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# SOPRA STERIA: ACTING ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL ETHICS

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## The rise of Digital Ethics

Digital ethics has scaled the agenda of those implementing technology solutions over the last couple of years. Most often, the need to consider the ethical implications of technology has been associated with artificial intelligence (AI ethics). In addition, it is a topic that, in the early days was most spoken about within academic circles. As an example, the Oxford Internet Institute launched its Digital Ethics Lab (DELab) in 2017. Kings College meanwhile established the Centre for Technology, Ethics, Law & Society (TELOS) way back in 2007; it looks at the legal, ethical, and social implications of new and emerging technologies. What we have rarely seen is the ICT companies defining specific offerings related to digital ethics or putting senior leadership in place to lead the charge. There are some exceptions, of course - BT, for example, has a Tech for Good practice, PwC has an AI for Good lead, and Microsoft has a range of programmes, e.g. Tech for Good; AI for Good; Tech for Social Impact; Tech for Health etc.

## A joined-up approach

Sopra Steria has moved its thinking on and its approach looks more joined up than many other suppliers, acknowledging that it is about more than the technology, and that the boundaries between technologies are blurred, so it's not sensible to focus on a single area in isolation. It, too, this time last year, had a head of AI Ethics. But the company began to recognise that the issue was broader than just AI. Last summer, it established the Sopra Steria Group Digital Ethics Framework. This was followed in November by the publication of a Digital Ethics whitepaper. Then in January 2020, it formed the Digital Ethics & Tech for Good Practice; Tech for Good is complementary and seen as an equally important part of the unit. Its Digital Ethics services were brought to market in March 2020.

Jen Rodvold, who was previously Sopra Steria's Head of Sustainability Solutions, runs the practice. Ben Gilbert remains the AI Ethics lead but has taken on a broader role as a Digital Ethics consultant; he is doing a degree in Philosophy & Technology in parallel. Capabilities within the unit include digital ethics, AI ethics, data ethics, and customer ethics. Its kitbag includes guidelines, methodologies, and tools. The team currently consists of six people with backgrounds ranging from AI ethics to sustainability to CSR to digital innovation; they have established links with universities and academia and are contributing to the standards being set within the community. The aim is to grow the team this year, recruiting internally and developing the company's graduates into digital ethics consulting roles. Next year, external recruitment will commence.

In June this year, the practice won its first Digital Ethics consulting deal with a London Borough council. While the practice can help open doors via consulting-led sales, the expertise in Digital Ethics is also, increasingly, being embedded in larger transformational deals.

## Investment decision

Sopra Steria's decision to invest in this practice has been driven by the increasing awareness by organisational stakeholders of the unintended consequences of technology implementation, from privacy concerns, to bias in decision-making, to workforce displacement, to environmental and social implications. Sopra Steria's customers and prospects are aware that they must face up to these issues – alongside delivering quality services - if they are to develop a trusted relationship with their stakeholders. Research suggests that public awareness of ethics is rising and, in parallel, trust in both Governments and technology companies is on the decline. If ethics are not taken into consideration, the potential consequence of accelerated digital transformation is a direct negative impact on their business. As the technology environment becomes more complex, the use of data becomes more sophisticated, and the number of standards brings new confusion, many organisations are finding that they do not have expertise and know-how internally to deal with the issue.



Sopra Steria's approach, therefore, is to combine its technological, business, and sector expertise and work with each client to break down the complexities of digital ethics issues, making them relevant to each individual organisation. It has created a structured framework and methodology to help clients define their digital ethics and their impact on society. The key to having a positive impact is ensuring the Digital Ethics tooling is embedded in technology projects so that the changes stick and people are kept on board. In engaging with Sopra Steria, the client gets a high level mapping of its services and data; a tailored report on relevant standards, emerging regulation and best practice in digital ethics; defined ethics for their organisation and their stakeholders, aligned to the organisational strategy, values, responsibilities and objectives; clearly mapped risks and opportunities related to digital ethics; and a strategy and roadmap for implementation.

### Positive market reaction

So far, Sopra Steria states that the market reaction has been positive. C-suite level contacts at clients are starting to approach the team. A lot of interest has transpired from the public sector, but there is also particular interest from financial services. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the need to implement emerging technology quickly, raising ethical issues around how vulnerable customers will be impacted and parts of society disenfranchised, or the impact of workforce displacement.

Other drivers include the increasing desire to create social value; the rising prevalence of "scary tech" (facial recognition, deep fakes, GTP3) where ethical worries are driving a deep fear; more intense consideration of brand and reputation; and the need to be able to question third party tech suppliers having insourced supplier management. At its first client in local government – London Borough of Harrow - Sopra Steria is delivering a data ethics framework and strategy to support the authority's future digital transformation; the council intends to make more use of data and predictive analytics. Sopra Steria has promised that the project will deliver increased customer trust, improve data, privacy, and security, promote inclusion, and identify risks and enable mitigation of the authority's digital transformation plans.

### Small & developing practice

This is a small practice as things stand, and it might be hard to scale due to the unusual and rare skills mix required, but the team is already growing. A key to future success will be ensuring that the end value seen by clients – many of which will be hard to associate with the implementation of a digital ethics strategy – are clearly communicated. One of the risks, particularly for advisory work, is that the digital ethics strategy becomes a report that sits on a shelf with little impact. To avoid this trap, the team offers a service to help clients embed their digital ethics strategy with support for governance, policies, training and communications, and creates performance management tools that help clients see for themselves the results of the work.

Nonetheless, for Sopra Steria, the launch of this practice and the promotion of the company's capability in this area has several positives. Firstly, as we have highlighted, few ICT companies have created specific practices around digital ethics; being one of the first to identify its importance, broaden the focus to identify wider ramifications and unintended consequences, and act on them, has the potential to drive a positive perception change amongst clients and potential clients. Secondly, it is likely to boost Sopra Steria's ability to attract and retain younger employees (graduates or apprentices) who place issues like corporate and social responsibility, environmental sustainability high on their list of things they want their employer to care about. The benefit of that should not be underestimated. And thirdly, the timing feels right. With all the bad press about how tech and data are being used there is a rising risk that organisations do nothing because they fear the negative impact if things go wrong. This could slow adoption of relevant emerging tech, without which large transformation projects will not be able to meet expectations. Already, Sopra Steria is finding that the offering is a door opener; conversations

have started with new-name clients and c-suite contacts in existing accounts that the company had not reached before.

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