

Author's Commentary on "What a Site!"

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This case may lead to several areas of discussion, for example, the use of computers in the work place, the implications of strict computer use policies, or even co-worker interactions. The case identifies some of the common conflicts that can arise in the workplace with regard to the use of computers.

At first glance, it may be tempting to lead the review in a direction that aims to define pornography; it is the writer's hope that the case will instead lead to a discussion of how computer use in the workplace can affect the work environment. It is hoped that the discussion will focus on how the questionable use of computers in the workplace affects co-workers and the institution's image. The case should also lead to consideration of how policies governing the use of computers can affect workers and how these policies would be implemented and enforced.

In this case study, three people have been immediately affected by the situation. Frank and Jessica have been placed in an awkward position, while Mark has been pinned as a suspect, which could affect his interoffice/lab relationships and lead to questions about his professionalism. Jessica and Frank may or may not be opposed to pornography, just as they may or may not be opposed to Mark looking at airfare quotes, religious sites or neo-Nazi sites. This point relates to the first question: Would it have mattered if other potentially controversial material had been viewed? Suppose Mark had been using his lunch hour or a Saturday evening to get some air fare quotes for a trip to Aruba. Would that have been an abuse of office/lab equipment? The problem is that we don't always agree on the boundaries of what is permissible to view at work. While it is difficult to agree on appropriate computer use in the workplace, it is important to have guidelines. The use of computers has a broad impact because it is possible for cyber-fingerprints to be traced, which could affect an institution as a whole.

In analyzing this case, it is important to identify the individuals and institutions immediately affected by this situation (Jessica, Frank and Mark) as well as those who

may be affected later (other co-workers, the head of the lab, the dean of the college, the university's image). Next, one should consider what course of action would be best. In devising a course of action, it is imperative to identify who will be affected by the course of action and what long- and short-term effects will result.

A comprehensive review should address the pros and cons of several courses of action. For example, it may be best for Jessica and Frank to approach Mark about his actions. In doing so, they will limit the exposure of this incident, and they may avoid further tarnishing Mark's reputation. Additionally, Jessica and Frank will reduce the probability that they will be required to testify publicly about their discovery. Unfortunately, this approach may not resolve the situation, and it may adversely affect the dynamics of the lab's social environment. Mark may feel he has been wrongfully accused, or he may feel awkward around his colleagues after such a confrontation.

An alternative approach is for Jessica and Frank to discuss the situation with their lab head. In this case, they may request anonymity, which may be comforting with respect to the social dynamics of the lab. A downside is that the lab head may view Jessica and Frank as being poor at problem solving and incapable of handling social issues. Another possibility is that the lab head may not believe the students or may trivialize the matter; these outcomes are possible if the suspect carries a higher rank in the lab than the whistle blower.

As one can see, many avenues of action are available, with different effects to consider. This case may lead to discussions about the ethical use of computers in the workplace and the dynamics of colleague interactions.