

# ETHICS AND YOUR EMPLOYABILITY

(The flipside of “How to Choose an Ethical Employer”©)

Have you noticed how many times job ads ask for someone with integrity, ethics, high professional standards and commitment to the organisation’s values? What do organisations actually mean by this?

## KNOW THE TERMINOLOGY!

### ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

- These are **high level statements** that provide an understanding of what the company or organisation stands for and may be described as Corporate Values, Vision or Purpose, Mission Statement or even Goals and Objectives.
- With the move from an industrialized to a **knowledge society** there has been a shift in organisational culture and values, which now place a premium on balancing respect for all key stakeholders (employees, community, customers, environment, investors/shareholders), tolerance of diversity and rising expectations for interpersonal communication skills, integrity and professionalism.
- Thus values **commonly include** - commitment to teamwork, honesty, integrity, respect for stakeholders, (e.g. community, customers, staff) professionalism, achievement, and in the private sector a commitment to profitability, creating value for shareholders. E.g. Westpac: “One team, delighting customers, achievement, integrity, valuing each other.”
- Simultaneously concepts of corporate responsibility/sustainability, global citizenship have emerged. A new form of ethics, Global Ethics now ranks highly in organisational values e.g. Microsoft’s commitment to “responsible global citizenship”. Broadly **Global Ethics** encompasses an awareness of and concern for the social and environmental impacts of both the individual and organisation and acknowledges the implicit social contract involved in running a business. In this way companies hope to manage any **reputational risk** - of critical importance in the global marketplace.
- **Your ability to engage in ethical reflection over these issues will increasingly affect your employability.** Universities are beginning to recognize this and may include a version of global citizenship or ethical and professional understanding in their **graduate attributes**.

### CODES OF ETHICS AND CODES OF CONDUCT

In turn organisational values are drawn upon to guide everyday business practice and decision-making throughout the organisation, becoming articulated into more detailed principles and policies including codes of ethics and conduct. Each code has a different function:

- A **Code of Ethics** expresses fundamental principles that provide guidance in cases where no specific rule is in place or where matters are genuinely unclear. Therefore they **require ethical judgment**, for example: “Act with integrity in all business dealings.”
- A **Code of Conduct** will provide much more specific guidance and rules consistent with the code of ethics e.g. “Where conducting business never accept bribes.” Note the Code of Conduct is much more prescriptive.
- In turn these codes lead to **specific objectives and targets** for an organisation.

### INTEGRITY

Integrity means holding true to one’s values and acting consistently with these - knowing what is important to you and living your actions accordingly. **Within an organisational context** integrity can be taken to mean acting consistently in the spirit of the organisation’s values. As reputational risk grows in importance for business, integrity has become an important attribute for the job-seeker.

### COMPLIANCE

Compliance is the process by which organisations manage their obligations arising from the law, industry standards, and codes. A purely legal focus on obligations is not enough to properly manage all compliance risks. An organisation with a strong ethical base (demonstrated in its values and ethical codes) usually leads to reduced risk, a lower cost of doing business and greater market appeal.

### REFERENCES AND OTHER PLACES TO GO

EthicsWorld.org: [www.ethicsworld.org/](http://www.ethicsworld.org/)  
Ethics Updates: <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/>  
HUB of Responsible Business <http://thehub.ethics.org.au/>  
Professions Australia: [www.professions.com.au/](http://www.professions.com.au/)  
St James Ethics Centre: [www.ethics.org.au/](http://www.ethics.org.au/)

### TEST YOUR VALUES

My Guide: [www.myfuture.edu.au](http://www.myfuture.edu.au)  
Career Ethics: [www.careerethics.com.au/](http://www.careerethics.com.au/)

“YOUR TURN” OVER PAGE ...

*“As an organisation we have an expectation that graduates are able to understand these issues, can form an opinion and clearly articulate their views on the subject.” Westpac*

## Your Turn

1. **Be clear about what is expected** and consider your personal values in relation to the stated organisational values. Are they in broad alignment? For example is “Strive for profitability” (Macquarie Bank) an important value to you? What about “Respect: Value every voice” (ANZ Bank) or “The APS provides a fair, flexible, safe and rewarding workplace” (Australian Public Service)?
2. **How can you tell** if espoused values, codes of ethics and conduct are genuine and integrated? Look for:
  - regular review and the opportunity for staff to contribute to this discussion; employee engagement surveys,
  - modeling from the top of the organisation down
  - a commitment to operationalise values throughout the organisation through things like induction of new staff, training and values surveys.
  - For example, if a company values statement includes “Our people are our most valuable resource”, how respectfully do they manage for example staff redundancies? What is the rate of staff turnover?
3. **Applying for Jobs.** This is where you first begin to demonstrate your integrity in the job seeking process. Graduate Employers have named the following as important issues:
  - Display honesty, integrity, genuineness in the process and in return expect to be treated with the same level of respect.
  - Honesty in your CV - lying can be detected by a good interviewer and can ruin your reputation.
  - Honour your commitments once you have accepted a job offer - make a commitment to the process, once an offer is signed it is considered binding.
  - Communicate with the company if your circumstances have changed as soon as possible.
  - Consider the goodness-of-fit of your personal values with those of the employer - genuinely reflect on these and be ready to discuss. This ties in with self-awareness and communication skills - both highly regarded by employers.
  - Included in the top 10 least desirable characteristics by graduate recruiters: arrogance, selfishness, aggression, domineering behaviour and displayed lack of work ethic.(Graduate Careers Australia)
4. **Handling multiple job offers.** This is a tricky area to navigate yet one which provides an opportunity to demonstrate your integrity:
  - Give employers the chance to promote themselves if you have multiple offers.
  - You may ask the employer for an extension of time to consider an offer - this will be up to the discretion of the employer.
  - You may ask the employer questions and clarification over terms and conditions in their offer of employment as well as seeking external advice if you are concerned.
  - Once an offer is accepted it should be honoured. Alternatively by declining an offer as soon as possible other applicants can then be made an offer in your place. The guiding principle here is mutual respect.

## ONCE YOU'VE GOT THE JOB... AND INTO THE FUTURE

The story on being an ethical employee does not end here. Once employed you will come up against a range of ethical issues, some larger than others. To assist you in negotiating these remember the following:

- Most large companies have codes of ethics and conduct, and may also have in place guidelines for whistleblower protection. Get to know these. Be aware that whistle-blowing can have a major impact on your career so proceed in a well researched, resourced and supported manner.
- For most professions and industries there will be a relevant **professional association or industry body** which will include a number of resources including a code of ethics, guidelines on handling ethical dilemmas in your field and even peers to discuss your particular issue with.
- Occasionally it is possible that one's professional code of ethics is in conflict with the employing organisation's practices. Again, seek assistance from your association to discuss.
- Where your employer has no code of ethics/conduct for guidance -perhaps because it is a small organisation or you are sole practitioner, professional associations and industry bodies are especially helpful.
- Depending on the nature of your employment there should be a relevant **union**. Again, these may offer their members a number of services including advice and advocacy relating to employment.
- One helpful way to source your relevant Professional Associations, Industry bodies and Unions is to use the government publication “JobGuide”-available on line at: <http://jobguide.dest.gov.au/> . Search for your occupation, and look under the Further Information in your state.