



# Geek Speak

Lee Drake

## Ethics in Computing

**M**any perfectly honest people will turn to a life of crime when they fire up their computers. Because information seems like it ought to be free, in many cases we automatically assume it is. Today we'll talk about a few of the

ethical issues most common to people's computer experiences.

Software licensing is one of the largest areas where people's ethics take a left turn. Software is expensive, but that doesn't justify making an illegal copy. Just as we're not allowed to take a Porsche because we can't afford one, neither are we allowed to take software without paying the author.

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In some cases software piracy is blatant: a single copy of the software is purchased, then installed on multiple machines. In some cases it's subtler: academic copies are installed at businesses, or work copies installed at home. This happens most commonly with popular software such as Microsoft Office, though other applications are often pirated.

There are a number of ways to "get legal" for less than retail price. For instance, if you have at least five licenses of most software products, the vendor frequently will sell a "license only" version of their software. This license is uniquely issued to you by a reseller or licensing agent, and is usually less expensive than a typical retail license. Similarly, if you purchase software pre-installed on a computer, the OEM license is much less expensive than a retail license. If software is truly too expensive for your organization, consider legal, less-expensive alternatives such as open license, freeware, shareware, and competitive software such as Word Perfect Suite and Star Office.

Microsoft offers a free tool on its Website <http://www.microsoft.com/piracy> to allow you to audit your network, showing what applications people have installed on their computers. This allows you to check your records and software to be sure you are compliant.

Many companies don't realize that they are liable for any license theft that goes on within their organizations. The individual, the corporation itself, the direct managers of the person performing the license stealing, and the CEO can all be held responsible both criminally and civilly for software license theft within their

## Ethical Issues in Computing

- Using computers on company time to perform personal tasks
- Downloading of sexually explicit content
- Distribution of content or e-mail that is offensive within a work situation
- Music copying or sharing
- Software Piracy
- License theft

organizations. Companies like Microsoft and the Software Piracy Association (SPA) make it easy to report license theft. They love to publicly prosecute license theft, and leverage the fact that the fines for theft can be quite hefty. All it takes is a single disgruntled employee to land your company on the front page of your local paper for software piracy—not the kind of publicity companies crave!

Similarly, corporations and their officers are responsible for other intellectual property theft that occurs within their offices. Using the office computers or network to share music or videos can get your connection to the Internet shut down at best, or result in criminal prosecution under the recently passed Digital Music Copyright Act (DMCA). Typically when such prosecutions are done, the police will seize all computers, hardware and equipment involved—even if you're not held responsible, the expense of having your business disrupted, or replacing equipment, is nothing to sneeze at. Again, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the individual studios love to find companies that they can use as examples in prosecuting these crimes.

In many cases a properly configured firewall and/or a network proxy can limit or reveal when music copying or sharing happens. Having a corporate policy against installing programs such as Napster, Kazaa, and Bearshare can also help, as can computer lockdown policies that prevent people from installing software without an administrator's permission. Ignorance of illegal activity isn't an excuse—you are expected to exercise reasonable care in the maintenance of your computer systems to prevent DMCA or piracy violations.

If you're a company officer, you should be setting the example with your own behavior as well. Having Kazaa installed on your company or home computer is not the example you want to set as a leader—the message you're giving your employees is that you consider it okay to steal.

There are other ethical issues to consider: people using computers on company time to perform personal tasks, downloading of sexually explicit content at work, the distribution of content or e-mail that is offensive within a work situation. Computers are remarkably good at recording where they've been and what they've been used for, and this record can come back to haunt a company accused of discrimination or human resources violations.

It's a good idea, every once in a while, to do a quick internal ethics check of your company. Be sure that you have good computer ethics policies in place, that you actively enforce these policies, that you audit your licenses and access records, and that you set a good example when you lead your own people. **BSM**

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