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OU professors study genetic testing and discrimination

By **Rebecca Wyatt Thomas**, OU Web Writer

It seems like something out of a sci-fi movie. Potential employees turn over their genetic information to their future employers during the interview process. While it seems like fiction, OU professors Lizabeth Barclay and Karen Markel have been researching the possibility of this becoming a reality. Their research will help keep OU human resource management students up-to-date on how to handle sensitive information and the potential outcomes that come with collecting it.

The Human Genome Program is a research program to map and understand all of the genes of human beings. Armed with the location of specific genes, scientists are working toward treating genetically-related diseases and other afflictions. Some writers have suggested that the genome will also provide information about human character traits.

Barclay and Markel are researching how this information relates to those in human resource management.

"are many different ways that genetic information could tie into human resource management practices," Barclay said. "It makes rational sense that companies might want to screen their employees; however, there are many ethical issues that need to be addressed"

While there are many possibilities for the information obtained through the project, there are also issues for organizations that have not been examined to date. The topic is important to business ethics and Barclay and Markel want to relay that information to business students. In addition, the topic has multidisciplinary implications. The Honors College hosted a panel discussion on the topic and faculty from SBA, biology, mathematics and statistics and laboratory science took part.

Barclay, who is interested in genetic testing, and Markel, who is interested in the disabilities side of human resources, teamed up about four years ago to start researching how companies are handling the genetic information.

"This genetic information is very personal information. The genetic information of employees also provides information about their families," Barclay said. This is information that has not traditionally been available to organizations.

While some companies may consider genetic screening in the future, others test those in at-risk work environments for mutations that could occur because of workplace exposure. A good example of this would be in the nuclear power industry.

Barclay and Markel said there is a lot of responsibility for companies participating in genetic testing. They are researching and exploring not only the legal and ethical responsibilities but also the stigmatization that comes along with genetic information. Knowing a person's predisposition for certain diseases or ailments creates a risk for stigmatization from others within the organization and self-stigmatization.

Barclay and Markel have attended conferences on genetic testing and have also done a lot reading as part of their research. Since very few HR researchers are looking into genetic testing, there is very little literature available in their area of study. Barclay and Markel relied on information from ethicists, doctors and lawyers.

They soon plan to start gathering data about genetic testing. With such a sensitive subject matter, it is difficult to acquire data. They plan to study judicial decisions and legislation, genetic testing centers, advocacy organizations and labor organizations. They also plan to use focus groups and case studies.

"It's too early to gather how the information is being used," said Markel.

Barclay and Markel want to apply the information in the classroom. They said they would explain the legal and ethic issues behind genetic testing and provide cases and examples for how it has been used and misused.

So far, their research has been reported in a book chapter, several scholarly publications as well as presented at a variety of academic conferences.

SUMMARY

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