
Ethics Case Study Individual Report: The Conflicted Data Analyst

In this scenario (refer to appendix), the company you are working for is signing a multi-million-dollar contract to share customers' private information with a third party without their knowledge. As a result, you are posed with the issue of whether you should leak the details of this arrangement to the press or keep your inside knowledge to yourself. This is considered an ethical dilemma as it may conflict with your own personal beliefs. You may believe that the company must act with honesty and remain trustworthy with the customers' information; however, this new arrangement goes against your moral principles as you become suspicious of the handling and proper use of the data.

Ethical issues in business can be examined at three different levels: the individual, organisational and systemic. There are several aspects of organisations that can have an impact on individual ethical behaviour and can make this decision more difficult. This includes factors such as:

- Organisational norms – Cottonworths' mission statement may be more concerned with making large profits which this contract will be able to achieve.
- Diffusion of responsibility – the structure of large organisations such as Cottonworth can contribute to lack of moral responsibility. You may believe that another employee will act instead.

This ethical scenario will be compared against three ethical frameworks and consequentially highlight moral reasons for choosing both options which form the dilemma.

Utilitarianism

Consequentialist theories claim that only the consequences of an action are relevant when determining if that action is ethical. Utilitarianism is an example of consequentialist ethics which claims that the right action is the one in which maximises the overall "good". One of the developers of classical utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, believed that an act can be determined to be right or wrong by measuring the net amount of happiness with reference to its: intensity, duration, certainty, remoteness, fecundity, purity and extent.

For everyone affected by the proposed action, the total of all increases and decreases in pleasure/pain must be calculated while comparing this to alternative actions and determining which will generate the greatest "happiness" overall. If a proposed action results in more net positive consequences than the alternatives, then this action is morally the right choice. Meaning the agent is morally obliged to take this action and acting otherwise would be considered morally wrong.

When analysing a dilemma from an ethical perspective, firstly all stakeholders must be identified as well as the consequences had by each. The Conflicted Data Analyst dilemma includes four main stakeholders: yourself, the Cottonworths company, the customers and the Department of

Defence.

Deciding not to leak the detail to the press will result in pain for yourself (low intensity) as you will be going against your own moral principles. Although you may experience some pleasure for deciding to share (low intensity) and staying true to your personal beliefs, you will also experience pain from the repercussions of breaching the company's policy (high intensity, long duration) and potentially hindering your future career.

The Cottonworths Company will experience pleasure if you decide not to share (low intensity) and all employees and shareholders will be able to benefit from the large profit the contract will bring. However, if details are leaked the company will experience pain as they will have to deal with backlash from the public and could suffer financially (medium intensity, short duration).

The customers of Cottonworths will experience pleasure (low intensity) if they are unaware of the new deal that has been made, continuing with their satisfaction of Cottonworths' purchaser program. However, pain will be experienced if they are made aware of the arrangement and their personal data is being accessed by a third party without their permission (medium intensity).

The Department of Defence will experience pleasure if you keep knowledge to yourself as they will be able to better detect terrorist activities (medium intensity). On the other hand, they will experience pain if the public is to find out about the secret contract (low intensity) resulting in distrust and potentially making it more difficult to detect such activities in the future.

Outcome/Consequence

Stakeholders

No. of Stakeholders

Scale

Not to Share

Scale

To Share

Change in Utility

You

1

-2

-2

-5

-5

-3

Cottonworths company (employees/shareholders)

1 000

+2

+2 000

-4

-4 000

-6 000

Customers

1 000 000

+1

+2 000 000

-3

-3 000 000

-5 000 000

Department of Defence

500

+5

+2 500

-2

-1 000

-3 500

+2 004 498

-3 005 005

Therefore, when applying the utilitarianism perspective, the action to be taken is to not leak the details to the press as it generates the greatest net positive consequences and least pain for all stakeholders involved.

Kantian Ethics

Kantian Ethics is a form of deontological ethics in which actions only have moral worth when they are motivated by 'good will'. Regardless of whether the consequences are good or bad, we only act morally if we act because it is the right thing to do. That is, even if our actions continuously result in bad consequences, we can still act morally if we are acting in accordance with moral duty. Kant called this duty the 'Categorical Imperative' – it applies in all situations and involves the following two formulations.

1. Universal acceptability – 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that should become a universal law'.
2. Respect – 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means'.

Kant stated that each action must first be considered as a maxim, and to then be universalised. This would make the first action, "I will not leak details to the press, even if it exploits customers to increase profits". Then universalised it becomes, "Everyone will keep inside knowledge to themselves and exploit customers in order to increase profits". These are not contradictory statements, although they are irrational in the sense that there is a contradiction in will as no rational person would want this situation. When considering the second action, "I will share details to the press, even though I will have to admit to breaching contract". Universally it becomes, "Everyone will breach contract and leak details to the press". In this case, universalized maxim is contradictory. If everyone breaches contracts then contracts will not bind anyone, in which case they cannot be breached.

Thus, according to Kantian ethics, neither action is more ethical than the other as they both fail Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Unlike the two previous perspectives, Aristotle's ethical approach focuses not on individual actions but rather on the agent and their character. This approach called 'virtue ethics' has four elements that must be considered:

1. Function, goals and the good
2. Flourishing
3. Virtues
4. Developing the virtues

According to Aristotle's approach, the first step is to identify a function. Applying this, we know that you are a data analyst for a supermarket chain and their primary role is to gather and

interpret data in order to provide insights to better a business. The 'virtues' of a good analyst include good problem-solving skills as well as possessing honesty in order to produce reliable data to help improve the business. Aristotle argued that the ultimate human goal is flourishing and that this is best expressed as acting in accordance with these virtues.

In Aristotle's third element of virtue ethics he provided what is called the 'doctrine of the mean'. According to this, each virtue or excellence represents an appropriate response in an area that is an intermediate between two extremes, one is 'deficient' and the other being 'excessive'. For example if you decide to leak details to the press and subsequently implicate yourself, you would display moral virtues of honesty as you are making the customers aware that their personal information is at risk, as well as courage as you are prepared to face the consequences of your actions. You would also exhibit the intellectual virtue of knowledge in this scenario as you are aware of the company policies. On the other hand, if you were to keep the inside knowledge to yourself and exploit customers to gain profit, you would not be displaying any of the moral virtues and only that of the intellectual virtue, knowledge as you are aware of company policy.

Therefore, according to virtue ethics the action to be taken is to share the information to the press as it displays more moral virtues.

Recommendations

From analysing this ethical scenario against the three frameworks it can be seen that there are moral reasons for choosing either option which forms the dilemma. However, it is recommended that you keep the inside knowledge to yourself and subsequently share the customer information with an outside party. This is because it provides the greatest overall pleasure for the stakeholders involved and avoids punishment for yourself.

While applying the frameworks it was found that each have their own strengths and limitations which should be considered. Utilitarianism for example is quite simple and provides an unbiased method of reaching a solution but can also be strict, not allowing for much flexibility. The same can be said for Kantian ethics, however this can also form a foundation of human rights. The strengths of virtue ethics are that it provides a broad moral framework and does not assume that all decisions can be resolved by following a rule. Although it does not provide enough guidance for actions or consider dilemmas where virtues conflict.

This should all be taken into account when deciding which action is best to solve the ethical dilemma, however, it is recommended that you keep the knowledge to yourself even though you will be sharing customer information with a third party.