

Beyond Netiquette

■ The Computer Ethics Institute is staging its second wave, which it hopes will include auditing companies and building a definitive resource library

By Shannon Henry
Staff Writer

A decade ago, a Maryland minister and an IBM executive member of his congregation started talking about businesses' social responsibility in the world of computers.

That conversation planted the seed for The Computer Ethics Institute, officially formed in 1991 and known for its 10 commandments of computer ethics and its yearly conference at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution.

According to its founder, Rev. John Boyles, the institute is ready to take on more responsibility itself. With computer ethics issues — from copyright to pornography — popping up in every business, the institute is staging its second wave. "We're poised to do all kinds of things," said Boyles. "People are looking for leadership in this area."

Plans include offering an audit service, designed to be an objective analysis of a business' policies and practices. Corporations would pay a fee for the ethics expert's analysis. The institute would also house a computer ethics resource center, complete with on-line consulting and research service, as well as a case-study repository for ethical dilemmas companies have experienced. An annual award would also be given to a company that in the previous year had "advanced the ethical use of information technology."

The institute would address all areas of computer ethics, including such unclear issues as misrepresentation on the Internet. This is a chance for businesses to lead by example, Boyles said. The Internet, he said, "shouldn't be a lawless frontier."

Of course, these new plans require money, which is something the Computer Ethics Institute doesn't have. Contributions, though they come from MCI, Washington, D.C.; Merrill Lynch, New York; and Pfizer, New York, are so far drops in the bucket. "The reality is that all of us involved have been doing this as a labor of love. We have no actual office, no full-time staff," Boyles said.

However, Boyles is convinced there are companies that want to support the development of a more ethical computer society.

That's a tough sell, said C. Dianne Martin, an associate professor in the electrical engineering and computer sciences department at George Washington University, Washington, D.C. Businesses want to pay for audits only when it looks like they might have broken a regulation, said Martin, who teaches an ethics course on computers and society. "Why would companies ask for that kind of service unless they are under fire?" she

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asked. While she said the cause is admirable, she doubts many companies would volunteer to fork over fees to make sure they are acting ethically.

Martin said she uses the institute's commandments in her class, but said she's not sure who else is paying attention to them. "If you are a computer professional, you belong to a professional society, and if you are a computer user, why should you care what the Computer Ethics Institute says?"

Civil Libertarians, who say government and groups like the institute should leave technology alone, think the issues are too complex to be solved by the computer ethics commandments.

Even Boyles admits the general public waxes and wanes in its interest in technological social responsibility. "You get a flurry of publicity when there's a [computer hacker such as Kevin] Mitnick and then it goes back to normal," he said.

While he's facing financial and philosophical obstacles, Boyles said he expects to succeed. "We're convinced there are all kinds of people who will join us," Boyles said. "We can take control of the technology rather than the other way around." ■

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF COMPUTER ETHICS

- I. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.
- II. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.
- III. Thou shalt not snoop around other people's computer files.
- IV. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.
- V. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.
- VI. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.
- VII. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation.
- VIII. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.
- IX. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.
- X. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that show consideration and respect for your fellow humans.