

Ethikos Volume 35, Number 2. March 25, 2021 Pioneers in business ethics: Joan Elise Dubinsky

Joan Dubinsky, (dubinsky@erols.com) JD, has been a champion for ethics, compliance, and responsible business conduct within the international, government, nonprofit, and business sectors for more than 30 years. She is a leader in the global business ethics movement, having served as the chief ethicist for several leading international organizations and corporations, including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, BAE Systems Inc., and the American Red Cross. Dubinsky was interviewed by **Patricia Werhane**, PhD.

A note on this series: In the last 40 years or so, an entirely new academic and occupational niche for practicing ethics in business has emerged. Many of the original academic business ethicists came to the field through philosophy, then brought their thinking and research into business schools. Many of the original practitioners came to the field through the law and remain close to the practice of law.

In an effort to preserve and share this knowledge and practical experience, the Center for Professional Responsibility in Business and Society at the University of Illinois Gies College of Business has filmed and transcribed the oral histories of these pioneers and early adopters. To date, almost 50 academics and practitioners have been interviewed, each with 25 years or more of experience in the field of business ethics. This series aims to provide a better understanding of how the business ethics field and profession have evolved over the decades, through the interviewees' own experiences. This interview was condensed for clarity and brevity.

PW: Let's start with a quick career overview.

JD: I am a “somewhat retired” business ethicist. My first assignment as a chief ethics officer was for the American Red Cross, starting in 1987. In 1994, I created a blended role as corporate counsel and compliance officer for The MITRE Corporation. Then, I took a detour to work as a consultant in responsible business practices at the late Arthur Andersen. Though I disliked working at a Big Five firm,^[1] I enjoyed the world of consulting and ran my own boutique management consulting practice for several years. That led to a five-year assignment as the chief ethics officer for the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 2010, I accepted an offer I could not refuse—to serve as the chief ethics officer for the United Nations (UN) through 2015.

PW: Tell me about how you “did” ethics at the United Nations.

JD: Ethics at the UN requires endless difficult conversations, and it's fraught with international political and diplomatic booby traps. The main idea is that all UN staff are bound by a shared set of ethical values and a passion to pursue peace and security, sustainability, the rule of law, and international development. Everyone assumes that staff members will swear allegiance only to the UN, forswearing loyalty to their country of origin. In reality, personal values and national loyalties are really hard to set aside.

This document is only available to subscribers. Please log in or purchase access.

[Purchase Login](#)