

The Information system manager's dilemma

Abstract

This case study deals with conflicts of interest in the context of planning decisions.

Key words

Conflicts of interest, confidentiality, privileged information

The case

You are an information manager for a large-scale retailing company. The company opened a new superstore in a town about two years ago, and it is seeking planning permission for a filling station. The application has caused much local opposition. There is another filling station close by. Residents have registered their opposition with the council on the grounds that 'the filling station is not needed; it will generate additional traffic, it is just another example of a large-scale organization riding roughshod over local interests.' Your partner is amongst the opponents. 'It's an example', she said to you, 'of the way in which the large-scale organizations are ruining local businesses'. In turn, your company has taken advertisements in the local newspaper to explain that the new filling station will bring cheaper petrol, that fears about extra traffic are exaggerated, that it will be in the retailer's interests to ensure smooth flows of traffic, that the filling station will generate business for the store. The advertisements also point out that the retailer has been a major contributor to the town's rugby club and has supported local charities. You are a local councillor and a member of the Planning Committee, which will consider the application. The other councillors - opponents and supporters - all want 'inside information'. Your partner is urging you to oppose the application. At the same time, one of the planners in your company has asked you about the councillors - about 'the strength of the opposition', about the people who are likely to be on our side'. 'We'd like the council to come to a well informed view', said the planner, 'so anything you can tell us will help. Anything. No need to write it, by the way'.

Discussion points

- How do you suggest the information manager, or any manager, should handle a situation of this kind?
- When roles or interests clash, which one should be the dominant one? Are there any general rules that you can suggest?

Tutor's notes

The IS manager has a clear legal duty to declare an interest when the application is discussed by the council. Would there be a similar moral duty in regard to his relationship with the other people and groups concerned?