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The Case of the Troubled Computer Programmer

Author(s)

William J. Frey

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Description

A programmer is asked to install proprietary software in violation of the licensing agreement.

Body

You are a computer programmer working for a small business that provides specialized financial services to local, mostly small businesses. You have been working for company X for about six months. Recently X has been occupied with reengineering the inventory system of a local hardware chain, ABC Hardware. The objective is to enable ABC to keep better track of their inventory, to be more responsive to changes in customer demand, and to adopt a “just in time” strategy to reduce inventory.

Your supervisor calls you into his office. “Do you know of any existing software products to help ABC keep better track of its inventory?” You mention a particular product that you have worked with in another job and point out that ABC could use it without any modification. The only drawback, you point out, is that this software is somewhat expensive. Your supervisor leans back in his chair, puffs on his cigar and

says, "That's no problem. We have that software. Why don't you just install it on ABC's computers?"

You diplomatically indicate that this would violate the licensing agreement X has with the developers of the software. "Do it anyway," your supervisor says.

"Nobody's going to find out, and ABC is a very important client. We need to do all we can to keep them happy."

What should you do?

1. Go ahead and install the software on ABC's computers. After all, your supervisor is right: nobody will know what you have done. Furthermore, you haven't been working for this company very long and don't want to be branded a troublemaker.
2. Refuse to do it. Make it clear to your supervisor that he is putting you in a very difficult position, and you are not happy about it. It is illegal, and you don't have to do it. Period.
3. Go ahead and install the software. But be sure to cover yourself first by writing a memo that clearly states that this is illegal, and you are doing it because your supervisor has left you no choice. Establish the case that your supervisor is responsible for the act, and then send several people within the company copies of this memo, including your supervisor.
4. Discuss the matter confidentially and informally with another colleague, preferably another supervisor, possibly someone over your supervisor's head. If this person's reaction is good, then both of you can approach your supervisor and try to talk him out of this course of action. Also, have some concrete alternatives in mind that you can propose, such as using a less expensive program, getting the license for ABC and having X absorb part of the cost, or negotiating a deal with the owner of the program to extend the license to several users at a lower rate.
5. Your solution.

This scenario is based on a case that actually happened. Among the decision options listed above is the one actually taken.

Notes

(This case study was developed from a scenario provided by Olga Rosas-Velez, presented before the DOLCE workshop, summer 2000.)

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