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## Ethics 101 for Interns

### **An ethics violation—even an unwitting one—could derail your career. Here's advice on how interns can avoid ethical minefields**

By [Michael Levin](#)

With the current economic climate and so many individuals making multiple career changes throughout their lives, interns are no longer limited to college graduates and the twenty something crowd. An internship has always been a great way to get a foothold in a company where you wish to work. Companies realize the benefit of hiring an intern with previous experience in the workforce, even if it's in another field, and the ranks of corporate interns are on the rise.

Unfortunately for the companies that hire them, interns are in a position to do extensive damage to the body corporate. Interns are often asked, for example, to handle confidential documents, respond to client inquiries, monitor blog posts, and attend sensitive conversations and meetings. Each of these activities exposes you and the company to both financial and reputational risk.

How do these risks present themselves? Consider these scenarios:

- Over drinks with friends one night, an intern mentions that he heard co-workers talking about a new deal that is going to raise the value of a particular company's stock. The next morning, one of his friends purchases 200 shares in anticipation of the upcoming deal.
- A public relations intern monitors message boards and watches online communities. She then posts a glowing review of her company's client's product without disclosing the relationship.
- An intern is updating customer contact data files for his employer and decides to keep a copy of the files for himself. As he begins his formal job search, the intern contacts these customers to inquire about employment.

The risk inherent in these examples may not be readily apparent, yet each could prove catastrophic.

## **The First Day on the Job**

So your new internship is beginning. What's next? If you're like most people, you're learning a new role, meeting new colleagues, and trying not to get lost looking for the copy machine. In this age of corporate scandal, though, everyone within an organization can be held accountable.

You're probably not thinking about ethics—yet. But just one ethical or legal mistake can bring down your career and possibly even your company. It doesn't matter if you've been in your position one day or 15 years. Fortunately, you don't have to be an ethics and compliance expert to get started on the right foot. Though you may not know what the future holds for your career, you can make sure it doesn't include mistakes caused by a lack of ethical intelligence.

Public companies are required to educate all employees (including interns) on the company's expectations, along with any specific policies or guidelines that apply to their job. And while not patently required, a majority of private companies follow suit. Since 1999, more than 400 companies, including many in the Fortune 500, have worked with Integrity Interactive to develop advanced compliance and ethics programs for their employees. One way to get a head start as an intern is to follow the principles set out below, which are premised upon those programs and which provide a strong framework for making ethical decisions and avoiding unethical actions no matter where in the world you do business.

### **Your Basic Integrity Guidelines**

1. Take personal responsibility for integrity. Guessing about ethical issues isn't good enough in today's world. You need to hold yourself personally responsible for knowing and following all of the company policies and guidelines that apply to your job. Read any policies you are sent, and complete all training you are assigned. Your company has established structures that are designed to protect the company and its employees from the risk of an ethical or legal violation. If you are stuck and you don't know an answer, ask for help. It's easier to prevent a problem than it is to fix one.

What this means:

- Take time to learn company policies and guidelines—even if you have a lot of "real" work on your plate.
- Never bend the rules—even if "everyone does it" or "that's the way they do things here."
- Don't accept a double standard when it comes to ethical behavior. It's simply not acceptable to say one thing and do another.
- You need to support company policies and guidelines. Never minimize or ridicule them.

- If you know about a violation, never conceal it to avoid "making waves" or because you're worried you'll get someone in trouble.

## **2. Practice good records management.**

All employees—even interns—have some responsibility for creating and maintaining business records. In some cases, the company may be required by law to create or to keep certain documents. Destroying, altering, disguising, or concealing business information—or withholding information required to be disclosed or reported to others—can get you into serious trouble. People have gone to jail for covering up even seemingly small problems.

Interns should not:

- Backdate or destroy records without proper authorization and oversight.
- Deliberately engage in careless recordkeeping.
- Conceal or deliberately mislay company documents and records.
- Create phony documents or records.
- Destroy customer complaints or claims.

## **3. Privacy, Intellectual Property & Security**

Interns must respect the privacy and confidentiality rights of co-workers, suppliers, business partners, customers, and the company itself. Likewise, interns must not make improper use of intellectual property belonging to others. Interns are expected to protect the company's patents, copyrights, trademarks, trade secrets, information systems, databases, tools, and technologies.

Interns should not:

- Carry confidential data off-site (e.g., on a laptop or USB drive) without security protection and permission.
- Give sensitive customer information to third parties without permission.
- Copy other people's work, ideas, or creative expression without permission.
- Use company computers and information systems for illegal, unethical, or nonwork activities.
- Use a disguise or assumed name to obtain valuable information from or about others.

## **4. Intern Rights & Working Conditions**

Interns should respect the rights of co-workers and treat co-workers with respect. Interns should not tolerate, engage in, or promote behaviors or practices that result in unacceptable working conditions for others.

Interns should not:

- Send off-color or inappropriate e-mail because "everyone thinks it's funny."
- Retaliate against others who report harassment or discrimination.
- Participate in uncomfortable conversations of a personal nature in the workplace.
- Discourage others from availing themselves of workplace rights, remedies, or benefits.
- Treat co-workers differently because of their age, race, gender, religion, ethnic background, national origin, sexual preference, or physical disability.

## **5. Consumer Protection**

Interns should not aid in the production or distribution of goods or services that contain design, manufacturing, or marketing defects that subject consumers to unreasonable dangers or risk of harm.

Interns should not:

- Ignore or disregard quality standards and controls.
- Sell products beyond their "sell by" date.
- Fail to report product and service defects to appropriate supervisors.
- Use unapproved materials or processes in order to meet a deadline.
- Alter or omit product labels, instructions, and directions without authorization.

## **6. Health, Safety & Environmental Protection**

Interns should not aid in the production or distribution of goods or services that cause injury or pose substantial risk of harm to public health, safety, or the environment.

Interns should not:

- Ignore or disregard proper safety procedures and requirements.

- Prevent or discourage others from following safety procedures and requirements.
- Use untrained personnel to perform jobs that require safety training.
- Perform jobs that require special training unless they have completed such training.
- Misuse, mislay, obscure, or disable safety equipment, warnings, and notices.
- Use ingredients, components, processes, or methods known to be unsafe.

Internships may be the best way to differentiate oneself from the crowd in this economy. The majority of internships are designed as a stepping-stone into a company, paving the way for the next chapter in your career. Bill Gates, Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, Patrick Ewing, and this author all began their careers with an internship. Conduct yourself in an ethical manner and work hard and you never know where things will lead.

Michael Levin is a vice-president at Integrity Interactive, and for more than eight years has worked with hundreds of global organizations to develop programs that prevent and detect corporate integrity violations. Levin also spent seven years as an attorney in Boston, specializing in litigation.