From Awareness to Action:
Why digital ethics is moving up the agenda

The world is how we shape it

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Introduction

The concept of digital ethics is no longer new. Leading academic institutions and think tanks have been raising ethical concerns around technology for decades, and the last several years have seen a plethora of guidelines for creating, testing and managing technology so it's responsible and trustworthy.

But, the last year has seen digital ethics hit the mainstream, with organisations in the private and public sector focusing their attention and, increasingly, resources, on these matters. There are four forces at work that are currently transforming awareness of digital ethics – accelerated adoption, growing awareness, falling trust levels and future regulation.

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Accelerated adoption

The seemingly overnight transformation of organisations during the pandemic is now well documented, with many shifting to enable remote working and offer digital products and services in order to survive.

Underneath transformation is an acceleration of the adoption of more advanced technologies such as automation and artificial intelligence (AI). Although data had already been proclaimed as the 'new oil' in terms of its perceived value to business and our economy, organisations are now taking a more serious look at what that means for them, and are developing data strategies that could shift entire business models.

Without integrating digital ethics into this acceleration, the ethical risks proliferate. The more data we use, and the more technology we incorporate without understanding the potential consequences, the more potential there is for harm – to individuals, society and the reputation of the organisations themselves – unless we integrate the right guardrails and sufficient testing.

Growing awareness

The benefits of using technology to improve our everyday personal and professional lives are clear. In fact, technology is and will continue to play a prominent role in addressing some of the world's biggest challenges, from climate change to providing better, more equitable healthcare. **However, the public is now more aware of the potential for unintended consequences of technology, such as the amplification of misinformation, and bias and discrimination on digital services based on poor quality data or faulty algorithms.**
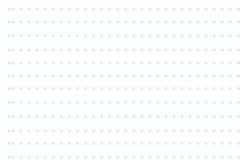
At the same time, more people are aware of how some digital business models work, making use of personal data in ways that, increasingly, are worrying to consumers. *A 2020 report from Doteveryone showed a 5% decrease (from 25% to 20%) in the number of British people who felt they didn't need to read the terms and conditions of digital products.*

Faltering levels of trust

The annual Edelman Trust Barometer report has shown a number of emerging concerns over the past few years. This includes a widening trust gap between the informed public and the general population, and a decline in public trust in the technology sector. While levels of trust are clearly falling, the understanding that trust has real value to businesses and public sector organisations – and is a critical success factor in achieving their ambitions – has grown.

With public trust in a precarious position organisations are starting to recognise the need to address digital ethics concerns.

Prospects of regulation

While governments are still not keeping pace with the rate of change in tech and the acceleration of the adoption of increasingly advanced technologies such as AI, there are now signs they are on the political and legislative radar. **For example, the EU has proposed regulation on AI, and the US is increasing the scrutiny on tech giants including Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon. It is now likely many parts of the western world will see regulation introduced in the next couple of years.**

The fact that regulation is only on the horizon, but not imminent, is no excuse for organisations not to act. In light of all the factors described above – accelerated adoption leading to increased ethical risk, growing public awareness, and shaky public trust – there are plenty of reasons to integrate digital ethics into organisational strategies and governance immediately.

Signs of progress

These four forces describe the drivers behind the signs of progress on digital ethics we're now seeing. Organisations understand they need to build and maintain trust amongst employees, customers and other stakeholders, and trust cannot be achieved if something goes wrong with the data or technology they are using. They are also starting to see ethical risks as business risks, which are multiplying as digital strategies advance.

While the costs of inaction in terms of risk are too high, the rewards for making progress are great, from preparing for regulation to improving user engagement and building stakeholder trust.

More Information

Many organisations talk about the ethical implications of technology, few are taking action. Backed by research and industry-recognised standards, Sopra Steria's Digital Ethics experts help you to gain a better understanding of the ethical challenges your digital strategy, programme or project faces; uncover the practical changes you can make and develop the business case for change.

Our comprehensive understanding of technology, combined with our leadership in managing our business for economic, social and environmental sustainability, make us a natural partner to take action on Digital Ethics issues. We move the discussion from the philosophical to the practical, collaborating with a range of stakeholders and industry groups to shape a better future, while helping organizations navigate the challenges of Digital Ethics today, leading to better business outcomes now.

For more information about our Digital Ethics consultancy services please contact our Head of Digital Ethics at the details below:

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Or you can visit us at https://www.soprasteria.co.uk/capabilities/digital/digital-ethics

We look forward to working with you.

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