

Policies, Principles and Technology: Ethics and Standardization through the Ethic of Systematic Coherence.

Long paper

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Abstract. The importance of policies in the workplace is that they are intended to assist with governance. With the introduction and development of technology in the workplace, policies are used as guidelines in governance. Policies have become more crucial because technology introduces unique working conditions, such as employees attending staff meetings online in the comfort of their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. These policies also act as a communication tool between employers and employees, where the expected conduct within the workplace is established. When these very policies are drafted by a small number of executives in the company, with the use of concepts which are not effective for this governance, then policy vacuums become evident. Consequently, this not only causes exclusion in the policies formation process, but in addition creates a rift between the drafters of the policies and the employees whom the policies are created for. As a result, the conceptual vacuum speaks to the policy vacuum, as articulated by James H Moor (1985). Through the use of a particular corporation in South Africa, the purpose of this paper is to address these vacuums, with the aim of identifying a perspective that serves as a tool for ethics and standardization in the workplace.

Keywords: Technology, Principles, policies

1 Introduction

Technology forms a huge part of modernity that humanity cannot escape, to the point that it is entrenched into the day to day life of human beings. This entrenched nature of technology in society is fed by how, in its development, is an enabler in human tasks, such as travelling, communicating, and executing tasks in a more efficient manner. Maley (2004:72) adds that the rate of development of technology surpasses human being's ability to use it. In fact, Maley continues to argue that technology is advancing

so much that human beings end up knowing less about how technology really works. In the context of this research, technology will be observed in the workplace. The introduction of technology such as Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the workspace must not come at the cost of ethical conduct. Policies serve as one of the means through which the technological development in the workplace does not leave behind the ethics which need to be integrated with the technology in the workplace.

To address this, it is important to revisit the discourse by James H Moor about technology and policies [in the workplace]. Moor argues that the predicament of [computer] technology is that its policy vacuum feeds its conceptual vacuum, (1985:266). In other words, technology presents the quagmire that the more humans beings familiarise themselves with technology, the more they have the responsibility to understand the concepts which come with this familiarisation. In the context of the workplace, it could be the case that employers and employees working with technology are grappling with this phenomenon. In essence, both conceptual and policy vacuums become bigger and bigger. What makes this worth paying attention to is that the creation of policy can be informed by the understanding of concepts, and with these vacuums it becomes quite problematic to formulate policies. It would then be challenging for employers to enforce policies that will guide the productivity and behaviour of employees in the midst of both the conceptual and policy vacuum, and also the development of technology in the workplace. To explore this practically, an ethnographic¹ study accompanied predominately by desktop research was undertaken at a popular corporation in Africa by a researcher.

This corporation, which has its headquarters based in Johannesburg South Africa, has asked to remain anonymous, so it will be addressed with the pseudonym GauPeak financial corporation. Further, pseudonyms¹ will also be used to protect the identities of the executives that the researcher had conversations with at the premises of the location, which adds to the content of this paper. The aim of the paper is to analyse how GauPeak is addressing the policy and conceptual vacuums observed by Moore, especially in light of the integration of technology in the workplace. Further, this paper will most importantly address how this corporation aims to apply ethics and standardisation in this regard with the rest of its branches all over Africa. For this to be realised, this paper will commence with the context of technology in the workplace during this current era of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be followed by King IV, which anchors the study, as well as some points drawn from the conversation the researcher had with the executives as GauPeak. An ethical perspective will follow, which will be introduced as a way of standardising ethics for corporations not only in Africa but also beyond. Lastly, a conclusion will close the paper.

¹ This ethnographic study was undertaken before the COVID-19 Pandemic, between the 8th to the 16th of October 2019 in Johannesburg South Africa. It was planned for it to continue in early 2020 for interviews with employees at different levels of the corporate structure, but the COVID-19 pandemic changed plans. Consequently, the post-doctoral researcher decided to make use of the little data captured in that space of time as well as desktop research about the corporation.

2 The context in the workplace: the era of COVID-19 pandemic

Technology in the workplace is growing in leaps and bounds, to the point that employees may have to re-think their agency. Stein et al (2013:168) mention how the societal changes created by technology have influenced how [employees] are constructing their identities [as employees]. As a result, a construction which may ask for an agency that is evolving with technology surfaces. This has been more realised with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has put to the foreground the use of technology as a means to continue with work productivity even though the employee is not geographically stationed in the office. Herath and Herath (2020:277) highlight the importance of the function of technology in this regard by means of elaborating on the kind of pressure that workplace Information Technology teams had/have. The COVID-19 pandemic has quickly introduced the need for companies to strengthen technological support, technological education, and technological accessibility for employers and employees. These mentioned needs necessitate a permanent adaption of digital technologies which can enable employers and employees to work remotely, (Herath and Herath 2020, 277). The importance of this change is that it consequently informs the agency of the individual as a worker. The agency is now subjected to a changing workspace, working from home has introduced a new dynamic of space and time for the employee. With GauPeak as a financial service provider, this dynamic has been practical throughout the COVID-19 as they provide an essential service, where some workers were working from home and some at work throughout lockdown.

The productivity of the corporation as a whole, circumstantially faced by the space and time dynamic, has attracted a lot of attention and work. This space and time dynamic challenges the work/home boundary. With ICT's, and especially through the times of COVID-19 pandemic, this boundary has become a very blurred line. Adkins and Premeaux (2014: 85) state that the unique nature of ICT can easily make employee's work from home or make them have access of work from home. For instance, during working hours replying an email from a child's school regarding a school concert. The blurred line between the two spaces can often be crossed. Although Adkins and Premeaux (2014:86) highlight that there are workplace policies which encourage employees to work from the office and to be visible at the workplace, there are times where implementing policies may be challenging when it comes to dictating how and when an employee should be working when they are at home. This is especially worth thinking about when considering that workplace policies were not intended for the home, they were intended for the workplace itself.

This space and time [of COVID-19 pandemic where people are working from home] is also one where the socio-economics of the employee informed by their backgrounds at home, identity and purchasing power is more evident as it becomes a means of access. The importance of this access is that it not only affects the employees understanding and use of technology, but can also influence how they do their work. Han et al confirm this by stating that access of internet for the worker goes a long way in terms of what the worker can produce in the workplace, (2011:58). If this access is integral in the workplace itself, how much more at home when the COVID-19 pandemic has turned home space into workspace.

Having policies in the workplace concerning technology should ultimately have the ability to be relatable and inclusive even with regards to the socio-economic dimension of the employee. To elaborate on this, Reuschke and Felstead (2020:209) mention how the state of a society before COVID-19 pandemic is telling of the readiness of that society when it comes to remote working and technological development and accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this elaboration is seen in the policies that a country has with regards to flexible work and issues of equality in the workplace (whether it be gender or class based), (Reuschke and Felstead, 2020:209). The existence or non-existence, implementation or lack thereof have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Essentially, the fibre of society with regard to its functionality and progression lies in the kind of policies adopted by that society (especially in the time of crisis).

In light of the disparities aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as those on the socio-economic front, it becomes necessary to introduce inclusivity when it comes to the concepts used to draft policies. Concepts and policies about ICT in the workplace are largely dependent on the employees literacy about everything concerning [computer] technology. With employees, the literacy they have about technology has an impact on their communication and experience of it. Hunter (2018:56) defines digital literacy as the manner through which an individual engages with information pertaining to technology.

The backdrop of this definition provided by Hunter is based on an important element stemming from the views provided by Peremingo and Pieteron (2018:33). These scholars argue that digital literacy feeds off the ill of inequality, where the “haves” tend to have better access to technology than the “have nots”. The executives at GauPeak that the researcher had a conversation with regarding the policies and concepts used by GauPeak will have a different understanding of the policies in that workplace compared to the cleaners and administrators at GauPeak. Further, Peremingo and Pieteron (2018:33) indicate that even within the “haves” there is a further digital divide that is based on skills, knowledge [and interest]. As the perceived gatekeepers and custodians of policy drafters, this could be one of the contributors of the policy and conceptual vacuums in the workplace, where the “haves” are drafting policies which they can relate to be but not always relatable to the “have nots.” This divide informed by differing access, knowledge, skills and class can make bigger the policy and conceptual vacuums in the workplace. A conversation that the researcher had with the executives as GauPeak revealed that there is discourse within their workplace, coupled with King IV, which serves as a starting point to address the policy and conceptual vacuums, especially with regard to technology and its use.

3 King IV and the Gaupeak Executives: from policies to principles

The discussion about the King IV must be preceded by a description of what King IV is and its context in South Africa. Founded by a retired South African Supreme Court judge, Nateson (2020: 155) tells of the King (report) as a report which educates South African companies about governance in the context of a free economy. In South Africa, this free economy concept became a reality around the same time as South African democracy in 1994. It started with King I, which served as a guideline for the “standards of conduct” which should be followed by directors and boards of companies and banks, with the aim of promoting ethical governance of such institutions. Over the years, from 1993 to 2016 it evolved from King I right through to King IV, with the intent of becoming more radical, reaching a wider audience, such as Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed companies, non-profit organizations and more, considering both local and international developments in the sphere of governance within organizations, (Nateson, 2020: 158). This radical take should also grasp the introduction of technology in governance, because as technology develops it continues to inform more and more spheres in society, including governance in the workplace. As a Johannesburg Stock Exchange company, GauPeak complies with the King IV report, which is why in this paper, King IV has been integrated in its principles and execution thereof.

Khan introduces an important premise relating to the technology in the workplaces of developing countries, such as GauPeak which will be further discussed in this section. Khan states that structurally, attention is needed regarding the “organizational and technological capabilities” in emerging economy workplaces. One of the most important processes upon which this concern lies is the acquisition and exertion of tacit knowledge. Further, the nature of this knowledge is quite complex to manage and maintain. With concerning capabilities on the organizational and technology fronts, governance becomes compromised, (2013:1). In the context of an advancing technological world, governance is further strained in emerging economies as they still lag behind when it comes to development. For this reason, it becomes necessary for corporations [in this case emerging economies], to abide by the King IV Report. The premise of King IV is based on the leadership that is not only ethical but is also effective in its governance. In addition, this governance should be measured by the following outcomes: “ethical culture, good performance, effective control and legitimacy,” (Institute of Directors South Africa, 2016:37).

For the purpose of this paper, there will not be a thorough engagement about these outcomes of governance. These outcomes are mentioned for the sake of stating that they are reliant on the underlying principles as well as the practices of the corporation. For ethical governance to occur, King IV provides a strategy of leadership which is premised on the “apply and explain” approach. This approach firstly states that there should be principles established which will serve as a moral compass of the corporation. These principles serve as an explanation of how ethical governance can be achieved. Moreover, the corporation must also be able to indicate how these principles can be practically realised for a corporation to govern ethically and effectively, (Institute of

Directors South Africa, 2016:37). Hence, the “apply and explain” strategy literally translates to applying the principles created in the workplace and later explaining how these principles will be practised.

In light of the “apply and explain” strategy, the executives at GauPeak revealed in their conversation with the researcher that they, as the Johannesburg branch, have kick started a transition in their governance which will assist with ethical and effective governance. Executives Greg and Jada highlighted an integral move by the corporation, the conceptual move from “policies” to “principles.” In their PowerPoint presentation, they highlighted that the term “policy” is heavily laden with excessive rules which employees struggled to recall because of how many they were, etc. In addition, this comes with constraints attached to policies, (Executives notes at GauPeak Financial corporation: 2019:7). To illustrate this, defining “policies” and “principles” will further reveal the logic and intension of such a move, and how it serves as means of how GauPeak addresses the conceptual (and policy) vacuums.

Starting with the former, Wies (1994:64) states that the word “policy” is synonymous to terms such as “procedure”, “guideline” and “plan” to name a few. Consequently, this has led to defining policy as a “procedure”, “guideline” or “plan” used by management to achieve a desired positive outcome. This can in turn create a particular culture within that working environment, influencing the behavior of the people who work within that environment. What is important to note about this definition provided by Wies is that a policy is not internal, it is an instrument that lies outside of the employee as a moral agent. This then challenges the notion of an agent, creating a particular work culture. Secondly, in the context of working from home, it is challenging to use policies to create a particular work environment when most employees are working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Technological advancements require policies which are not confined to space, when contrary the human beings using the policies employees are now able to extend themselves beyond the confines of their geographic location. In the same way, policies should therefore be able to extend themselves.

Moving on to the latter definition of “principles” is a definition provided by Schumann. Schumann (2001:96) provides a definition of moral principle which states that a principle must fit the condition that it must be carried out by an individual who has the freedom to make an ethical decision. Their act must have an outcome that positively affects themselves and the next person, and must be an act which is good in itself. Unlike the definition of “policy” provided earlier, “principle” comes from within the employee as a moral agent and allows them the freedom to create or contribute to their[working] environment. This is what is required when employees work from home, they require an ethical culture that comes from within themselves and create that for themselves in their personal home spaces from which they are now able to work. In fact, the importance of an internal “principle” mentioned by the GauPeak executives is highlighted in a very important phrase they mentioned in their engagement with the researcher. The phrase is “principles come with empowerment and accountability, however, policies come with disempowerment and lack of accountability,” (Greg and Jada, 2019).

This phrase is worth unpacking, as it is overloaded with philosophical insight. Firstly, empowerment acknowledges that the employee as a moral agent is not passive but active in their moral agency. To empower means to strengthen or enhance that internal “active” disposition to act in a manner that is beneficial not only for the agent in question but also for the betterment of others in the corporation as well. Secondly, Greg and Jada (2019) mention that this empowerment is also essential for the employee to contribute to the culture of the workplace. By being empowered and accountable as an individual, the employee is also empowered to contribute to the culture of empowerment and accountability in the workplace. The importance of this during the COVID-19 pandemic when working from home is that a principle that is internal to the employee enhances the empowerment which is also internal. Internal dispositions can be applicable wherever the employee is, whether they are working from home or work, and all employees as individuals have access to it, which leads to the third point. A moral agent is responsible for what they freely decide to engage in as opposed to that which they were coerced to do.

Even in their use of technology, whether they are working from work or home, their internal, active power is what their workplace principles speak to. They have equal access to this inner power and freedom to access it, compared to policies which are formed exclusively, with concepts that only a few can understand. This is why the “apply and explain” strategy is so relevant as it addresses this, where everyone has access to a principle which can empower them, enable them to be accountable with regard to the outcome of a chosen act or practice. Even within COVID-19 pandemic, access is not limited to the socio-economic background but taps into that which all employees have access to, empowering the agency of all employees. Further, Greg and Jada (2019) state that the mention of principles, which are internal and inclusive, do not mean that the employee has to do whatever they want in an anarchical sense. It means that the employee has the moral agency where they have “empowerment within rails.” For instance, they have principles which are based on space and context. This kind of moral agency and action can be rooted in what Nussbaum (1997:3) highlights about the Kantian ethics being based on “reason [and freedom], being active, reformist, universal.”

The mention of universality is integral for the context of GauPeak, as it has a number of branches extended across Africa. All these branches would have to be uniform and universal [all being on the same page] when it comes to their governance. The mentioned notions of “principles being empowering and embracing accountability”, as well as a governance structure operating on the rationale of “applying and explaining” embody a fundamental premise of Kantian ethics. This premise is understanding that moral agency requires reason and freedom to choose. In principle, this implies a universally accessible starting point for moral agency [and hence governance] by virtue of being a human being.

Universality encourages the use of the term standardization. Standardization is defined by Spivak and Brenner (2001:2) as a process which unifies and rationalizes diverse standards in the forms of documents, practices, tests or methods, etc, which exist across national, regional and international boundaries. The application of King IV in all GauPeak branches as well as the notion of principles adopted by these branches

are steps in the right direction when it comes to standardization in governance strategies.

Further, this conversation of standardization persists even on an international front, outside of Africa, where the need for standardization in the governance of organization is important. This importance of standardization is ushered in by the reality of globalization, where organizations are essentially existing in spaces that are part of a bigger global picture. The current need for corporation to be technologically equipped to not only exist in the global sense, but to stay visible in the digital sense. COVID-19 has highlighted the digital presence and competence as an important avenue for companies to be sustainable, digital and inclusive. Hence, the need for a standard form of governance will one day become a necessity which will be difficult to avoid. Accordingly, this speaks to the necessity for an ethical standardization in governance in the midst of technological development in corporations. The suggested perspective that could assist with addressing this is the ethic of systematic coherence derived from a PhD study by Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa (2017).

4 Way forward: The Ethic of Systematic Coherence

The ethic of systematic coherence is an ethical perspective which is based on the principles and values of a [system/structure/corporation]. This value system starts from individual entities such as individual moral agents, families (who are the nucleus of society), and permeates to bigger structures and systems. If the individual parts of a whole function within the same values, principles and frequency of the bigger system, then holistically the system is coherent. Equally, if the individual employees and employers at GauPeak have the same principles and values, it will permeate nationally and continentally with the other GauPeak branches as well. This can be illustrated with the analogy of a mechanical clock, all these systems submit to the same rhythm initiated by the suspended pendulum, (Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa 2017: 168). This captures the radical nature which King IV aims to attain, by addressing each level or society to make a holistic, coherent impact. A radical, and yet ethical perspective in the workplace would need to start with the individual as an employee.

Each employee as an individual moral agent, living in the times of a constantly technologically evolving society is an agent that has the freedom and reason to choose how they want to behave. This is accompanied by the internal disposition of being an active human being that has the ability to discern how they should use technology. In addition, being an employee, the principles which the workspace formulates should speak to the already existing internal, moral compass of the employee as a moral agent. Further, when the GauPeak term “empowered and accountable” is used, it acknowledges there is already a moral agent which needs to be empowered to continue being accountable for their actions. This inherent quality is something that the modern employee carries with them in whichever space that technology may present to them. In addition, this can be a moral compass for the modern employee using technology, complementing the feature of principles which are also drawn from within and

portrayed outward, unlike policies which are external of the moral agent and expected to be internalized.

The internal feature of principles that the Ethics of Systematic Coherence taps into is a feature that employees all over the world possess. This is a necessary step towards standardizing this ethical perspective. Bearing in mind the fact that employees all over the world live within different cultures and traditions upon which their workplaces are based. The constant factor is that the moral compass informed by the principles of their workplace is inherent wherever an employee is in any part of the world, whether they work from home or from the office. The standard is to not silence that inherent principle informed by values but should be allowed to guide the employee as a moral agent. The culture and tradition would then act as a verifier. Even Kant articulates that moral principles are associated with the rational human being [moral agent], which is a concept of universal appeal, (Tolley, 2006:371).

Further, with regard to the conceptual change from the term “policies” to “principles” as a means of addressing the policy and conceptual vacuums, as well as standardization in this regard, there is a further essential standardization that needs to take place to address the digital divide within the workplace, and inclusivity when drafting policies (principles). The key here is inclusivity, which will need to address both the divide as well as the process of policy “principle” drafting. Once again, the Ethic of Systematic Coherence becomes essential as a tool of standardization. To illustrate this is the reference that Nkohla- Ramunenyiwa presents in her articulation of the theory. She highlights the united rhythm and order that the mechanical clock represents in the functioning of the smaller parts that are a part of it to create a functional whole, (Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa, 2017:168). These smaller parts functioning individually and contributing to the bigger picture provide an illustration of inclusivity as a means of standardization. The involvement of diverse employees in the process of formulating work principles indicates that it takes a united diversity to create an all-inclusive standard. That is what ethical standardization is all about. All the employees who will be affected by the formulated principles should be part of the process of creating them, and not be hindered by the digital divide and or exclusion in drafting of policies.

5 Conclusion

The current COVID-19 pandemic has circumstantially presented unique working conditions for employees all over the world, which without technology would not have been realized. This places technology at the fore front of modern society, as its development stretches many years ahead of human conceptualization and experience. This nature of technology puts pressure on workplace policies to also move with the times and not lag behind technological development in the workplace. Amongst other things, this contributes to the policy and conceptual vacuums. In this paper, the instigator for policy vacuums lies in the conceptual vacuums. This is why the transition taken by GauPeak from policies to principles was a conceptual turning point which addressed both the conceptual and policy vacuums.

Knowing that the concept “principle” creates an awareness for the employee to look inward for their moral compass and not outward, as the concept “policy” implies. This realization affirms the statement by the GauPeak executives, that principles bring about “empowerment and accountability”, which is how the employee as a moral agent should be perceived and identified. This change of concept “policy” to “principle” is also an indication of the addressing of a conceptual and policy vacuum. King IV is also essential in incorporating governance in the equation, and serves as a sound reference point for corporations which thrive to govern ethically and to ethically govern. To standardize, the Ethic of Systematic Coherence assisted to make this applicable internationally.

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