

ethikos Volume 34, Number 9. September 01, 2020 Communicating ethics to a changing audience

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Most organizations expend quite a bit of effort and expense in defining the ethics that inform their operations. We can probably agree on many of those foundational principles that companies adopt to guide their workers. There is much written on the content of those ethical principles and the elements of compliance and ethics programs, but the way those principles are conveyed is easily ignored. Sure, most everyone agrees that each company needs some type of documentation that outlines what should inform decision-making. But often there is not much thought put into *how* those things are said.

Forms of communication

So, how should those communications be set up? The way policies and codes of conduct are written has changed very little over the years, except that they are generally available in digital format and not just in a written policy binder. Yet, the 21st century has seen drastic changes in the ways people communicate. Those changes should translate to the workplace. Additionally, the workforce is seeing significant shifts as younger workers displace those retiring. That means organizations need to adjust how they communicate critical aspects of their operations, particularly ethical guidelines and principles that drive how those organizations work.

Organizations must communicate their principles through various methods, including policies, procedures, codes of ethics, and education materials. Clear communication is concise and direct. Yet, the format and presentation of this information often does not fit that model. Policies and codes of conduct, and by extension the way they are presented in education or training, are usually very formulaic. That nature can make them vague and hard to read.

Communication is no longer hierarchical, yet organizations often fail to tailor their ethics communications to account for this reality. Good ethics documents should be utilitarian—quick, concise, and informative. They should be easy to navigate. These concepts are even more important today than they have ever been in the workplace.

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