

Ethics case study

Principle 11: Transparency and Principle 12: Trustworthiness

1. Identify the problem

You have recently started to work on a freelance basis, having been employed in the careers world for some time. Suddenly you have no colleagues and no boss. There is no organisation setting standards for you and no-one monitoring your performance. This gives you freedom to make your own decisions. But, as ever, with freedom comes responsibility. You realise that you stand and fall on your own merits – that you are only as good as your last piece of work.

Putting this into practice can be harder than you thought. You realise that you now have to bid for work. This can feel like groping in the dark. You want to approach the bidding process in an open, transparent way but you feel that the other parties to and parts of the process are not always as transparent. Even when you are invited to bid, you don't necessarily know who you are bidding against - or how many competitors there are. If your bid is unsuccessful, you don't necessarily find out who was successful and at what price.

A successful bid and the start of a new contract can bring its own ethical dilemmas, too. Again, no-one is scrutinising your work on a daily basis. This where trust comes in – you want to be seen as someone who can be trusted. The client trusts you to fulfil the contract – and you have to trust your ability to do that.

On many contracts, you submit a piece of work (by the deadline, of course!) and hear nothing. You rarely receive feedback. Or on contracts involving delivery, you turn up at the agreed venue, provide the service to your clients, complete the necessary paperwork – and leave.

After years of team leaders, managers and other hierarchical layers and time spent on team meetings, appraisals and project updates, you find this refreshing but at the same time disorientating. You are coming to terms with, in the main, never meeting your clients. Most of your tendering and contracting is done by email with the occasional phone call where necessary. The closest you get to a meeting your client could be their picture on the website!

Members of the public have to be able to trust you – whether you are delivering coaching or guidance services or if you are using their information for LMI and careers information. Even when they are not the 'client' who is paying you for your services, they still deserve that you act in a trustworthy way (maybe more so than the payer?)

What type of problem is it?

- a) Organisational - but you are the 'organisation'. You have to make business decisions that allow you to maintain a livelihood
- b) Professional: you are setting your own standards of behaviour towards clients and their information

Questions to address include

Organisational

- a) How to find and get work?
- b) Do you work in collaboration with colleagues or in competition?
- c) How to price your work to be competitive and earn a living
- d) How do you choose which organisations to work with/for?
- e) Do you share information with colleagues/competitors?
- f) How to ensure client/business confidentiality

Professional

- a) What constitutes an acceptable standard?
- b) Do you strive for more than 'acceptable'?
- c) Do you work to clients' standards or your own?
- d) Any conflict between standards and competitiveness?
- e) Can I ask for a testimonial?

2. Apply the code of ethics

As ever, more than one principle is involved. You are doing complex work in an increasingly complex world. Two principles from the CDI Code of Ethics which are particularly relevant to self-employed work are Principle 11 Transparency and Principle 12 Trustworthiness.

Principle 11 of Code (Transparency) states that:

Members must provide career development services and activities in an open and transparent manner

Principle 12 of the Code (Trustworthiness) states that:

Members must act in accordance with the trust placed in them, ensure that the clients' expectations are ones that have reasonable expectations of being met and honour agreements and promises

3. Review of relevant professional literature

Likely to be mainly web-based.

4. Consult with experienced professional colleagues and/or supervisors and/or relevant professional body

These could include:

- Colleagues who have been self-employed longer than you in the career development world

- Self-employed colleagues from other fields
- A mentor or coach
- Business support or start up organisations
- Statutory authorities – Information Commissioner, HMRC, etc
- Intellectual property protection and rights eg PLR, ALCS
- Solicitor, accountant, tax expert, insurance possibly

5. Potential courses of action

Research the availability and appropriateness of, for example

- CDI networks and regional meetings
- Professional networks in your area
- Informal networks in your area eg Women in Business, etc
- Relevant professional bodies eg Careers Writers Association, International Coach Federation, CDI interest groups as appropriate
- Business organisations such as Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, Local Authority Enterprise Support
- Business mentoring, where available
- Engage the services of a professional coach/mentor
- Attend enterprise/small business start-up courses
- Attend HMRC information/training sessions
- Online fora for your area of interest

including the option to

- Practice without considering the Code of Ethics.

6. Select the most appropriate course of action

Consider the potential consequences of all actions and select those that best fit the situation. This might depend on the nature of the work you are undertaking and therefore may change over time. Some may be one-off (HMRC training), some annual (Data Protection Registration), others on-going (mentoring or coaching).

This would include an understanding of the implications of choosing to operate without the Code of Ethics.

7. Evaluate the selected course of action

The test of justice: you feel that this is a course of action you would feel happy with for someone you cared about. You believe that the wishes of the client have been respected and that external pressures have been addressed.

The test of accountability: you feel that you would be happy if this course of action were reported to your professional colleagues. You are comfortable that the press/ public would see your actions as being impartial and client centred.

The test of universality: you would be comfortable recommending this course of action as a valid option to other professionals.

8 Implement the course of action

Having considered the potential consequences of all actions you select those that best fit the situation taking into account all circumstances.

You implement your course of action by making it clear in every bid that you work in accordance with the CDI Code of Ethics.

9 Monitor and evaluate outcome

Learn from your choices. Reflect on the lessons that emerged from this case and the ethical issues it raised.

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