

# CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

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## Always Thinking, Always Watching

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By Douglas E. Welch

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Due to the events of the past 12 months, business ethics, especially in the high-tech arena, have been on my mind quite a bit. We have seen ethical lapses approaching the level of those in 1929, but the effects of these lapses have gone far beyond those of the notorious stock market crash. As companies have become larger, the effect they have on the economy, both good and bad, grows tremendously. Worse still, small lapses in ethics can grow exponentially. There is no telling the damage you might cause if you aren't constantly vigilant about your ethics, especially regarding your high-tech career.

### Testing Ethics

I find that in my line of work as a high-tech consultant, teacher and computer coach, there are many opportunities for testing my ethics. Potential conflicts of interest—something almost always ignored in today's business world—are probably my greatest concern. Despite the fact that I could easily sell computers to my clients, I avoid it. I find that there is too great a concern of recommending unneeded upgrades and additions to a customer's computer when I am also the provider of those upgrades.

To avoid this, I have personally decided not to deal in computers or peripherals. This is not to say that you cannot be both dealer and consultant, but I can almost guarantee that there will come a time when it will test the trust between you and your clients. This has one of two results: Your relationship with the customer will be made stronger, or it will collapse entirely. It all depends on the depth of your relationship in the past.

### Privacy

In high-tech careers, you also face the issue of customer privacy. As a high-tech worker, you are often privy to a large amount of privileged information, both personal and business-related. Abusing such information, in any fashion, is not only ethically wrong, but could lead to immense legal problems, whether this information relates to business dealings or a client's personal life.

If you come across private information, it is important

to keep it private. This is one area where one mistake could mean the end of your career. I make a conscious effort to avoid all private information whenever I can. If papers are left on the desk, I cover them with my notebook or toolkit. If I am using personal files for troubleshooting or testing, I always ask the client before I open up a particular file. You don't want to be reading notes about a messy divorce or company failure. You don't want to be tempted about insider trading or any other abuses of the information.

Ethical lapses are easier to avoid if you avoid private information entirely. There are simply some things you do not want to know about your clients.

### Be Aware

You must always be constantly aware of your ethical decisions. It is too easy, over time, to become lax or affected by the ethical choices of others. I find myself saying to my young son, time and time again, "You cannot misbehave just because someone else does." We are all responsible for our own ethics. If someone decides to abandon his or her ethics, it does not give you permission to abandon yours. You need to guard against the erosion of your ethics, both personal and professional. It is a constant battle, but one of the most important battles of your career.

In situations such as those above, it is up to you to decide your ethical limits and the effect they will have, not just today, but tomorrow as well. To me, it isn't the individual lapses in ethics that cause the damage, it is the combination of all those lapses over time. The cumulative results of conflicts of interest, bad business practices or ethical erosion will eventually catch up to you and your business. As we can see in the examples of Enron, Global Crossing and others, these ethical problems may not harm you immediately, but it is only a matter of time.

No one is perfect—far from it. Our lives and careers require constant attention and vigilance. We have to watch our actions, compare them to our ideal ethics, and judge how near or far we are to that ideal. It is only through this direct action that we can hope to achieve the best life and best career possible. □

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