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## Integrity Testing for Software Professionals

by Donna L. Davis

Software developers play professional Hacky Sack with terms like “standards” and “best practices,” batting them around with effortless familiarity. But under the microscope of personal scrutiny, the game might very well change to dodge ball.

Seven years ago our CIO sponsored a departmental logo contest. I won—though lack of interest and entries probably explains it. The winning entry wasn’t great: I simply dotted the “i” of MIS with the county seal. Underneath, in small, italicized letters, I added three words that came to mind: “Integrity, Innovation, Initiative.” I’ve always been a sucker for alliteration. The phrase sounded like something you’d hear in a deep, TV announcer voice.

Clearly we had innovation covered—as an information technology organization we kept in tune with the latest microprocessors and software. We upgraded, enhanced, re-engineered, developed, and replaced like our futures depended on it. (They did.)

The other two words—integrity and initiative—seemed appropriate for a service organization, especially one in government. After all, we’re paid with the people’s tax dollars...and we’re some of the same folk who want to see that hard-earned levy well spent.

Even if lethargy and procrastination would rob us of initiative, between the CIO’s published departmental goals, performance plans, and our clients’ never-ending service requests, we managed to get a regular workout.

The third word—integrity—is something altogether different, I now realize.

At the time I was probably thinking of perceived departmental integrity. The department implemented a service request system that held us accountable for every password reset, keyboard coffee spill, or report change—and thousands of other critical and trivial calls for IT assistance. We wrote hundreds of procedures and best practices, following a rigorous review process. Despite the tremendous effort and discipline it took to maintain, we did the right things to build trust and confidence in our organization. We wanted to be viewed as a department with integrity.

Yet, despite all the coaching and well-planned strategy, the game is won or lost by individual players.

When each developer comes to work in the morning, he or she makes a conscious choice whether to exercise personal integrity. What do I mean? Take this quick-and-dirty self assessment.

## True or False?

1. Since I'm in the technology profession, surfing the Internet throughout the day increases my awareness of the latest tools and trends. The only thing that would really be considered inappropriate at work is accessing pornography.
2. I play Solitaire or other computer games occasionally throughout the day to relax my mind so I can regroup and focus on work better.
3. When going for coffee or a soft drink, sometimes I get into lengthy conversations with coworkers about a ball game or TV show, but I'm still entitled to my usual break. Talking with coworkers is really teambuilding, and therefore work-related.
4. I send and receive emails from friends or relatives quite a bit throughout the day, but it's no big deal. Everybody does.
5. If I arrive at work on time and am available at my desk in case a real emergency comes up, I'm doing my job.
6. I play DVD's or have the TV on with a game or the soaps in my office, but I'm still working.
7. I keep my door closed a lot of the time, but I need my privacy in order to focus. It's nobody's business what's on my screen and I don't like people sneaking up on me.
8. Everybody checks their eBay auctions at work.
9. Supervisors should not monitor Internet or email usage. We're adults and professionals and should be treated accordingly.
10. I have changed the date and/or time on my computer to beat the system (to close a request on time, for example), but only when I felt completely justified.
11. I have hard-coded a program or "zapped" data off the record for a quick fix when I was in a hurry and couldn't figure out the real solution.

12. I don't feel compelled to share everything I've learned through sweat and hard work with my coworkers, even if that means they have trouble supporting my code.
13. Coding standards are really for newbies and incompetents. At a certain point, a professional should be able to exercise judgment and use his/her own personal style.
14. I've used my system administrator rights to query a database for information I didn't need for my job, but I just wanted to know for personal reasons.
15. I've told a client a feature they requested was not technically possible (when it was) because it would have taken too much effort to implement.

Most of us, if honest, would have some "True" responses to these statements. Is that in itself an indictment? Are all of these issues equally serious? Are the ethics as simple as that? I don't pretend to have clear answers.

Considering that most of us work so hard that we scarcely take time out to visit the...um...facilities, the hint of censure is infuriating. We work through lunch, stay late, and take work home. Probably 90% or more of us do just that. While we might check stock prices or our Yahoo! email account, we give back much more than we ever take.

Before I became a supervisor, the very notion that someone might be monitoring my Internet usage was not only horrifying, but demoralizing. I was also extremely upset that developers in our organization were not given network administrative rights. Didn't they trust me? Didn't they consider me professional enough to be responsible? Then with the implementation of our new fangled IP phone, I realized Big Brother was possible from every angle.

Ah—but then I became responsible for ten other developers—good people, who by the nature of their work are fairly stapled to their desks all day. During my entire first year as a supervisor, it never occurred to me to check Internet usage logs. When I did take a look late one day, I was astounded by the quantity of research some of my staff had been engaged in. Surely they were close to solving the problem of world hunger.

A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach followed me for the rest of the evening. What if the county manager, on a lark, asked for the log? Would I have trouble explaining why one of my staff had more hits than anyone else in the county? How credible would our request for an additional head-count and greater bandwidth seem then?

It's really not about Internet use or superfluous external email. As a supervisor, I know if I even mention the Internet usage log, the least guilty staff will be afraid to touch it for a few weeks. I'm afraid the most guilty will be quick to justify the numbers, and maybe they can – I hope they can.

The real issue is that third important word on our department's logo: integrity—who you are when no one's looking, when no one is there to be impressed by hard work or disappointed by lost productivity. The reality is that Internet usage monitoring and integrity surveys aren't really all that necessary. Work speaks for itself. Supervisors know who is faking it. Coworkers know whose extra burdens they are carrying.

The tragedy is that the organization pays the price. Maybe it's time for software professionals to do a little less Googling and a little more soul searching. As with most things in life, moderation is a wise governor.

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