

IPRO Team Ethics Assignment

Ethics Case Writing

Description of Exercise

In order to explore ethical issues relevant directly to an IPRO project, teams will be asked to write a case study that explores one ethical problem that needs to be considered and addressed as part of their project.

Students, as a team, will participate in a brainstorming session where they will be asked to think about the potential issues that should be considered as part of their project. This could include issues such as privacy, public safety, intellectual property, product liability, applicable laws or ethical guidelines (like those protecting human subjects participating in research) that need to be considered, issues relating to how the team works together, responsibilities to project sponsors, local communities, etc. For help in this, please feel free to contact the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions (CSEP) to have someone attend this brainstorming session.

After all ideas have been put on the table, the team will try to narrow down the list to the most important handful of issues. The team will divide into groups of 3-5 students; each group will then have the chance to pick which ethical topic they would like to write about. They will then have three options for this exercise:

1. Adopt an existing case study related to your IPRO project.
2. Find a recent story that relates to your project in the news discussing an ethical issue, and use the facts from the article to write a case study.
3. Develop an imaginary scenario, and write a case study describing the details of the situation.

The final result for all three options should be a one to two page case study highlighting an ethical concern or issue directly related to your topic. Cases should be accompanied by two to three questions that would help a reader recognize the ethical issues that loom large in the case. Writing the case should also require some research, and a "further reading" list of sources should be cited at the end of the case. For example, if you are writing a case on conflict of interest, your citations may include a reading you found explaining what conflict of interest is, an example of a conflict of interest policy developed by a company, and a news article you found describing a real-life instance of conflict of interest.

If you would like to see an example of a case study, please see a case (attached at end of this document) based on the BP oil spill of 2010, or contact the Ethics Center Library for more examples or help in developing your case.

Student Competency Level

Advanced. Students have a good grasp ethical issues inherent in project, and can clearly articulate main questions and concerns that exist.

Time Commitment

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| 30 | Minutes spent as a team brainstorming session about ethical issues in project. |
| 1 | Hour doing background research and discussing ideas for the case study. |
| 1 | Hour writing the case. |
| 1 | Hour editing the case, clarifying missing facts, getting feedback from group members. |
| 15-20 | Minutes (per case writing group) presenting cases to IPRO team as a whole, discussing the cases. |

Tasks Involved

Writing a good case study is often more difficult than it first seems, so it pays to break down the work into a series of steps and perhaps even divide up these steps among group members.

1. **Brainstorm.** What ethical topics does your IPRO project involve? Assign topics to groups of 3-5 students.
2. **Research.** What are some of the concerns surrounding your topic? Who are the stakeholders involved? What laws, guidelines or other standards govern how major problems or questions in this area should be addressed?
3. **Find examples.** Locate some examples of case studies already written on your topic (see a collection of ethics case studies at <http://ethics.iit.edu/eelibrary/>), do some research in major newspapers and magazines for stories covering your topic, or read some articles about your topic and begin thinking what kind of scenario you want to write.
4. **Brainstorm.** Once you have an idea about the kind of scenario with which you want to work, talk with your team members and take notes. Who are the main protagonists in the story? What is the ethical question or concern they are facing? What are the surrounding details that complicate this situation?
5. **Write up the case.** The case could be written about your IPRO, about a similar project, or be about a similar topic but set in a completely different environment, such as in a workplace or a committee meeting. The important thing is that the case highlights one or more aspects of your topic, though it could involve many issues, such as professional responsibility, public safety, and employer/employee relationships. If you are adapting a case, see if you can add details that make the case more relevant to your IPRO project. For instance, you may find a medical ethics case that can be adapted to look at ethical responsibilities in engineering. If you are looking at news articles, see if you can find one aspect of that real-life event to focus on, such as choices that need to be made by one individual or group of individuals as in the BP case below.
6. **Editing and the review process.** Have all the members of your group read the case and made suggestions. Are there crucial details missing? How can the case be reworked to help readers think about the nuances of the ethical concern at hand? What kinds of questions do you want to ask about the case? Feel free to contact the Ethics Center Library for help with this, along with help in finding references to include with the case.
7. **Case Discussion.** Hand out copies of the case to your IPRO team, and hold a short discussion about the questions you ask about the case. Based on this, you may want to edit your case before you post the final version on the iGroups web site.

Required Deliverable

An ethics case study, 1-2 pages in length, including questions and cited sources. This deliverable should be uploaded to iGroups by the deadline set each semester by the IPRO Program.

Case Example: BP

A week after the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, you are hired by BP to act as a consultant on the cleanup of a section of the Louisiana coastline. At an early meeting of the expert advising committee, one of your colleagues, Dr. Sanderson, suggests that dispersants can be used to help break up the dense oil that is continuing to accumulate on the surface of the ocean and making its way towards the shore. He suggests using the product line Corexit, as BP already has a relationship with the manufacturer of this family of dispersants and can get a large amount for a reasonable price. He further urges adopting this line of action as a large amount of the chemical has already been shipped to other parts of Louisiana, so it is readily on hand. At the end of the meeting, all the committee members agree that rapid action is needed, as the oil is quickly moving closer to the shoreline.

That evening, you talk about this situation with a friend of yours, an environmental scientist who expressed interest in your work on the oil spill. When she hears that your committee is thinking about recommending Corexit, she warns you that the product line is no longer approved for use in Britain because laboratory tests found the dispersant harmful to sea life that inhabits rocky shores. The next day you do some research and talk to a representative from Nalco Corporation, the manufacturer of Corexit who tells you that these findings likely have no relevance in the current situation, as in Louisiana the dispersant will be used in the open sea, not on the shore. However, you are worried about the sheer amount of the dispersant that is going to be used, and that some of it might get to the shoreline. The representative tells you that this should not be a problem and directs you to the safety information sheets on Corexit available off of the Nalco web site. When reading these sheets, you find out that a number of the ingredients in the dispersant are labeled as “proprietary”. In an answer to an email you send, the Nalco representative tells you that some ingredients are listed as proprietary to protect the company’s trade secrets.

The next day, you communicate all of this information to your fellow committee members by email, knowing that you have a second meeting scheduled in two days time. At this meeting, the expert committee is going to have to decide on what recommendation to make.

Questions

Who are the major stakeholders in this situation?

What problems is the proprietary nature of some of these ingredients in Corexit likely to pose? Is Nalco ethically justified in keeping these ingredients secret?

As a committee member, whose interests should you be representing? What are the major factors and concerns you need to consider and communicate to your fellow committee members?

What recommendation should the committee make, and why? Be sure to justify your answer.

References

Case based on facts drawn from New York Times article, “In Gulf of Mexico, Chemicals Under Scrutiny.” May 5, 2010. Elisabeth Rosenthal. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/06/science/earth/06dispersants.html>

Nalco. “COREXIT Technology”. Nalco North American Web site. 2010. Last viewed December 10, 2010. <http://www.nalco.com/applications/corexit-technology.htm>

Weil, Vivian and John W. Snapper (1989). *Owning Scientific and Technical Information: Values and Ethical Issues*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press. pp. 3-9.

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