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inside:

**SYSADMIN**  
Sysadmin Ethics



## USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &  
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# sysadmin ethics

Recently I have been thinking about sysadmin ethics. Here are some of the things I've been thinking about, and some conclusions I've come to.

Ethics has been part of SAGE since the beginning. SAGE-AU adopted an ethics code several years ago. SAGE accepted an ethics document for discussion and has published a code of ethics. Recently, a group has been working on a unified ethics document for all the international SAGE groups.

1. I have been served well by the SAGE ethics document. I used it to jumpstart a discussion on sysadmin ethics with the student sysadmin staff at the university where I work. I don't recall what prompted this particular discussion – it wasn't an incident involving our staff. I thought that the discussion would be more productive than a lecture about ethics from me.
2. I have heard from several friends that the SAGE code of ethics has been useful in explaining to others (usually management) why they should not or will not do something that they have been asked or told to do.
3. I think the SAGE ethics document has served SAGE well. At numerous events, I have explained SAGE to potential members and others in related areas of the computer industry. I always mention the ethics documents. It has always been a positive with the people I'm talking to. I think just mentioning our ethics document has helped a lot of people to think about sysadmin as a serious profession.
4. Last May, I gave a talk to the Twin Cities System Administrators (TCSA), the Minneapolis/St. Paul SAGE local group. My talk was a SAGE activities update generally and a discussion of the SAGE certification program. One of the participants (not a SAGE member, but I think he's joined since then) asked about ethics. Would it be a component of the certification process. Wow. I hadn't thought about that. (Note – I'm not on the certification committee. They may have had a discussion about it, I'm not sure).
5. At the USENIX Security Conference I was part of a fascinating discussion in the bar. The issue was the ethics and morality of certain security practices. Full disclosure vs. limited disclosure. "Grey Hat" security people. The discussion was wide-ranging, and touched on many situations, and drew upon many analogies. Case in point: a common network scanning tool that is extremely useful, but also has some stealth characteristics. For the sysadmin or "white hat" security professional, the tool would be (or should be – more on that later) equally valuable without the stealth features. Why are they there, if not to make the tool equally useful to the black hats?
6. A friend was sitting next to me during this discussion. He commented that the stealth features were useful to him – it prevented another organization within his company from knowing that he was port-scanning his own network. It is important to note that this was not a case of hiding it from his users, but of hiding it from another IT group that might object or think he was out of line for taking responsibility for the network for which he is nominally responsible.
7. In various conversations, we – the sysadmin community at large – have been accused of compromising on ethics. Why? Because every time someone poses an ethical dilemma on the `<sage-members>` mailing list (or in a BoF or tutorial) almost all the answers include disclaimers ("I don't know the details of your situation," "You will have to decide how important this issue is to you," "You might want to consider

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looking for another job”), and refuse to consider the question or its answer in “black-and-white” and flat out tell the questioner what to do.

What do I conclude from this?

Ethics is an important part of the profession. Ethics is also important to me as a person. Can I separate the two? Maybe, but not entirely. My own personal ethics will guide me in any discussion of ethics for the profession, or for the workplace and job situations I find myself in.

Ethics are important, but complicated. I don’t think we are compromising our ethics (as accused in #7 above) when we recognize that not all situations are the same, and not every sysadmin shares one’s particular personal ethical system. We may have a consensus on a general statement of ethics, but the devil is always in the details. Is divulging the contents of a user’s email an ethical violation? It depends on the circumstances. To whom are you divulging that information? Why? What does the company/site policy say on the subject? These are just a few of the questions that have to be considered before a judgment can be made. It has been observed that the “tech culture” has a strong streak of libertarianism in it. Many of us are fierce advocates of civil liberties, objecting to electronic (and other) censorship and invasion of privacy. Yet that same streak prevents us from imposing our values on others. I don’t think that is a cop-out.

In response to this issue, it was suggested (in one of those late-evening discussions among fellow sysadmins) that we borrow from the legal and medical professions. They (according to the person who proposed this – I haven’t researched the details) have “ethics boards” that can discuss the details of a situation with a member who is facing an ethical dilemma, and based on the profession’s code of ethics, traditions, and personal experience (and probably the law), give guidance. The entire discussion must, of course, remain confidential.

Would such a system work for sysadmins? I don’t think we are ready to do that on a formal basis. But many of us, through our networks of colleagues (from LISA conferences, coworkers at past jobs, local groups, etc.), do have a resource that we can call upon to help us face these decisions. The result may not have the weight of an “ethics board” ruling, but it seems to me to be an appropriate step to take. This assumes that there is a common understanding of the basic ethics of the profession, and a recognition of the role of ethics in the profession – at least among those one chooses to consult.

Not every sysadmin has a well-developed network of peers to consult in such circumstances – even those who do consult the <*sage-members*> mailing list. Hopefully, the answers and discussion on the list have helped members deal with their situations. I assume that in some cases there is private follow-up between the poster and some of the respondents, to provide the type of advice that requires more details.

Can we (society at large) “teach ethics”? I don’t know. I have never had an ethics course, but I know they exist. I don’t know what is in them. I have always assumed that we can’t “teach ethics” (and have as an outcome ethical behavior by the students) by the lecture or pronouncement method. I think each person develops his or her own personal code of ethics, and will most likely resist a rigid code being imposed upon them. I think we can teach about ethics and raise the issues, and raise the awareness among our students (or membership, or users, or management). We can – indeed must – also teach by personal example. As an example, I am 100% sure that every sysadmin on the

staff where I work knows that I am extremely concerned about protecting our users' privacy, and that it is based on more than just the university's rules.

Should we include ethics in the certification process? Yes. Should we judge the applicants' ethics? No. We are not at the point where the ethics of systems administration are universally understood and agreed to by sysadmins, their users, managers, and the general public. Until we get to that point – which will probably take a long time – the profession and professional bodies are not in a position to judge. We can advise, educate, and discuss. In our certification process we can ask applicants about their knowledge of the SAGE code of ethics, but that is all.

If you have not looked at the SAGE code of ethics recently, you should: [http://www.usenix.org/sage/publications/code\\_of\\_ethics.html](http://www.usenix.org/sage/publications/code_of_ethics.html)). Have you had an ethics discussion (not a lecture!) at work? In your local SAGE group? It might be time to do that.