no constraints on use. The fact is, universities "assign" computer equipment to us as tools to help us perform our jobs more effectively and efficiently, in the same way that institutions assign offices to faculty members, laboratory space to scientists, or photocopy machines to departments. Computer equipment, far from being personal property, is owned and maintained by the university, with restrictions on how it may be used.

Broader ethical principles are at play as well. For example, while it is generally considered unethical to use university e-mail accounts to engage in personal communication, most institutions are tolerant when it comes to minor personal usage, such as inviting friends to lunch or cocktails.

But institutions frown on extensive personal use, such as carrying on lengthy private exchanges or selling personal property on eBay, not to mention engaging in day trading or political advocacy. Those are all abuses to one degree or another.

A university chief information officer explains it by using an analogy: "It's the equivalent of petty theft at the supermarket, where we each have our own personal threshold as to what is morally acceptable." Some of us think nothing of popping a few grapes in our mouths while in the produce section, he explained, while

others justify keeping an extra \$20 bill that the cashier mistakenly gave in making change.

"Regardless of where you draw the line," he said, "it is all theft, pure and simple."

That sentiment is echoed in my own state. Illinois mandates that all state employees -- including faculty and staff members, and student workers at all public universities -- take an annual online ethics course. It presents principles relevant to ethical workplace behavior, illustrates them in narrative scenarios, and then quizzes the test takers. Prominent in that training are discussions on the use of state-provided technology for personal use.

Many professors and administrators avoid even the appearance of impropriety by establishing external e-mail accounts for personal use. That allows them to draw clear boundaries between university business and personal or recreational use.

"I have a free Hotmail account for all my nonuniversity e-mailing," said one professor of zoology. "I only use my university account for communicating with students and colleagues in the discipline."

Maintaining a personal account not only helps you avoid ethical transgressions, it also can protect you from unexpected legal trouble. A common legal tactic nowadays is to obtain someone's e-mail messages through a public-information request. Those messages can be easy to obtain because public universities often archive e-mail traffic for a given amount of time.

You may have thought the messages you deleted yesterday were gone forever, but they could still be retrievable. The university is allowed to archive employee e-mail messages because it, in effect, owns them: They were produced in a university-provided e-mail account by a university employee, most likely using a university-owned computer.

I know of one faculty member who was sued for libel by a colleague. He was shocked and embarrassed when a public-information request turned up a number of incriminating messages. He might have avoided being exposed had he only used a personal account.

The same ethical principles pertain to an institution's e-mail discussion list. The professor who wanted to post an antiwar announcement claimed that the e-mail list was a "virtual faculty lounge" and so he should be permitted the same kind of free speech as in an actual faculty lounge.

While it is a type of public space, a college discussion list is necessarily a restricted space and, like e-mail accounts, is primarily a tool to assist in the performance of one's job. While most universities are somewhat flexible with actual usage in the same way that they are with e-mail, the identical ethical principles apply.

What's more, supervisors would be wise to exercise oversight over the content of their official e-mail discussion lists because, unlike e-mail, the supervisors are directly accountable for what gets posted. That is why every official discussion group should have a single moderator who can make informed judgments about which messages are appropriate to post.

Another common misconception about the ethical use of university technology involves computer software. Most universities purchase site licenses that give them the legal right to provide certain software programs to a specified number of users. Usually, those software programs are the only ones that are supposed to be installed on university computers. That helps the university protect itself from legal liability, and it also helps to cut down on the number of software applications that conflict with university software, thereby causing system errors.

Nonetheless, many faculty members attempt to install their own software on machines assigned to them,

arguing that they will use the software primarily to conduct official business.

Campus information-technology departments don't see it that way. They are charged with serving the tech needs of faculty and staff members, but they are also obligated to report infractions by those users. That conflict often creates an unnecessarily adversarial relationship between the two.

That relationship is also strained when professors ask a technology-support staff member to work on, or repair, their personal computers -- another ethical no-no. The professors' rationale is that they are using the home computer or laptop principally for official business.

But technology staff members are employed to work on equipment owned by the institution. Asking them to work on your home computer creates a conflict of interest. In the case of a public university, it would amount to using taxpayer money to service private property. An obvious solution to that dilemma is for you to employ the technician outside of the university setting as an independent contractor. Even better: Hire someone unconnected to the university.

Practices and policies vary by institution, and private colleges have much more leeway than public ones in determining what is permissible. My point here is that too often we take our university-provided technology for granted and assume we have much more latitude than we do. It is our responsibility both to know the ethical principles at stake and the institutional rules pertaining to technology use -- which, after all, are in place for the greater good.

Gary A. Olson is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State University and can be contacted at golson@chronicle.com. For an archive of his previous columns, click [here](#).

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