

Professional Codes of Ethics for Organizations

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Keywords: ethics, cartography, mapmaking, code of ethics

Abstract:

An established profession has characteristics such as a body of knowledge, profession-specific publications, an accepted culture, and standard practices. Professional organizations participate in the development of the profession by organizing seminars and conferences, providing training, and, in some fields, offering certification and accreditation. They also contribute to the profession's development by establishing a code of ethics and a code of conduct.

Such codes communicate accepted behavior and guide professional practices by conveying standards for acting ethically and with integrity. In some professions, they can also pre-emptively warn of consequences for code violations. A code of ethics is a “hallmark” of a profession because it expresses the goals, values, and mission at the core of the profession. Additionally, it provides guidelines “to support professionals in making sound decisions, especially when facing complex situations or ethical dilemmas” (Hawamdeh, et al., 2023). Davis (2006) even suggests, “A group cannot be a profession without setting itself special (morally permissible) standards, that is, without developing its own code of ethics”. Each profession develops a code of ethics that best reflects the core values of the profession and best serves the needs of its professionals (Hawamdeh et al., 2023). As such, it should contain guidelines that are recognizable as pertinent and applicable to that profession, not just general principles that could apply to many professions.

Organizations, whether they be institutions, agencies, businesses, or societies, may each develop codes of ethics and conduct for their members. These are each a set of statements about ethics that is universal to a portion of the population within a profession. In turn, these collectively contribute to the development of the profession by cohering to establish a universal baseline for ethical behavior in the profession. Universality within the profession is secured by participation in the development and refinement of the organization's code of ethics by its members (Siderea, 2023), and by collective consideration of all the codes.

The codes of ethics for organizations are not personal or normative, that is, focused on moral conduct (Drew, 2023). Rather, they are “moral principles and standards specific to a particular profession or occupational field” (Vaidya 2023). As such, they have certain characteristics. For example, they are given to the members of those organizations who agree to the terms of the codes by participating in the organization (Siderea, 2023). They are a codified standard that is incumbent upon the individual members to follow, and as such, they can be enforced. They help to make members of the organization resistant to being coerced into unethical behavior through the consequences of breaking the code. Disciplinary action against a member of the organization is stronger as a deterrent than is the enticement to act against the code. Non-compliance, in effect, reflects a statement from the member that they do not adhere to the baseline for appropriate conduct within the profession. DiBiase (2017) notes that the commitment of a member of an organization “to honor these occupation-specific obligations, above and beyond ordinary morality, is a defining characteristic of professionalism.”

Acceptance of the profession's code of ethics by individuals can be voluntary or it can be mandatory, as in licensed professions. In some professions, such as finance or public health, specific laws dictate professional conduct (Herrity, 2023). In professions in which a code of ethics is voluntarily adopted, laws may still regulate some conduct. For example, copyright laws are applicable to professions such as journalism and literature, the arts, and cartography. In professions that require licensure, such as engineering and surveying, disciplinary actions for code violations can include warnings or reprimands, fines, mandatory education or training, and license probation, suspension, revocation.

In non-licensed professions, adherence to a code of ethics is voluntary, undocumented, and unregulated, and the code of ethics may be seen as non-binding. As such, its power to deter unethical behavior can be called into question, and, as a result, those outside the profession may see its practitioners as less ethically responsible or accountable. Nonetheless, as a non-binding agreement, it can carry moral or societal weight and serve as a basis for decisions about future opportunities or actions. Non-licensed professions may still suffer consequences for professional misconduct or unethical behavior, including loss of reputation, loss of business opportunities, legal action (as mentioned above), and, at the extreme, loss

of employment. Professional associations and organizations with their own codes of ethics and conduct can impose their own disciplinary actions, such as penalties (for example, restriction of participation in association activities) or expulsion from the organization.

To borrow from the American Bar Association (2002), a voluntary association of lawyers and law students, “Compliance with the [codes], as with all law in an open society, depends primarily upon understanding and voluntary compliance, secondarily upon reinforcement by peer and public opinion and finally, when necessary, upon enforcement through disciplinary proceedings. The [codes] do not, however, exhaust the moral and ethical considerations that should inform a [professional], for no worthwhile human activity can be completely defined by legal rules. The [codes] simply provide a framework for the ethical practice [within the profession].”

The advantage of a professional code of ethics for non-licensed professions, such as cartography and GIS, is that it communicates the standards for moral and ethical behavior to those both within and outside the profession. It is understood by members of the organizations within the profession that they agree to the terms of the code of ethics and subject themselves to disciplinary action should they not comply. Or, as Siderea (2023) put it, “When you become a member of the organization, you become a member of the profession, and, as such, you must submit to the authority of the code of ethics, and you will be subject to possible disciplinary actions that will effectively label you non-professional.” The ultimate goal is that every practitioner in the profession shares the same standard of conduct.

A professional code of ethics is equally important for those outside the profession. It circumvents the question of who should dictate and regulate the ethics of the profession. This issue is becoming critical in an era when individuals are seeking more control over professions through their consumer behavior and political decision-making, and even in courts of law. As Thompson (2007) noted, “We should be reluctant to abandon the ideal [of the self-regulating profession] since it has traditionally expressed the principle of service to others, which is the ethical essence of a profession ... Professional ethics, as many professionals themselves insist, is too important to all of us to be left only to professionals. The pressing challenge for the future is to forge, in principle and in practice, a union of the traditional idea of the autonomous profession (preserving its ethics of service) and the modern demand for accountability (acknowledging an ethics of responsibility).”

The first step in facing this pressing challenge is to demonstrate the self-regulation of our profession, and the first step in demonstrating that is for organizations to develop a code of ethics and a code of conduct. Organizations such as the International Cartographic Association are ideally situated to lead that effort because of the inclusive nature of its membership, which is comprised of national members (representing nation states) who are often backed by the primary or a major cartographic association within the country, as well as affiliate members representing private sector, government, or other society organizations. Additionally, though its memorandums of understanding with other organizations, such as the International Map Industry Association, which is an international organization of map industry professional, among many others, its reach can extend even further. At the same time that the ICA can serve as an umbrella organization to coordinate the development of a cartographic code of ethics, it is also subject to the codes of organizations in which it is a member itself, such as the International Science Council; therefore, these ethical considerations must also be taken into account.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the many conversations and the correspondence I have had with Nat Case who has helped me to clarify my thoughts and writing on this subject.

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