

4

Recognizing Ethical Issues in Technical Communication



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

- Recognize ethical dilemmas and understand that they are not always black and white
- Realize how ethics are often compromised by workplace pressures
- Avoid various types of ethical abuses

Technical communication does not occur in a void. It happens in the world of human beings, politics, and social conditions, a world in which we regularly face ethical dilemmas that balance our sense of what is right against a decision that may be more efficient, profitable, or better for the company.

ETHICS, TECHNOLOGY, AND COMMUNICATION

Ethical questions often revolve around topics related to technology. For example, a new computer chip that secretly collects personal information about a person's Websurfing habits presents a privacy dilemma. Should people be allowed to choose whether to have this information collected? Some would say yes, but in the United States, few laws address personal privacy at this level. So the decision becomes less a legal one than an ethical one. The communication about this product (a press release announcing it or a user's manual that accompanies the computer) plays a central role in this ethical dilemma. Should the technical writer include this information, exclude it altogether, or deemphasize it by using a small font?

These are not simple questions. Taking an ethical stance requires a personal decision on your part as to how to weigh your ethical and moral beliefs against the realities of the job. This stance requires you to consider the effects of your decisions on the people who use your product, on your company, on society at large, and on your job. Sometimes standing your ground on an ethical issue may mean losing your job or suffering retaliation from coworkers.

Typical ethical dilemmas

Ethical decisions are not always "black and white"

TYPES OF ETHICAL CHOICES

Virtually all areas of science and technology are involved in issues of communication and ethics. Here are a few examples:

- *Medical technologies*, such as genetic testing, raise questions about personal privacy and medical insurance.
- *Banking and retail operations*, which increasingly collect personal information on consumers, raise concerns about how this information is used and who has access to it.
- *Environmental pollutants*, such as pesticides or smokestack output, raise serious questions about the long-term health of the planet.

In your own communication, you will often face ethical decisions—about how much information to include, how much to leave out, how to word an issue, or how to shape the information for your audience. Note how the memo from David Michem in Figure 4.1 sounds completely well-reasoned and persuasive. An employee reading the memo, especially one with an existing medical condition, might go straight to the company Web site and sign up for a Medical History Card. But in his desire to make the card program a success, Michem has provided

FIGURE 4.1
An unethical document

Note the misleading omission of information about employee confidentiality.


Andrews & McNeel

MEMORANDUM

To: All Employees
From: David Michem, Health Benefits Manager *D.M.*
Date: November 10, 20XX
Subject: *Medical History Card Program*

Last week, you received a brochure about the new Medical History Cards (MHCs) available through the Human Resources Department. I encourage you to enroll in the card program for a variety of reasons:

- **MHCs ensure that all employees receive safe and efficient health care.** Whether you have a serious medical condition, take a prescription medication, have an allergy, or none of the above, MHCs instantly provide medical personnel with personalized medical data during an emergency or routine visit.
- **The cards are free to all Andrews and McNeel employees.** Any employee at Andrews and McNeel—whether full-time, part-time, or contract—may enroll in the program and receive a card free of charge.
- **Enrolling in the MHC program is easy.** Simply go to <http://www.andrews-mcneel.com/hr/mhc> to enroll in the program and fill out the requested personal and medical information to be uploaded to your card.
- **MHCs contain much more information than standard medical ID bracelets.** While an emergency bracelet may only provide basic information, such as the fact that a person is diabetic, MHCs hold your complete medical data, including emergency contact information, prescription information, and so on.
- **MHCs are easy to update.** If your medical information changes (for example, you are prescribed a new medication or your emergency contact information changes) simply update that information online. You will receive a replacement card within 5 business days.

Please take advantage of this program by re-reading your brochure or simply going to the Human Resources MHC Web page above to learn more. This is an excellent benefit not offered at many companies. We strongly encourage you to participate.

cc: Elizabeth Sanchirico-Edwards, Director of Human Resources

employees with no information about confidentiality in his memo. Will the company have access to personal and medical information when employees sign up via the Andrews and McNeel Web site? Will the information be password-protected? Will third parties have access to this information? By omitting this information from the memo, Michem has been misleading, as reasonable as his memo may sound. In the end, communication is never neutral but instead always carries some type of consequence.

HOW WORKPLACE PRESSURES AFFECT ETHICAL VALUES

Usually, ethical rules are broken not because people are dishonest but because they feel pressure to bend or break the rules. More than 50 percent of managers surveyed nationwide feel “pressure to compromise personal ethics for company goals” (Golen et al. 75). To save face, escape blame, or get ahead, anyone might feel obliged to say what other people want to hear or to suppress or downplay bad news. Figure 4.2 depicts how workplace pressures to “succeed at any cost” can influence ethical values.

Despite outside pressures, however, everyone must maintain ethical standards at all times on the job. Unethical decisions can harm a company’s reputation and bottom line. More importantly, unethical decisions can compromise the safety and welfare of workers and customers. When an instruction manual is written and vital safety information is purposely omitted to save on the cost of printing, for example, people can be injured.

Ethics are often compromised by outside pressure

Why ethics matter

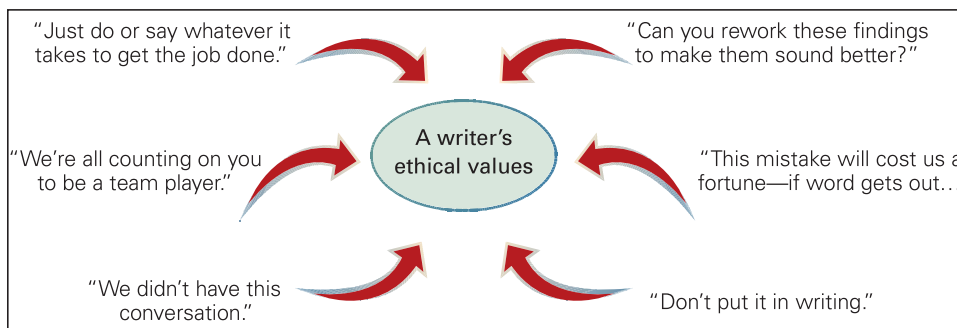


FIGURE 4.2
How workplace pressures can influence ethical values

RECOGNIZING AND AVOIDING ETHICAL ABUSES

Following are some of the major examples of unethical communication in the workplace.

- **Plagiarizing the work of others.** Technical communicators may feel pressure from upper management to produce results quickly and may be tempted to cut corners. Workplace plagiarism occurs when a person claims the work of someone else as one’s own, without citing or even mentioning the original source. Plagiarism may also happen in collaborative work, as when a team leader claims all the credit for the work of team members.
- **Falsifying or fabricating information.** Outside pressure to produce results that others seek may tempt people to distort information. For example, research data might be manipulated or invented by a scientist seeking grant money. Developments in fields such as biotechnology often occur too rapidly to allow

Types of ethical abuses

for adequate peer review of articles before they are published, thereby leading to the release of information that isn't verifiably correct ("Misconduct Scandal" 2).

- **Suppressing or downplaying information.** Withholding information is just as unethical as supplying false information. For example, a report author may purposely fail to mention an important study that contradicts what he or she wants to prove. Or a company may fail to inform the public about a safety hazard in one of its products—or, if the hazard is revealed, may downplay its importance.
- **Exaggerating claims.** Organizations that have a stake in a particular technology (e.g., bioengineered foods) may be especially tempted to exaggerate its benefits, potential, or safety and to downplay its risks. If your organization depends on outside funding (e.g., defense or space industry), you might find yourself pressured to make unrealistic promises.
- **Using visual images that conceal the truth.** Pictures are generally more powerful than words and can easily distort the real meaning of a message through manipulation. For example, an individual might create a pie chart that paints a more optimistic picture than the data indicate by distorting the sizes of the pie pieces. Or a TV commercial for a prescription drug may list its drastic side effects while showing images of smiling, healthy people, thus downplaying the dangers. Photo editing software makes it especially easy to manipulate images.
- **Stealing or divulging proprietary information.** Information that originates in a specific company is the exclusive intellectual property of that company. Proprietary information includes company records, product formulas, test and experiment results, surveys financed by clients, market research, plans, specifications, and minutes of meetings (Lavin 5). In theory, such information is legally protected, but it remains vulnerable to sabotage, theft, or leaks to the press. Fierce competition among rival companies for the very latest intelligence gives rise to theft or unethical divulging of such information.
- **Misusing electronic information.** Ever-increasing amounts of personal information are stored in databases (by schools, governments, credit card companies, insurance companies, pharmacies), and all employers, of course, keep data about their employees. How we combine, use, and share all of this electronic information raises questions about privacy. If you are designing a Web site, for example, should you create a page that asks customers for their name, address, and other personal information without providing information about how your company intends to use that information? Most Web sites have links to privacy policies that allow customers to learn more about the company's approach to privacy. The lack of such a policy could be considered an ethical breach.
- **Exploiting cultural differences.** Both individuals and organizations can exploit the vulnerabilities of various cultural groups through manipulation or deception. For instance, one employee of a company might exploit another's English-language limitations for personal gain. So too, an organization might

exploit clients for whom the culture places greater emphasis on interpersonal trust than on lawyers or legal wording.

To avoid ethical abuses, follow the guidelines provided by professional organizations in your field (e.g., see the American Medical Writers Association Code of Ethics in Figure 4.3), and use the Strategies on page 72.

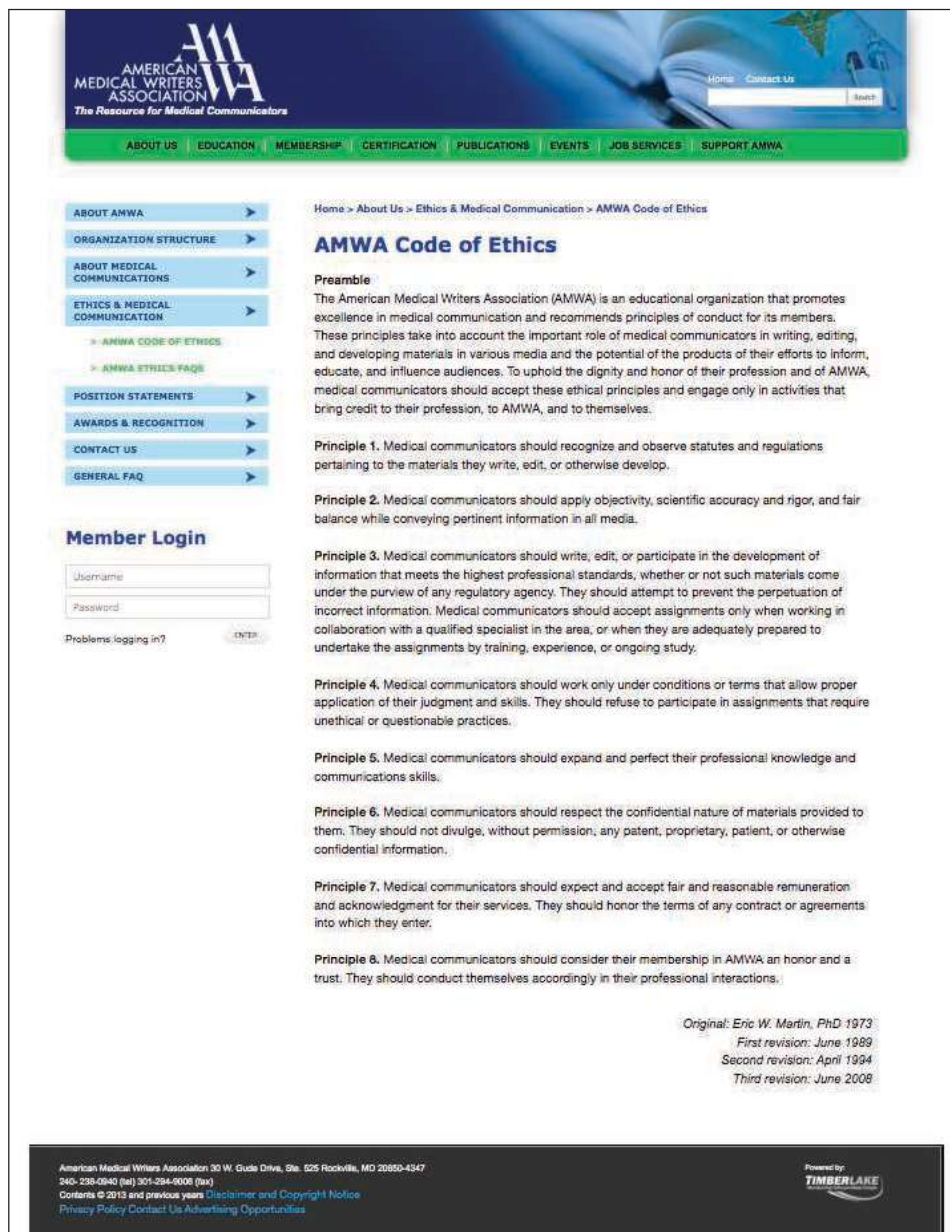


FIGURE 4.3
A code of ethics from a professional organization

Source: American Medical Writers Association



STRATEGIES for Avoiding Ethical Abuses

- ▶ **Always cite your sources if the information or data are not your own.** For specific advice on avoiding plagiarism and citing outside sources, see Appendix A.
- ▶ **Give the audience everything it needs to know.** To accurately see things as you do, people need more than just a partial view. Don't bury readers in needless details, but do make sure they get all the facts and get them straight.
- ▶ **Give people a clear understanding of what the information means.** Even when all the facts are known, they can be misinterpreted. Try to ensure that readers understand the facts as you do. If you are not certain about your own understanding, say so.
- ▶ **Never manipulate information or data in your writing or in your visuals.** If you encounter data that contradict what you want to say, include and interpret those data honestly. Likewise, do not make your case via exaggeration, understatement, sugarcoating, or any other distortion or omission.
- ▶ **Use common sense or follow your company's confidentiality guidelines.** If you suspect that information may be confidential, assume that it is or ask the appropriate personnel to clarify.
- ▶ **Do not exploit cultural inequalities or manipulate international readers.** Try to be fair. When producing a document for an international audience, be especially careful about using simple and honest language and visuals.
- ▶ **Constantly ask yourself, "Would I stand behind what I have created if I were held publicly accountable for it?"** If you would not, then chances are what you have written is unethical to some degree. It may be not entirely honest, fair, confidential, or safe.



CHECKLIST for Ethical Communication

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Use this checklist for any document you prepare or for which you are responsible.

ACCURACY

- ☐ Have I explored all sides of the issue and all possible alternatives?
- ☐ Do I provide enough information and interpretation for recipients to understand the facts as I know them?
- ☐ Do I avoid exaggeration, understatement, sugarcoating, or any distortion or omission that leaves recipients at a disadvantage?



CHECKLIST *continued***HONESTY**

- ☐ Do I make a clear distinction between what is certain and what is probable?
- ☐ Are my information sources valid, reliable, and relatively unbiased?
- ☐ Do I actually believe what I'm saying instead of advancing some hidden agenda?
- ☐ Would I still advocate this position if I were held publicly accountable for it?
- ☐ Do I inform people of the consequences or risks (as I am able to predict) of what I am advocating?
- ☐ Do I give candid feedback or criticism, if it is warranted?

FAIRNESS

- ☐ Am I reasonably sure this document will not harm innocent persons or damage their reputations?
- ☐ Am I respecting all legitimate rights to privacy and confidentiality?
- ☐ Am I distributing copies of this document to every person who has the right to know about it?
- ☐ Do I credit all contributors and sources of ideas and information?

Sources: Brownell and Fitzgerald (1992), p. 18; Bryan (1992), p. 87; Johannesen (1983), pp. 21–22; Larson (1995), p. 39; Unger (1982), pp. 39–46; Yoos (1979), pp. 50–55.

**APPLICATIONS****GENERAL APPLICATION****MyWritingLab™**

Find the professional code of ethics for your major or career. Divide into groups of three or four students, each of whom has a different major. Compare your professional codes, noting similarities and differences. Discuss why each code seems appropriate for that profession.

TEAM APPLICATION

In groups of two or three, locate a piece of technical communication (or use one provided by your instructor), and evaluate its ethical stance. Is the information presented in such a way that ideas or facts are exaggerated or suppressed? Are any cultural issues exploited? Share your thoughts in class, and explain how your team would redo the information.

GLOBAL APPLICATION

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Counterfeiting, sometimes known as “intellectual property piracy,” has become a major point of tension between the United States and many developing nations. Counterfeit products ranging from computer chips and pharmaceuticals to cigarettes and cell phones now flood markets in Asia and South America, and many may even be found on the streets of New York and other U.S. cities.

Use your library and the Internet to do some preliminary reading about the problems of counterfeit products. What are the advantages and disadvantages, both economically and politically, of trying to crack down on unauthorized copy-cat products? Why do some countries do little to police such piracy while others, including the United States, view it as a major priority?

Write a brief report analyzing the ethical, economic, and political issues that influence the global debate on counterfeiting, and present your findings in a brief oral presentation to your class.

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATION

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Social media has created new ethical challenges in the workplace. For example, people use Facebook to post about personal activities and assume that this information is only viewable by friends. But during a job interview, a person may be surprised to discover that a posting intended for friends was also discovered by the potential employer. Should the employer have looked at a person’s social media postings? Also, the use of content from Twitter or blogs as the basis for workplace decisions could result in unintended consequences if that information turns out to be inaccurate.

Do an online search on “ethics and social media.” Select two or three articles or sources that are highly credible (e.g., published in a journal or magazine or as part of an organization’s code of ethics). Meet with two other students in class and share your findings. Give a brief presentation in class describing the main points made in these sources.

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Visit Chapter 4, *Recognizing Ethical Issues in Technical Communication*, in MyWritingLab to complete this chapter’s applications, to explore this chapter’s overview, checklist, and flashcards, and to test your understanding of the chapter objectives.