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Ethics Institute

BUILDING DATA AND AI ETHICS COMMITTEES

Northeastern University, Ethics Institute
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizations face a difficult challenge when it comes to ethically-informed data collection, sharing, and use. On the one hand, there is growing demand for incorporating ethical considerations into products and services involving big data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning. On the other hand, outside of mere legal compliance, there is little guidance on what being ethically responsible involves, let alone how to incorporate ethical consideration into product and service design. Even among organizations that have adopted institutional value statements or data/AI ethics platforms, there has been limited success translating them to organizational practices, decision-making, and products.

Some organizations are exploring the use of ethics committees to help build capacity for data and AI ethics. However, up to now there has been almost no resources from which to draw to guide development of effective and well-functioning data and AI ethics committees.

This report is intended to help fill that gap by:

DISCUSSING
the advantages of a committee-based approach to data and AI ethics

DESCRIBING
the components of a committee-based approach to data and AI ethics

IDENTIFYING
the questions that an organization would need to answer in the process of developing an effective ethics committee

An ethics committee can be a crucial part of building ethical capacity within an organization. However, to be successful, it must be thoughtfully designed, adequately resourced, clearly charged, sufficiently empowered, and appropriately situated within the organization.

WHY THE NEED FOR DATA AND AI ETHICS?

Not using people's information illegally is the minimum responsibility for organizations, and it will not be enough to sustain trust, manage risk, or be responsive to stakeholder expectations. High-profile cases of negligent and irresponsible use of information have sensitized people to ethical concerns, and they increasingly want organizations to respect values such as autonomy, fairness, and rights in their data and AI practices.

Additionally, because the pace of technological innovation vastly exceeds that of regulatory and policy innovation, organizations and the people working in them confront important ethical questions prior to the development of an adequate legal regime.

As a result, merely complying with the law is not good enough. Organizations need to build data and AI ethics capacity in order to **respect** their users, **meet public expectations** for social responsibility, **maintain trust** between themselves and the people they serve, and **manage risks and liabilities** associated with data misuse and negligence.

WHY USE AN ETHICS COMMITTEE?

A committee-based model has been used effectively in several contexts, such as protecting human research subjects, supplying guidance in health care contexts, and providing oversight for embryonic stem cell research. It has several features that make it well-suited for building organizational data and AI ethics capacity. A well-designed committee will:

Bring together people with a range of expertise — technical, legal, ethical, and organizational — needed to effectively analyze, assess, and respond to complex problems

Be responsive to rapid advances in technological capabilities and to novel applications

Develop standards, cases, precedence, and resources to be used in decision-making processes

The ethical issues and questions associated with the use of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence are emerging and dynamic. In this context, a collaborative approach to ethical analysis and assessment that incorporates multiple perspectives and areas of expertise is crucial.

HOW TO BUILD
AN ETHICS OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

These are early days in the development of data and AI ethics, and there are little more than anecdotal data from established AI ethics committees. This means there are no success models for how to design and implement them. But by learning from the features and functioning of other types of ethics committees — informed by the distinctive social, ethical, and technological challenges posed by data collection, sharing, and use — it is possible to identify key elements of a well-structured and thoughtfully-designed approach.

This report identifies the key questions that organizations will need to answer if they are to develop effective data and AI ethics committees. These questions concern:

01 Organizational Function

Why is the committee being created?

What is the purpose of the committee within the organization?

02 The Ethical Content

What are the basic values that the committee is meant to promote and protect?
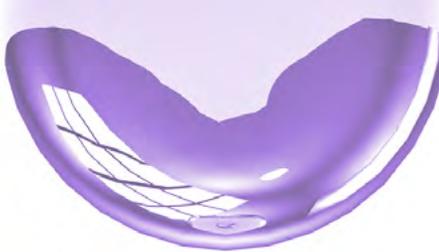
What rules, standards, and goals will guide the committee's work?

03 Committee Composition

What are the types of expertise needed for the committee?

How can the committee avoid bias and conflicts of interest?

04 Organizational Position and Powers

Where is the committee situated within the organization?

*What is the purview of the committee and what authority does the committee have?*

05 Procedures and Governance

What is submitted to the committee for review and what are the processes for review?

What are the standards by which judgements are made and how are they issued?

In addition to discussing these and other questions, this report provides examples that have proven successful elsewhere and suggests how they could be applied to data and AI ethics committees. However, it does not advocate for one particular type or form of committee. There is a wide range in the possible roles, powers, and positions that a data or AI ethics committee could have within an organization. The aim of this report is to help organizations identify the questions to ask in developing a committee that is right for them.
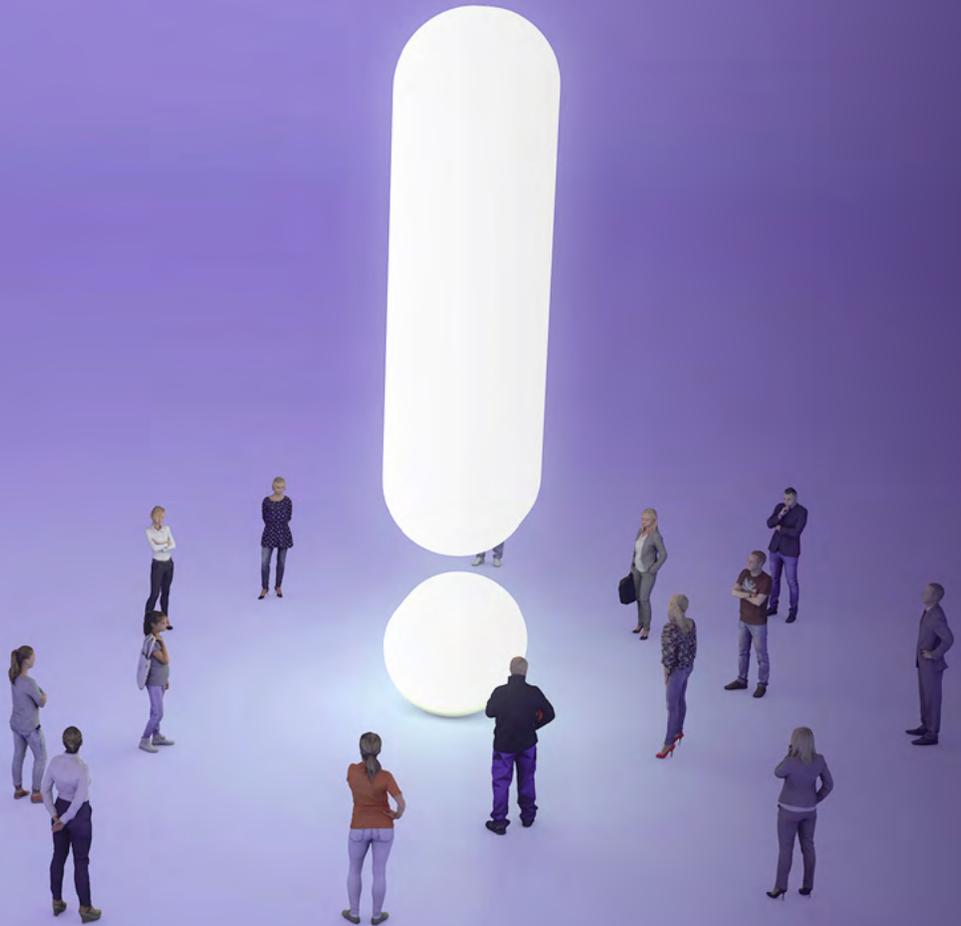
GETTING STARTED

Data and AI ethics committees can play a crucial role in developing ethics ecosystems within organizations and society more broadly. However, building an effective committee is a substantial undertaking. It takes organizational commitment and resources.

Crucial to beginning the building process is putting together the right team of people and engaging with stakeholders to begin thinking through key questions about function, values, principles, position, composition, powers, and process. This report provides a framework for building effective ethics committees by identifying these questions and offering some guidance on how to begin to address them. We hope it is a useful resource from which others can develop still better ones.

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