

Commentary on the ACM Code of Ethics

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Abstract

A report summarizing the most important aspects of the ACM Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice. [1] Along with a critique as to aspects that seem unreasonable and an assessment of the code's applicability to computer science students today.

1 Introduction

The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) is one of the primary professional organizations for computer scientists. They publish a code of ethics [1] which they expect all members to abide by. It is broken into four main sections.

1. Fundamental ethical considerations
2. Professional conduct
3. Leadership guidelines
4. Compliance principles

2 The Principle

The concept of a code of ethics is certainly an admirable one. One of the most disturbing developments accompanying the rise of industrialization and technology has been the way that the accompanying stratification of society has allowed individuals to lose touch with the consequences of their actions.

Pragmatically, it is not particularly meaningful. Research into moral development [2] suggests that individuals who would be operating at the level outlined in

this document (Kohlberg 4-5) will more than likely already be operating from an internalized moral model and the majority of people operating from a less developed stage will likely not internalize the document.

I suppose it is useful though in situations like this to help people have a larger context for what their actions are. Many people may not have considered that their work as programmers may have far reaching effects on the world at large.

3 Specificity

The document is too specific at times. With passages like:

Commitment to ethical professional conduct is expected of every member (voting members, associate members, and student members) of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM).

and

This principle prohibits use of computing technology in ways that result in harm to any of the following: users, the general public, employees, employers.

It reads like an algorithm. This level of specificity is dangerous in a field which is highly dependent on individual circumstances for reasoning. I think that it would be improved in some places with more general language. In many ways it almost sounds like it had multiple authors since some sections are decidedly general:

This principle concerning the quality of life of all people affirms an obligation to protect fundamental human rights and to respect the diversity of all cultures. An essential aim of computing professionals is to minimize negative consequences of computing systems, including threats to health and safety.

I like it though when they give specific examples which might actually happen in the work environment. I think that helps tie in the abstract principles to the real world in a way that may help people recognize the authors intent better. In particular I like the focus on recognizing the repercussions of actions and the awareness that upholding an ethical code may have undesirable personal consequences.

4 Intellectual Property

There are a variety of issues in the modern world where ethical concerns over intellectual property conflict with other concerns. I think that a blanket statement

agreeing to respect all intellectual property laws regardless of circumstance in naïve.

As a computer scientist though I recognize that pretty much all of the work that I produce in my life will be intellectual. I recognize that the system of laws we have protects me and I agree with Kant on the importance of categorical imperatives in determining actions that are sustainable within a society.

5 Excellence

From the section on professional behavior I could not agree more with the statement that “Excellence is perhaps the most important obligation of a professional”. From both working professionally and on projects with my peers it is extremely frustrating to see quality of work being sacrificed continually to avoid work. In the marketplace it was more reasonable since there were always encroaching deadlines, but at school I think that excellence and professionalism should get much more emphasis.

In a way I am uncomfortable with my position on this issue. I recognize that I enjoy learning and it is something that comes easily to me. Designing software is something that I would continue to do even if I had no monetary motivation. Given that I enjoy it, how fair is it of me to require the same standards of those who do this as a job rather than a passion.

I could go on at length about the ethical implications of professional competence on ethical ramifications of work, but since I am already past my limit I will refrain . . .

6 Summary

All in all I like the document and agree with it. I like the Thoreau-esque civil disobedience stuff in the professional practice section. Having worked in industry some I know how the bottom line can sometimes cloud the larger picture. In particular I liked the statement that:

If a member does not follow this code by engaging in gross misconduct, membership in ACM may be terminated.

While I recognize the limitation of overly idealized positions I think that having individuals and organizations stating and upholding a set of ideals is useful to the overall ethical development of society.

References

- [1] Association for Computing Machinery. **ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct**, Task Force for the Revision of the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. 1992.
- [2] Kohlberg, Lawrence. **The Meaning and Measurement of Moral Development**. 1979 Heinz Werner Lecture Series.