

: *What are ethics and privacy issues related to using a DSS?*

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Using a decision support system (DSS) is sometimes associated with making hard choices, contested issues, and applying high standards. One set of issues that can create problems associated with building and using a DSS is easy to minimize or overlook. These issues relate to the ethics of using a specific DSS or privacy issues raised by using specific data in a DSS. Both managers and MIS professionals need to be sensitive to ethics and privacy issues.

One might think that a DSS is ethically neutral and that project proposals shouldn't raise any moral or value issues. This view ignores the important role that principles and values play in making decisions. When model-driven or knowledge-driven DSS are constructed, developers make assumptions that can have ethical impacts on choices. For example, establishing a criterion or weight in a model may exclude inappropriately certain alternatives. Also, some Decision Support Systems decisions are considered so value-laden that many people would be uncomfortable with developing a DSS to assist a decision maker. For example, supporting decision analysis associated with euthanasia or having an abortion would involve serious moral or ethical issues. One cannot specify all of the ethical issues that might be relevant to a specific DSS proposal, but once a proposal reaches the feasibility stage, the project sponsor needs to specifically address the ethical issues associated with the project. Open, transparent debate about the issues and dilemmas is important.

There are moral distinctions associated with DSS. DSS builders should anticipate any religious or ethical objections and attempt to minimize or avoid them. For example, identifying conflicting objectives for a system may indicate ethical problems. Also, the purpose of the DSS must be ethical. Rationalizing potential objections as unimportant or irrelevant is not acceptable. Rather seek to resolve ethical issues appropriately.

From an ethical perspective, DSS builders must understand that information privacy is important. A DSS builders should verify that any personal data and information that is used is provided voluntarily. Voluntary means the person or subject of interest understands that he/she has control prior to collection over how and what personal data and information will be gathered and used. In general, there should be informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and a guarantee that no harm will occur.

Privacy concerns are also easy to ignore during the evaluation of a DSS proposal. In many societies people expect that certain personal and behavioral

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information about them will be kept private. For example, in the United States, many people assume that religious donations and hospital records will be kept private. This information belongs to the person and doesn't belong to a company, the public, or the government. Managers need to insure that data used in DSS does not infringe on the privacy rights of individuals. The exact extent of privacy rights for employees, customers, and other data providers is not always clearly defined. In general, unless there is a clearly compelling reason to risk violating an individual's privacy, the "fence" to protect privacy of data should be higher and stronger than any minimum requirements.

Ethical decision making creates trust for the decision maker and for his/her organization.

This column is edited and updated from Power (2002) pp. 207-208.

References

Power, D. J., *Decision Support Systems: Concepts and Resources for Managers*, Westport, CT: Greenwood/Quorum Books, 2002. pp. 34-35.

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