

BEHAVIOUR, ETHICS AND COMMUNICATION AT THE WORKPLACE: A SUBJECT FOR ALL !

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***Abstract** The authors have created an innovative subject which contains elements of all the three important non-technical aspects of an engineer's work. Team work, leadership, conflict resolution, body language are but a few of important aspects of human behaviour that are learnt by experience, rarely addressed in an undergraduate curriculum for engineers. Effective communication is an art that is honed with practice which is also rarely addressed in overcrowded engineering curriculum. Similarly could be said for ethics. If these non-technical aspects are addressed at all, they are usually presented singly, with the emphasis on communications.*

This paper describes the new subject, and briefly outlines its extent and scope. The subject was especially designed for students of engineering and authors believe it to be the first of its kind. Because of its universal utility, they suggest it ought to be incorporated in all professional courses.

Introduction

“There is an intellectual recognition of the fact that all systems are man-machine systems and that if the human part of the system is not performing effectively then it is unlikely that the technical part of the system will be efficient either”

Mumford [1] expressed the above quotation in 1971 and 30 years on it seems even more relevant now than it may have been then. The need for professionals in any technical field such as engineering, computer sciences and other science fields to acquire knowledge and develop people skills before entering the workforce is no longer questioned.

This paper examines the issues associated with the choice of material to be covered in such courses and how this material should be presented. Taking into consideration the demands placed on curriculum designers to focus on specialist courses, the financial constraints on universities to become more efficient and results oriented, the rapid discoveries in every field brought about by technology that necessitates constant updating of knowledge and skills and the challenges that market forces impose on educational institutions it becomes imperative that courses are specific and relevant to the individual disciplines.

This naturally raises the question of why not utilise generic courses that are already in the curriculum and cover the issues of communication, ethics and workplace behaviour very effectively. There are a number of arguments for and against this proposition. The main argument against

using such generic courses is that they have been designed specifically to meet the needs of the students who intend to pursue a study program that lead to a professional career in these fields. As such they include a comprehensive history of the development of the theory and practice of each specific fields. While this is most interesting and necessary for students in organisational design, management, communication or ethics, it often appears irrelevant to engineering, computing and accounting students.

This does not imply that students in such technical disciplines do not recognise the importance of studying these topics. Indeed in discussions they accept quite readily the importance of gaining knowledge and awareness of work organisations, ethics and communication but in an abbreviated and integrated format that provides them with an introduction to the basic concepts. These were some of the reasons for designing an integrated course that addressed the three topics.

There are two compelling reasons why a study of these topics is essential. The first centers on the significance of organisations in the modern world. Undoubtedly organisations have assumed increasing importance over the centuries but especially over the last century. Organisations have become larger in size, more complex in structure and specialised in function.

A cursory analysis of life in the modern era reveals that organisations have taken over most of the activities that enable people to remain self-sufficient and as such we have all become dependent on them as they influence and determine the conditions under which we all live and exert an immense amount of power over governments and ultimately their decisions. Since our lives are affected by the existence and behaviour of organisations this is reason enough to attempt to study them and understand them better.

The second reason follows from and is linked to the above discussion. It is inevitable that throughout our lives we are continually involved in various types organisations ranging from being members of our immediate family to other organisations that employ us, educate us and form a large part of our social contact with other people throughout our lives.

In addition to these two compelling reasons that are relevant to everyone, there is a third reason that applies to a smaller group of people: those who are involved in managing or aspire to manage organisations or parts of them.

For this group of people an important part of performing their function effectively is understanding human behaviour in an organisational context.

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Undoubtedly as organisations are dynamic social structures whatever happens in them or however they function is ultimately the result of human action. Even in the world of science, computers, engineering or science fiction it is humans who decide to create, design and generate the wondrous discoveries we have witnessed. Ultimately all these discoveries and advances can be traced to some human action. This in turn makes it imperative that the functioning of the human element must be studied and understood if we are concerned with the efficient and effective functioning of organisations.

An additional factor for studying organisations is the influence and power they exert on government policy and decision-making. An understanding of the behaviour of organisations and the people in them would enable us to make a judgement of their potential to exercise their power and influence ethically and for the benefit of the wider community.

The three key areas of study included in this programme are: workplace behaviour, communication and ethics. These areas were selected because of their relevance to engineering students and the demands frequently expressed by employers for people that possess not merely effective technical skills but can also illustrate skills in interpersonal communication and people skills as well as awareness and understanding of ethical dilemmas likely to confront engineers and how these would be resolved. A brief analysis of each of the three areas will be considered.

Workplace Behavior

Organisations have existed and evolved for thousands of years. Over the last three decades changing environments and conditions have posed significant challenges for organisations and their structure and function. Some of these challenges include: the organisation's relationship to its environment and this refers to the globalisation of the economy, restructuring, technology, mergers and acquisitions, changes in market characteristics, ownership of resources and the quality revolution. Other challenges revolve around issues of social responsibility, stakeholder interests, changed workplace patterns and practices, workforce diversity and employee relations.

The globalisation of the economy emerged as a major issue during the last two decades. [2] lists four factors that made the emergence of globalisation inevitable. The first is industrialisation whereby after the Second World War industries moved to reestablish and expand their export markets. The ensuing prosperity motivated less developed economies to pursue industrialisation policies in order to improve their standards of living and economic prosperity.

The second factor involves the rapid rise of living standards after the Second World War especially in the industrialising nations, which led to the opening and expansion of export markets worldwide.

The third factor is the rapid explosion of the Information Technology and change, which has had and

continues to exert an enormous impact in every aspect of our lives.

And the fourth factor involves the vast improvements in global transport and Communication that enables people increased mobility and flexibility.

The effects of globalisation on organisations have been dramatic and it can be summed up in an often-quoted phrase: compete globally or perish. Increased globalised competition leads inevitably to significant changes in the world of work because global organisations appear to enjoy significant advantages in resources at their disposal, technical expertise, productivity efficiencies and ability to respond rapidly. Ultimately to be able to compete with globalised organisations make it imperative to reorganise themselves into leaner, fitter and more flexible structures. This in turn has significant implications for employees and management alike.

In addition to globalisation pressures other issues such as the economic conditions of the country where an organisation is located presents challenges as it determines the demand for its products. Other pressures exerted on organisations by institutional investors/owners who demand short-term productivity and efficiency gains and these have to be balanced by the demands of customers/clients for quality services and products. Those pressures require a committed, flexible and skilled workforce.

In order to respond to these challenges today's graduates in every field have to possess both knowledge and skills in the areas of organisational behaviour. It is felt that an introductory course should familiarise students with the challenges and issues in organisational behaviour. The specific topics include perception, personality and attitudes, teams, groups and decision-making and conflict and its resolution.

Ethics

The necessity for studying ethics derives from the realisation that people are always confronted with alternative courses of action. In every field of endeavor there are always more challenges to be met than we can actually do and there is always more than one way to perform any task. As a consequence we continually have to choose between alternative activities and between methods of performing tasks.

Whilst engineering is basically a technical activity it does take place with other people and in the context of society and is subject to the same kinds of ethics, codes of conduct and laws that set the guidelines for all activities.

There are numerous misconceptions concerning ethics and one of the most frequently cited is that ethics is a matter of personal opinion. A closer examination of the issues involved would provide sufficient evidence to disprove this. In order to consider the specific issues relevant to professional engineering ethics we need to critically examine the broad concepts and theories involved

in the field of ethics generally.

Ethics is not merely a matter of personal opinions or feelings that can be discounted as something that cannot be rationally debated. The fact is that ethical dilemmas are unavoidable and all people have a code of ethical opinions held either consciously or unconsciously to assist them in resolving such dilemmas. In this way ethics does have certain common elements with science in that it tries to clarify and to reflect on those principles that govern our actions even on the occasions we may not be aware of them.

The reason for including the study of ethics in the field of engineering is best illustrated by Rheingold (1985) who states in [3] that:

The further limits of technology are not in the hardware, but in our minds. The digital computer is based on a theoretical discovery known as the "universal machine" which is not actually a tangible device but a mathematical description of a machine capable of stimulating the actions of any other machine. Once you have created a general-purpose machine that can imitate any other machine, the future development of the tool depends only on what tasks you can think to do with it. For the immediate future, the issue of whether machines can become intelligent is less important than learning to deal with a device that can become whatever we clearly imagine it to be (p.15).

Ethics are needed to assist the engineers of the present and future in determining what is acceptable and/or not acceptable to imagine and incorporate into the "universal machine". This is especially relevant at present with the developments in genetics and gene technology.

Communication

There is no dispute about the importance and relevance of effective communication at both interpersonal and organisational levels. It takes up much of our time and it is often the source of major organisational failures.

Most adults assume that they are reasonably competent communicators in their day-to-day interactions and are reluctant to acknowledge they need to improve their interpersonal communication skills. However, when questioned it becomes evident this reluctance is a matter of timidity or embarrassment than of genuine competence.

Although there is some ambiguity regarding the precise meaning of the term "communication" there is agreement that it can be defined as the process of sharing information, ideas or attitudes, resulting in a degree of understanding between a sender and a receiver [4]. This can occur through face-to-face interaction, telephone conversations, listening to formal presentations, reading reports, letters and memos or using a variety of electronic media.

Organisations generally appear to take communication for granted. Individuals tend to assume that what they have said or written is received and understood. The extent of poor communication is recognised only when

mistakes occur that demand resolution.

There are compelling reasons for individuals to be made aware of both the complexity of the communication process and the alternatives that are available. A cursory examination of major disasters often arrives at findings that include "a failure of communication" among the major sources. Examples include airline crashes or the Challenger explosion include elements of technological problems but the underlying fault often lies with "communication" especially from technical experts, executives and managers.

Research has established a link between communication and the traditional functions of management. Improving communication involves learning how it works, then refining skills necessary for efficient and effective communication. A starting point is the recognition that communication is not the message sent but the message received and we have not control over the message received.

The "communication breakdown" may result from different interpretations of the same information and the reluctance of people in such situations to seek clarification.

Communicating well or poorly can spell the difference between success and failure in human relations of almost every kind and this applies in the disciplines of computing and engineering. Technical skills and brilliant ideas can best be utilised, appreciated and rewarded if communicated effectively. In the information society the ability to relate to others, gaining approval for ideas and eliciting positive evaluations are the kind of skills that will increasingly count in achieving success.

The Combination

While each topic could comfortably occupy one whole subject, owing to the lack of space in the curriculum, it was decided to combine all three into a series of 12 two hour lecture/tutorials given during one semester, preferably in the junior years of all engineering courses. It is the aim of this note to draw attention to this development and present the underlining philosophy behind it.

In the subject, concepts of human behaviour, communication and ethics are introduced and developed. The specific topics include approaches and investigative methods of the Social Sciences, Perception and Personality, Learning and Motivation, Teams, Stress, Conflict, Attitudes and Leadership. As well as concepts of Ethics in Business and especially in Engineering and issues relating to both Interpersonal and Organisational Communication are addressed. The objectives of the subject are aimed at students' understanding of the above concepts and their relevance in the workplace. The tutorial program focuses on the practical applications of psychological, ethical and communication concepts in the workplace and the importance of research and preparation of reports and case study analyses and presentations.

Conclusion

In conclusion the aim of the subject *Behaviour, Ethics and Communication in the Workplace* explores the interaction of stakeholders and organisation members in the performance of work. It provides an introduction to the conventional concepts and theoretical approaches to processes in the workplace and focuses specifically on the issues of Behaviour in the workplace and highlights the importance of Ethics and Communication.

The subject can be seen as distinct from others in the field such as organisation theory, behavioural sciences, management studies and bioethics in that it reflects the multi-disciplinary contributions to this field. Whilst adopting a critical approach to the conventional analytic separation of individual, group and organisation the material emphasises the practical relevance and application of these concepts in the workplace, especially for the students in technical fields such as engineering and computer sciences.

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