

You are a project manager for a Company that develops software for a wide range of applications. At lunch time you stop by the desk of Ray, a software engineer who works under you, to leave him a note, and find him seated at his desk reading a pornographic magazine. The desk is part of a cubicle enclosed on three sides. Ray's cubicle is the first in a row of three cubicles off of the main aisle in the office. People walking down the main aisle cannot see Ray at his desk; they could only see him if they turn off the main aisle and walk past the open side of his cubicle. Ray, who has been with the Company for six months, has done uniformly superb technical work. He gets along well with other members of the project team, all of whom (like Ray) are male.

Describe how you would deal with this situation, and why?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It would be morally inappropriate for you to issue Ray a formal reprimand in this situation, or even to express your strong personal disapproval of the magazines he chooses to look at. Ray is on his lunch break. Furthermore, given the arrangement of work cubicles in the office space, he has an expectation of privacy, to the extent that people walking through the main aisle cannot see him at his desk. Nothing in Ray's behavior indicates he intended to offend anyone. Nonetheless, you should not ignore the incident. Even though no women currently work with Ray on his project team, you or another team member, could stop by his cubicle at lunch, accompanied by a woman – e.g. another employee working in another department, an outside consultant, sales representative, etc. You should point this out to Ray, and make sure he appreciates how uncomfortable many women would feel when a man talking to them has just finished looking at a pornographic magazine.

Case from the March 6, 1997 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1997.