

ENGINEERING ETHICS ESSAY CONTEST

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The issue posed by NSPE is certainly a timely one. Expansion of engineering markets to foreign countries is almost a foregone conclusion in order for firms to continue to prosper. While such ventures pose new and exciting technical challenges, they also present a different set of ethical challenges. This paper addresses the question of how professional engineers should respond when faced with practices different than those to which they are accustomed.

Three areas of concern have been mentioned in the NSPE example: local standards/codes, local licensing practices and contact with government officials. I do not believe that the first two pose nearly as much of a dilemma as the last one. I take this position because even within the United States, engineers are faced with varying standards and codes in different geographical locales. For example, seismic codes are more rigid in California, energy efficiency is more important in the Northeast and fire protection requirements are more stringent in an urban setting than rural. Engineers adapt their designs as necessary. While practicing in foreign countries, engineers should follow the applicable local codes just as they would do in the U.S. However, the Rules of Practice do state that an engineer's "primary obligation is to protect the safety, property and welfare of the public." With that precept held paramount, engineers are obligated to bring to the attention of local officials, any codes which in their opinion jeopardize these safety and health tenets and to only stamp drawings which provide an acceptable level of safety. On this point, there can be no compromise.

In terms of licensing laws and disciplinary procedures, the “Washington Accord” initiative as well as other initiatives from NAFTA are beginning to address just such issues. Engineers need to become versed in the local licensing procedures and respond accordingly. As the amount of international business continues to grow, I am sure organizations will publish guidelines to assist engineers in this effort and not allow local customs to become barriers to business. As time goes on, these criteria will surely become less and less of an impediment.

The third issue regarding dealings with government officials, in terms of gifts or other items of value, is much more problematic. It is understood that in many foreign countries the practice of providing gifts is ingrained in the local customs and is expected when conducting business. Since such a practice is essentially prohibited in this country, U.S. engineers are faced with a true ethical dilemma. But here the Rules of Practice are quite clear - engineers “shall not offer any gift or other valuable consideration in order to secure work.” It is clearly not ethical for a professional engineer to participate in this business practice. It simply crosses the standards line established under the Professional Obligations section of the Code. Engineers can not maintain the “highest standards of integrity”, while participating in such practices. A token gift of nominal value on the occasion of the start or finish of a large assignment is acceptable, but that is where it must end.

Lastly, is the question of what other ethical challenges might arise in different cultures - there could be many. For example, there could be significant issues arising in the areas of race, gender or religious affiliation in particular situations. While the Code does not actually have an anti-discrimination clause, the Preamble does clearly call for services to be provided with “fairness and

equity.” Before conducting business in a foreign country, the project team needs to become familiar with the local customs and decide whether they feel comfortable operating within whatever restrictions are normally in place in such an environment.

Heightened globalization of engineering practice certainly does create ethical challenges, but the Code of Ethics for Engineers, while only two pages long, is an appropriate guide to use in addressing these issues in a professional and uniform manner.

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