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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Virginia Edgerton - (Barus Awardee 1979)

Author(s)

Stephen H. Unger

Description

Virginia Edgerton received the second Award for Outstanding Service in the Public Interest (now deemed the Carl Barus Award) given by the IEEE Society on Social Implications of Technology in 1979. This account of her story is excerpted from the book *Controlling Technology: Ethics and the Responsible Engineer*, by Stephen Unger.

Body

COMPUTERS AND POLICE CARS

The New York City Police Department has had in operation since the mid-1970s an online computerized police car dispatching system called SPRINT. A dispatcher, upon receiving a telephoned request for police assistance, enters the address to a computer via a remote terminal, and the computer responds within seconds by displaying the street coordinates and the location of the nearest patrol car. By cutting the response time to emergency calls, perhaps by a few minutes, for each of hundreds of calls per day, SPRINT may be presumed to have saved lives and improved police efficiency. As of 1977, the system had been operating successfully for several years.

At that time, a project was well under way to install another computer system to aid law enforcement. This system, called PROMIS, was to provide New York City prosecutors with on-line information, again via remote terminals, pertaining to ongoing cases-names and addresses of witnesses, hearing dates, and the like. This project was being managed by the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) or Circle Project, a committee of high-level city officials including the deputy mayor for criminal justice, the police commissioner, and, as chairman, Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau.

The committee employed a computer specialist as project director and early in 1977 engaged Virginia Edgerton, an experienced systems analyst, as senior information scientist to work under his supervision. Both were technically listed as consultants, although in practice they were full-time employees. No other computer experts were employed by the committee.

In the spring of 1977, Edgerton learned that the PROMIS system was to be run on the same computer that hosted SPRINT. Realizing the importance of a short response time for SPRINT, she expressed concern about the effect of loading the computer with an additional task. When she found no indication that the problem had been studied, she brought it to the attention of her superior. He disagreed with her view and, without providing any technical basis, instructed her to drop the matter. Edgerton then sought advice from the IEEE, and, after her supervisor rejected out of hand a memorandum calling for a study of the overload problem, decided that the hazard to the public safety required stronger action. She sent copies of a memorandum with a cover letter to the members of the Circle Committee. Immediately following this, she was discharged by the project director on the ground that she had, by communicating directly with the committee members, violated his orders. He also stated that the issues she had raised were in fact under continuing discussion with the police department computer staff.

The case was then investigated by the Working Group on Ethics and Employment Practices of the IEEE CSIT (I chaired the working group and the investigating committee-the other members were R. Jeffrey Bogumil and Joseph S. Kaufman) and subsequently reviewed by the newly formed IEEE Member Conduct Committee (the CSIT and MCC reports on this case are reproduced in Appendix III.) More is said about this process in a later chapter. At this point, suffice it to say that both groups agreed that Virginia Edgerton`s actions were fully justified by the IEEE Code of Ethics and that her treatment by her employer was unjustified. In 1979 she received

the second IEEE CSIT Award for Outstanding Service in the Public Interest.

Some additional facts and comments relative to this case are worth noting. First, the issue was not whether the performance of the SPRINT system would in fact have been degraded by the added load on the computer. Edgerton did not claim to know that this would happen. She was arguing that a proper regard for the public safety dictated that the question should be carefully investigated. A consultant brought in by CSIT to discuss the matter with her stated that questions of this kind are not easily answered and that it seemed reasonable to him that a study be made. Although the supervisor, and later another city official, claimed that the matter had been and continued to be under study, they cited no reports and named no individuals who were doing the work. According to Edgerton--and she was not contradicted by city officials when given the opportunity to do so--the police department staff had no analysts qualified for such work.

But even the question of whether a study was required is not the ethical issue. The point is that, in the judgment of a qualified professional, a study was called for in the interest of public safety and that this judgment was peremptorily overruled by the manager. There was no hearing of any kind, and no technically qualified (or for that matter any) individuals were brought in to listen to arguments, discuss the matter, and state their own views. On a matter of some importance, in an area of her responsibility, a qualified professional was being asked to accept an arbitrary ruling, given without justification and with no opportunity for appeal. Even in the DC-10 matter, there was at least a written response to Applegate's memorandum in which his superior stated why Applegate's recommendations were being rejected. (This is not to suggest that the response by Hurt dealt adequately with the issues or justified rejecting Applegate's recommendations.)

With respect to the technical issue involved, Edgerton's action may indeed have averted serious damage to the public interest. Although the precise reasons cannot be established, the fact is that the city did not place the additional load on the computer running SPRINT. There was, incidentally, no appeal process of any kind made available by the city to Edgerton. After her discharge, she formed a small company selling data processing services.

Notes

This story is an excerpt from:

- Unger, Stephen. Controlling Technology: Ethics and the Responsible Engineer. 2nd Ed., Wiley, 1994. Chapter 2 Section 4.

Contributor(s)

Stephen H. Unger

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Award Winners

Topics

Public Health and Safety

Employer/Employee Relationships

Discipline(s)

Computer Sciences

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences

Computer Engineering