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Professional Societies in Information Systems: A Force for Globalisation or Good?

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing importance of both Information Technology and Information Systems (IT & IS) in the economies of the developed and the developing world, professional societies in the IT/IS discipline are in a singularly important position. These societies, which have been established throughout the world, and which represent the interests of large bodies of members, have an important role to play in the development of national and international standards that apply to the conduct of their professional members. Notwithstanding the distribution of the societies, careful scrutiny reveals that while some have a comprehensive set of membership types, regulations, codes and requirements for professional development, others offer a much less rich portfolio of resources and are correspondingly much less formally structured.

Professionalism itself is generally taken to be a ‘good thing’, whether it applies to IT, medicine, law, accountancy, engineering or any other profession. However, professionalism also involves a considerable degree of standardisation – members of professional societies are expected to conform to established standards expressed in codes of ethics, conduct or practice and may be cautioned or expelled if they fail to so conform. Comparison of standards across countries reveals remarkably little variation in the way these standards are described, although some provide much more detail than others. Exemplar societies on the detailed side include the British Computer Society (BCS) and Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). The relatively recently established Association for Information Systems (AIS) is also moving down this path; it has now set up a standing committee on member misconduct. This committee will start the process of crafting a code of ethics for its members.

The lack of variation in the way standards are presented suggests that professional societies may, intentionally or inadvertently, promote the globalisation of professional norms (i.e. standardisation on a worldwide basis), with all the attendant concerns with which globalisation is often associated, notably absolutism, Westernisation, Americanisation and other characteristics that may detract from practices appropriate to local cultures. This situation is likely to be exacerbated by the pressure on national societies to include regulations deemed appropriate by the global majority, even though these too may not best serve local interests. Examples could range from the protection of intellectual property rights (cf. Steidlmeier, 1993) through to the ethical treatment of employees.

In this panel session, we will investigate the role of professional societies as a force for globalisation, taking a number of perspectives. We believe that this is relevant for the conference, given a) the overall theme – we see the professional societies as key players in the challenging context of globalisation; b) the international nature of the topic and its relevance to both IT in organisations (IFIP WG 8.2) and the social impacts of IT in developing countries (IFIP WG 9.4). We have invited panelists to focus on the role of professional societies from a variety of national/cultural perspectives, according to their expertise. We aim that half the available time for the panel will be taken by the panelists and half will be available for the audience to engage in debate with the panelists and each other.

2. THE PANELISTS AND A SUMMARY OF THEIR POSITIONS

Robert Davison will chair the panel session and discuss the process under way within the AIS' standing committee on member misconduct to craft a code of ethics for the society's members. Key to this development process is the soliciting of values from members as to what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. Society membership now includes people from 50 countries, including many developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, as well as transitional countries in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Consequently, there is a unique opportunity for a wide range of people to contribute their views and values towards this code of ethics.

Ernest Jordan notes that the Australian Computer Society (ACS) acts a force for globalisation but that this is not necessarily good. The ACS has a significant role in 'approving' the IT qualifications of potential migrants, thereby facilitating their admission to Australia. This may be a unique position for a society. It means that 'conforming' education and training systems will be much better regarded than non-conforming. As a result aspiring migrants (especially from developing countries) will be 'encouraged' to follow an Australian model (or one that is closely compatible). However, differences between Australian values and those more commonly espoused in developing countries are very apparent.

Carol Hsu will compare and contrast the development of Computer Societies in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and China. Computer societies in these four countries were all established in the 1960s or early 1970s. However, Hong Kong and Singapore seem to have been more successful in promoting IT professionalism through active support and organisation by their local computer societies. Although Taiwan and China have contributed greatly to computer manufacturing production in the world, the work on establishing IT/IS professionalism seems less successful as compared with Hong Kong and Singapore. Carol will discuss how Taiwan and China can strengthen their IT professional membership with reference to the Hong Kong and Singapore experiences.

Chrisanthi Avgerou will discuss the controversial role of professional 'codes of conduct' in the light of her involvement in IFIP TC9 on the social aspects of computers. She will draw on a comparative study that TC9 conducted in the 1990s that presents and discusses a variety of countries' professional codes and draws some interesting conclusions about the range of issues they cover, the mechanisms of enforcement they foresee, and the extent of their diversity. She will then address the issue of professionalism in relation to the diffusion of standard practices in the context of globalisation.

3. REFERENCES

Steidlmeier, P. (1993) "The Moral Legitimacy of Intellectual Property Claims: American Business and Developing Country Perspectives", *Journal of Business Ethics* (12:2), pp. 157-164.

About the Panelists

Robert Davison is an Assistant Professor in the Dept of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. He was born in the UK, lived in various parts of Western and Eastern Europe, and was educated in the UK and Hong Kong, where he received his PhD in Information Systems. He is editor-in-chief of the *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* and an associate editor of the *Information Systems Journal*. He runs several Web pages for ISWORLD, including: *Professional Ethics* and *IT in Developing Countries*. His recent work has been published in *Communications of the ACM*, *Information Systems Journal*, *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, *Information & Management* and *Information Technology & People*. He has recently completed co-editing a special issue of the *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* on Cultural Issues and IT Management. His current work involves an exploration of virtual teams in educational contexts, as well as an ongoing interest in applying Action Research in organizational problem solving. Robert can be contacted by email at: isrobert@is.cityu.edu.hk.

Ernie Jordan is Professor of Management at Macquarie Graduate School of Management in Sydney, Australia where he is the Director of the Electronic Commerce Programs and board member of the Macquarie Risk Competence Centre. Ernie was born and educated in the UK, completed his PhD in Hong Kong, and has spent most of his working life in Australia. His major research interests are in electronic commerce, risk management, the strategic management of IT, with particular emphasis on management support systems, and knowledge management systems. Publications include a range of IFIP conferences as well as *International Journal of Information Management*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, and *Information Management & Computer Security*. He adopts an Australian community leadership role of academic analysis in the area of business continuity and disaster recovery. Ernest can be contacted by email at: Ernest.Jordan@bigpond.com.

Carol Hsu is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Dept of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. She also maintains an affiliation as a researcher at the *Computer Security Research Centre* at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She was born in Taiwan and pursued her higher education in the UK, where she recently obtained her PhD in Information Systems. In recent years, her research has been focused on online education and socio-organisational aspects of IS security. Her recent work has been published in *American Conference of Information Systems*, and *Journal of Information Systems Education*. She is currently involved in a DTI/ESRC project, which examines PKI interoperability through the lens of economics perspective, as well as the implementation of online education on campus. Carol can be contacted by email at: ischsu@is.cityu.edu.hk.

Chrisanthi Avgerou is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems at the London School of Economics. She was born in Greece and was educated in Greece and the UK, receiving her PhD in Information Systems from the London School of Economics. She chaired the IFIP 9.4 group from 1996 till 2002 and she is currently vice-chair of IFIP TC9. Her main research area is information systems and organizational change, with particular emphasis on the context of developing countries. Among her recent publications are *Information Systems and Global Diversity*, Oxford, OUP (2002), and *Information Systems and the Economics of Innovation*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar (2003). Chrisanthi can be contacted by email at: C.Avgerou@lse.ac.uk.