"with great difficulty..."

The assessment of attitudes and ethics at work and in training
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by Rilda Mossop
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all those people who participated in an interview to discuss a range of issues surrounding the assessment of attitudes, values and ethics.

Thanks for the input of the focus group who made an essential contribution to the formulation of this paper.

Thanks to Louise Fenley for commencing the investigation that led to the production of this paper.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................ i

Why are we looking at the assessment of attitudes and ethics? .................... 1

Who is the paper for? .................................................................................. 1

How was the information obtained? ......................................................... 1

What are attitudes and ethics? ................................................................. 2

Why do we need to clarify attitudes and ethics at work? ....................... 2

Why assess attitudes and ethics? ............................................................ 3

How are attitudes and ethics treated in competency standards? ............ 4

How are attitudes and ethics assessed against competencies in the workplace? ................................................................. 9

How are attitudes and ethics handled in recruitment? ......................... 10

How are ethics managed in enterprises? .............................................. 11

Where to from here? .............................................................................. 13

Appendix A
Why are we looking at the assessment of attitudes and ethics?

The production of this paper was triggered by:

- requests from the Centre's clients for assistance in the assessment of attitudes and ethics.
- the introduction of competency standards and assessment against standards in industry, including assessment of attitudes and ethics.
- competency based training and the need for valid assessment of all aspects of competency.
- interest in the development and implementation of values statements and codes of ethics by enterprises; for example to assist in developing a client focused culture, to improve safety or the quality of service provided or goods produced.

This paper will:

- give examples of how assessment of attitudes and ethics are managed now
- identify areas of concern
- raise issues for further discussion and investigation.

Who is the paper for?

This paper is for anyone interested in how to assess attitudes and ethics in the workplace and/or within the delivery and assessment of vocational education and training programs.

How was the information obtained?

The information on which this paper is based was gained from a review of the literature and a series of structured interviews with people from the following areas:

- private enterprise
- unions
- employer organisations
- professional associations
- government departments
- higher education institutions

1 A paper giving details of the research is available from the Centre for Vocational Assessment Research
What are attitudes and ethics?

At one level, we all have an idea of what attitudes are. To say that we have a certain attitude towards something or someone is a shorthand way of saying that we have feelings or thoughts of like or dislike, approval or disapproval, attraction or repulsion, trust or distrust.

Such feelings will tend to be reflected in what we say or do, and in how we react to what others say and do. For example, one has an attitude towards the environment, towards people of other races, towards sport and so on. One’s values then, are one’s most central, personal and generally well-formed, attitudes. Values are those attitudes which one will strongly support or defend. It is not the role of workplaces or training programs to assess a person’s values.

Ethics in its broadest sense is the study of a way of life - its values, its rules and justifications. It begins with a concern for individual character - including what we call ‘being a good person’ - but it is also the effort to understand the social rules which govern and limit our behaviour, especially those higher order rules which we call morality.

Why do we need to clarify attitudes and ethics at work?

Employment is based on an agreement between the worker and the employer. We assume a person taking a job gets paid to perform the tasks required, safely and to the best of his/her ability, to cooperate with other workers, exercise technical skills and knowledge and so on. We also assume that the person is expected to comply with the attitudes and ethics required for that job. An assessment of whether the person is performing satisfactorily in a job will include assessing all the required competencies including those with an attitudinal component.

What is appropriate and possible to assess is the behaviour that is suitable for a particular job role or occupation, not the attitudes that lie behind that behaviour.

Clearly all workplaces have particular ethics and values, regardless of whether they are written down in a formal sense or not. Similarly, employers have expectations about their employees’ behaviour that they may or may not make explicit to them.
This paper suggests that it is preferable that employees are made aware of those expectations so that they can more readily conform to the behavioural "norm" for that workplace. This is particularly important for inexperienced or younger workers.

In addition, the application of ethical principles (or expectations) in a particular context is not always black and white. Sometimes a subtle or complex discussion is necessary to spell out how they are to be applied in a particular situation.

**EXAMPLE**

In clubs and pubs, even though the service of alcohol is covered by laws and regulations, attitudes will still vary considerably on where to draw the line and when to refuse to serve a customer who appears drunk. Bar attendants need to know what the ethics of their particular establishment are on this subject in order to know how to deal appropriately with the customer.

**Why assess attitudes and ethics?**

As with assessment at work in general, attitudes and ethics are assessed for a variety of reasons:

- ✓ to assess competency against industry competency standards
- ✓ in selection for employment
- ✓ for completion of a training program and/or gaining a qualification
- ✓ for professional recognition
- ✓ to assess the results of training
- ✓ in selection for promotion
- ✓ deployment to a sensitive task
- ✓ to gain a licence

If ethical considerations are relevant to an occupation, then they should be assessed within all of the above purposes.

Their assessment will vary according to the purpose of the assessment.
How are attitudes and ethics treated in competency standards?

Industries have progressively developed sets of standards to describe the competencies required by workers in that industry. There has been much discussion about whether and how attitudes and ethics should be included in competency standards. At present the relationship between them and competency standards is illustrated by the following examples:

**Most sets of standards include some reference to appropriate attitudes and ethics**

*In some cases this is explicit, as in the following elements:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retail Industry</td>
<td>Act in a non-discriminatory manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressing Industry</td>
<td>Apply professional ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged Care</td>
<td>Communicate with aged persons respectfully and in a culturally appropriate manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical-Administrative area</td>
<td>Maintain security of the filing system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*And in standards which have been developed for professional organisations:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Therapists</td>
<td>Practise in an ethical and professional manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Engineers</td>
<td>Develop and promote environmental principles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Competency standards for the professions often refer to the code of ethics for that profession.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional engineers</td>
<td>Follow an accepted code of ethics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In other cases attitude and ethics are implied in the elements or the performance criteria; for example:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tourism Industry</td>
<td>Undertake a public relations role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the Horticulture Industry

Apply chemical and biological agents; (where an ethical response to questions of public and environmental safety is implied)

In the Manufacturing Industry

Engage in quality improvement

The inclusion of an attitudinal or ethical component in competency standards, either explicit or implied, has the following implications:

1. They need to be assessed in the workplace

If the ethical component of competency standards is to be assessed, we need to specify what constitutes ethical behaviour in that context. Units and elements of competency (and their performance criteria) need to describe the kinds of acceptable behaviour required for that unit or set of tasks.

Guidance on appropriate strategies for assessment of attitudes in the workplace needs to be provided. Competency standards currently under review or recently reviewed should include comprehensive evidence guides for conducting assessments. They should contain guidance on the critical aspects of competency to be assessed, including assessment of attitudes and ethics.

**EXAMPLE**

In a retail environment, it is important to demonstrate non-racist attitudes (Element of competency standard: Act in a non-discriminatory manner). One way of assessing these attitudes in this context is to look at them and customer service skills together and determine that, in this role, non-racist behaviour means that:

- ✓ customers are greeted politely and respectfully
- ✓ they are served in order of their arrival
- ✓ if they are not fluent in English, they are treated with patience and every effort is made to meet their needs.
**EXAMPLE**

As a doctor’s receptionist, it is essential to maintain confidentiality (Element of competency standard: **Maintain security of the filing system**).

The requirement to maintain confidentiality is assessed in combination with office procedures and communication skills. In this role maintaining confidentiality means that:

- client’s records are appropriately filed
- client’s details and test results are not left where others could read them
- access to files or information about clients is not given to unauthorised people
- information gained in confidence is not discussed with colleagues or friends.

**EXAMPLE**

In a manufacturing environment, it is important while appropriate attitude in relation to working safely. The attitude relating to safety is assessed in combination with the technical skills of operating the machine. In this role appropriate **behaviour** relating to safety means:

- following all the safety requirements of the enterprise
- using guards and personal protective equipment at all times
- undertaking all safety checks as required
- informing supervisor and fellow workers of any dangers
- complying with restrictive tags attached to the machine
- not doing anything that might endanger any one else.
2. They need to be included in training programs

- Training programs based on those standards need to have the ethical components clearly identified.

- Training strategies need to be adopted that assist in clarifying values and ethics.

**EXAMPLE**

Structure the training program to provide opportunities to:

- Discuss ethical questions and review ethical dilemmas look at different points of view.
- Identify possible actions.
- Determine preferred solutions.

- Training strategies need to be adopted that demonstrate how appropriate attitudes and ethical behaviour can be applied to and used as a basis for decision making in workplace situations.

**EXAMPLE**

Study of incidents and/or decisions taken from an enterprise, and identify the underlying attitudes and ethics.

- What decisions will result if ethical considerations are taken into account?
- What decisions will result if they are ignored?

- Training strategies need to be adopted that allow for discussion of what ethical behaviour in a particular occupational context is.

**EXAMPLE**

Identify an occupational role, for example, a vocational education teacher or trainer.

- What might be the appropriate attitudes and ethical behaviour that apply in that situation?
- What would constitute unethical behaviour?
3. They need to be assessed in training programs

- Teachers/trainers need to be made aware of appropriate strategies for assessing attitudes and ethics within training programs:

**EXAMPLE**

✓ Identify appropriate behaviour in a particular context.

For example, in a course to train Aboriginal health care workers, the assessment task (linked to the competency standards) might be the development of a plan for assessing the counselling needs of a community.

✓ Discuss a hypothetical situation covering an ethical dilemma and the selection of a preferred solution.

The following situation applies in a number of occupational roles such as in child care or working with machinery in a manufacturing environment. A fellow worker confides in you that she has a drug problem but that she is getting it under control. She asks you not to tell anyone. What do you do?

- Evidence guides within competency standards and curriculum should provide teachers/trainers with direction and information on which aspects of competency are critical to be assessed and how to integrate the attitudinal component with other aspects of competency, in training and assessment.
How are attitudes and ethics assessed against competencies in the workplace?

The assessment of attitudes and ethics is generally agreed to be difficult. Suggestions for sound practice are as follows:

- Assess them in combination with other skills used in an occupational role in a particular context. For example, assess a non racist approach in combination with customer service skills.

- Specify the ethical behaviours for a particular occupational role. For example, in child care, give all children the same level of attention and care, respect the culture of the parents.

- In many workplace situations it is more appropriate to adopt a holistic approach to assessment, that is to assess a complete workplace activity which covers a number of specific competencies. Assessment of attitudes could be combined with a number of other competencies in this type of assessment. For example in the child care situation in a multicultural area, communication skills and non racist behaviour could be assessed in a situation where a worker is interacting with a group of parents.

- Use the results of the assessment for constructive feedback to the person and possibly as the basis for a personal development plan. Relating to the previous example, arrange opportunities for workers to gain a better understanding of a variety of cultures.

- Involve a number of people in the assessment process - supervisor/team leader, manager, team, and so on.

- Gather evidence based on observation of behaviour over time rather than based on a particular event and from a range of sources.

- Use a combination of methods such as observation of a person's behaviour over a period of time, surveys, audit of a person's area of responsibility, or interviews in which situations that presented ethical dilemmas are discussed.

MOST RECOMMENDED METHOD

The method of assessment most recommended by those contacted was an assessment of actual behaviour at work carried out over a period of time, possibly combined with a specific assessment activity that was clearly linked to the identification of ethical behaviour.

An example of an assessment activity might be a task which involved developing a strategy to encourage ethical behaviour in a group of workers, or reviewing a number of work related situations involving ethical issues; developing a number of ways of handling them and recommending the most appropriate.
Assessment of attitudes and ethics in a simulated workplace environment may also be a viable alternative.

**Issues**

This investigation has highlighted a number of areas where more discussion and further research are needed:

- What are appropriate strategies for assessing attitudes and ethics? How can their validity and effectiveness be evaluated?
- What types of assistance or resources need to be provided to assessors to help in their assessment at work?
- If ethics and attitudes are included in standards, what is the best way to:
  - clarify this component of the competency units?
  - identify the behaviours that demonstrate appropriate attitudes and ethics in an occupational role?
- What ethical concerns could arise from specifying attitudinal requirements in competency standards?

**How are attitudes and ethics handled in recruitment?**

Investigation has identified the fact that assessment of attitudes and ethics in relation to currently employed workers and those seeking employment are rather different processes because they are assessed for different purposes.

- The assessment of attitudes and ethics in relation to current workers is intended to measure whether they behave ethically in their job.
- Their assessment in selection for employment is seeking to measure how well the person's ethics and attitudes match the organisation's, and whether he/she has aptitude for the job.

Obviously there is also strong commonality between assessment for these two purposes, as is shown by the fact that, in recruitment, referees and supervisors are often contacted to discuss behaviour in previous jobs.

**Methods used in selection for employment include:**

- interviews which make use of questions in which the context is carefully described and the applicant is asked for solutions to a hypothetical situation often involving an ethical dilemma
- psychometric testing
• assessment by an assessment centre - this usually involves testing a number of people together with observers from the prospective employer and uses writing skills, problem solving (paper and pencil, and in a team) and role plays to evaluate the applicant

• various group processes which simulate situations likely to occur in the workplace

• referee checks

It is important to clarify the ethical component in selection criteria. In current examples, some of the questions asked at interviews are linked to attitudes and ethics, but exactly what they are attempting to measure is unclear.

**EXAMPLE**

*As a question to a young job seeker:*

"Do you play football?" "Did you belong to the Scouts?"

An affirmative answer could possibly be taken to indicate that the person was capable of cooperating in a team, but, if the person did not play a team sport or belong to the Scouts, it would not necessarily be an indication that they were not a good team worker.

**Issues**

• What is the best way to assess the attitudes and ethical behaviour required by the enterprise or identified as required in a particular occupational role in selection for employment?

**How are ethics managed in enterprises?**

Many enterprises have developed codes of ethics and values statements and intend to use them as the basis for decision making, to assist them in becoming more client focused and increase productivity.

**Codes of ethics and value statements are most influential when:**

• the ethics statements are developed with input from people at all levels of the organisation

• their application is based on discussion of how the ethics statement applies in that context

• the gap between the official code and the informal code is narrow

• the workplace culture is one in which ethical questions are discussed.
Codes of ethics and values statements are promoted in enterprises through:

- training programs
- discussions with groups of workers in a section or at a particular site
- senior managers/supervisors and others modelling appropriate behaviour

Issues

- What are the most effective strategies for developing ownership and commitment to an enterprise code of ethics or a values statement?
- How can the work culture be changed to encourage discussion of ethical questions and dilemmas?
Where to from here?

This investigation found that, although attitudes and ethics are included in most sets of competency standards, covered to some extent in assessment in the workplace and in training, and are considered to be important in recruitment, they are more usually implied rather than explicit.

The result of this is that there is a lack of clarity about how they are handled in assessment, training and recruitment, with the resulting possibility that the assessment process is either inequitable or at least open to question. Where they are explicitly referred to, they are often very broad and general.

While this paper has identified a number of issues for further discussion and research, the following activities seem to be particularly important in clarifying the position of attitudes and ethics in standards and training, and in improving their assessment in the workplace.

- Those responsible for developing or reviewing standards need to decide whether they are to be included. If they are, they then need to clarify and specify what behaviours are evidence of appropriate attitudes.

- The development of guidelines and resource materials should be undertaken to assist assessors/trainers. These should be designed to identify appropriate and valid strategies for addressing the attitudinal/ethical components within standards and training programs. They could be based on a number of case studies of:

1. enterprises who are currently assessing against the competency standards for their industry, and including attitudes/ethics

2. programs which have integrated attitudes and ethics into their training and assessment.
Appendix A

Interview Topics

Topics for discussion in the interview will include but not be limited to:

**Issues Related to Competency Standards**

1. Are the competency standards in your industry/area? (Give details)
2. Are there units that include attitudes, ethics and values? (Give details)
3. How do you intend to assess them?
4. What is the purpose of this assessment?
5. Are there particular attitudes that your organisation wishes to promote?

**Training**

6. Does the education and training in your area promote certain attitudes and ethics?
7. What strategies does it use?
8. Who provides this training?

**Issues Related to Organisations Code of Ethics**

9. Does this organisation have a code of ethics, or values or mission statement?
10. How is compliance monitored?
11. Does it relate to your assessment practices? (Give details)
12. How does it relate to general workplace performance?
13. Have you any examples of where the culture of a work group is at odds with the organisational ethics? Please describe.
14. Do you have examples of bad results following from inappropriate attitudes?
15. Would you identify dilemmas or difficulties which arise from the assessment of attitudes and values?

Suggestions for further investigation or research.
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