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SBA professor makes ethics easier

In today's corporate environment, leaders are faced with tough ethical decisions that can dramatically affect the lives of employees. The results of five years of research by Kieran Mathieson, OU associate professor of Management Information Systems, may help. Mathieson's research to develop the Dioptra software program included studying how corporations approach business ethics questions.

"In real companies, doing ethics work is risky," says Mathieson. "Ethical discussions can be very emotional. I want to make it easier for business teams to make tough choices, without emotional conflict tearing the teams apart."

Mathieson created Dioptra, software that can help teams make ethical decisions. "Dioptra doesn't do any of the work for you," he said.

"Computers can't make ethical decisions. They aren't smart enough. Instead, Dioptra helps teams use work processes that can yield good decisions."

"Dioptra doesn't do anything that teams couldn't do on paper," Mathieson added. "The software just helps control the chaos."

For example, Dioptra offers a simple decision framework, suggesting things people should think about if they want to make good decisions. Ethical discussions often wander all over the place. The framework helps keep things on track.

"Another problem is that people with good ideas are silenced," he said. "Sometimes the loudest voice wins. Quiet, thoughtful people are shut out. Or if the boss is on the team, people are afraid to speak up. Good ideas are lost, and the decision suffers."

Dioptra helps overcome these problems. People can type in ideas at the same time, and not interfere with each other. Participants also can send anonymous messages.

"Research shows that people are more honest when they can be anonymous," he said.

Security is also a major issue. "It's important that private discussions remain private. Dioptra is securable. For example, suppose you've been using Dioptra, and your laptop is stolen. Because all data is kept on a server, the Dioptra project will not be compromised," he said.

There are limits to what Dioptra can do, Mathieson said.

"Dioptra is designed for well-intentioned people working in a company with an ethical culture. Too many companies only care about the quarterly numbers. Ethics and long-term profitability take a backseat. Dioptra will be able to help some teams in those companies, but it won't be as effective as it might be," he said.

To learn more about Dioptra, visit <http://dioptra.org>, or e-mail mathieso@oakland.edu.

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SUMMARY

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