

Modern Ethics

With Dr. Liz Calder

On the 11th March 2021, [Dr. Liz Calder](#) joined me on an edition of 'On The Spot' to discuss the important topic of *modern ethics*. [You can see the original broadcast here.](#)

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Please note, this is an edited version of an automated transcription. We apologise for any mis-transcriptions or typos! -- *Adrian*

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Adrian Reed: Hello, and a very warm welcome to today's episode of "On The Spot", the coffee-break shaped episode which talks about things related to business analysis, change and more. I'm really pleased today to be joined by Dr. Liz Calder. Many of you will know Liz as the president of IIBA UK, you may have seen one of her presentations. I know Liz, you've spoken around the world on a diverse range of topics. Today we're going to be talking about the tricky but important topic of modern ethics. So Liz, thanks for taking time out to be here today.

Liz Calder: Oh, thank you for having me. I'm really looking forward to this.

Adrian Reed: Me too. So Liz, people watching this may have heard the term "modern ethics", but might not be sure what that means, and perhaps how it differs from ethics generally. How would you describe modern ethics?

Liz Calder: If we go back to ethics it's a system of accepted beliefs that control behaviour. We've seen them through the medical professions, the teaching professions, the legal professions, and these are altered over time to have an accepted way of behaving. But what we're seeing in the new information age, with the growth of technology and the ability to suddenly do things we couldn't do last week, last month, last year, we're seeing the fact that we have no common agreed standard of what is necessarily the right and the wrong thing to do. I've seen this right from the very early days, when the very earliest sets of data came online. For example: births, marriages, and deaths information has always been freely available. But it's a different job of accumulating it when you've got to go to a registry office in another town, and sign a form, to when it just comes to your desktop. So even in situations where effectively nothing had changed, the ability to suddenly do things with information you could never get before created new problems for people and new ethical dilemmas that we just hadn't considered. So this field of modern ethics is about, with the all the opportunities open to us, and the advances that technology brings, really thinking about what that means for people, the effect on people and how they can be disadvantaged.



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It's a growing field, because a lot of the time we've never had to think about these problems before. We often don't have to think about them until they're right there in front of us.

Adrian Reed: It's almost like the technology has advanced faster than our ability to deal with the consequences of that technology. I'm thinking about the aggregation of data and some of the scandals that there have been around that and the accessibility of data, and the equity of access to that data or the services behind it create a whole bunch of new ethical dilemmas.

Liz Calder: Yes, they do. Often from a legal perspective, nothing's changed. You've always been able to have access to this amount of data. But you know, there was a time you wouldn't have thought twice about putting your name on the electoral roll that people could see. When all that happened was your neighbours could see it, verses now when the whole world can see it. The things people can do with that data is completely different.

Adrian Reed: Absolutely. So Liz, my next question is: How are these ideas about modern ethics relevant to say, business analysts or project managers or architects or change professionals generally?

Liz Calder: The relevance to us is in the way that our goal is to provide services and systems that are useful to the people that have to use them, and are helpful and supportive to those people. You can see in the news every day, issues that are raised by software that's been put out there, that people are using, that's had a negative effect. So while we are used to dealing with data privacy, or in the medical environment going to ethics boards, I think for any area where you're really advancing into new areas, where you are pushing the boundaries, we're dealing with huge data, it's your responsibility as somebody who is designing and shaping delivery to the public to think about what the ethical implications might be. Both to consumers of your tool, but also for your own organisation's profitability and reputation. And just making sure that the results are for the benefit of society, and not to the detriment of society.

Adrian Reed: As BAs we often think about the impact of change, we think about how different stakeholders will be impacted by change. Perhaps a further consideration is to ask "what is the ethical impact of what we're about to do?". I remember a presentation you gave a while back where you included a line "we can, but should we?" So it feels to me, part of what we should be doing as change professionals is asking that question. Do you think that's part of it?

Liz Calder: I think that that's absolutely part of it. I think this is also part of the whole modern ethics, as there's nobody to tell us what is the right thing to do. In a lot of these cases, society hasn't decided what is right and what is wrong. So we have to make sense of that situation ourselves. I think when you look at a business case for a piece of work, the temptation is to focus on the benefits, the the the positive aspects that it will bring to people.



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But I think we need to put more effort in, because people don't have the same choice they used to have, it's not a case of having a choice between using an app or not using an app. For access to certain services, you have to use it, which means we really need to be thinking about what are the other ways this information could be used or abused? How could people abuse the system? How could people use the data? Can everybody that needs it get access to this? It's not just for people who are tech-savvy, if everybody has to use it, does everybody have the capability to use it? And those are design decisions, but we're down at the level where, as Cennydd Bowles says: "design is applied ethics". In the choices you make, in designing your system, there are ethical consequences for very many people.

Adrian Reed: That leads on to all sorts of conversations about inclusion and equality. We have a comment from Emily, who says: "I think there's a challenge in different organisations and different states (or I suppose even countries) have different definitions of what's ethical and unethical. With global impact. It's hard to make decisions that please everybody." I think that's a really interesting aspect, isn't it?

Liz Calder: It is, and there's a really big cultural aspect to ethics, as well. There's a website that features some ethical dilemmas, it's based on the old, you know, "do you move a train to run over one person or five people" exercise? But what if you had a self driving car? Who are you protecting: the people in the car, or the people outside the car? And there's a series of exercises you can try that says what if the people in the car are old, and the people outside the car are young, does it make a difference to you? You may find different countries have different views on who you should protect in that situation. So organisations have culture, there's the countries and there isn't one right answer, which is probably why ethics has been a topic of discussion for thousands of years, we work it out between us depending on what an organisation wants to achieve.

Adrian Reed: I suppose it emerges, and it changes, it's got that cultural element. So how can we build ethical thinking into our projects or products or initiatives?

Liz Calder: Well, fundamentally, like any other controls and constraints and boundaries and scoping, you actually have to put active thought into it. You have to, not just focus on what it is we're going to deliver, but give some structure to decide what is and isn't ethical. Going back to a very traditional tool: PESTLE. Ask, what are the political implications of this? What are the socioeconomic implications of this? And so on. PESTLE allows us to do that assessment early. But there's also frameworks like ethicalos.org, which gives you a framework and a structure to really think around what ethics mean for you. If we have an app that will do this, that's really advantageous. Who's it going to help? Is there anybody that's going to be financially excluded if they can't use it? That's one side of it. But also, I think, a lot of selling techniques, and design techniques we need to be considered as well. We know from things like Amazon, that people react to time pressures. If you have a counter 'pull', people will buy quickly, we like good reviews, it encourages people to buy. If we think it's the last one available, it encourages people to buy. Now, if you're giving people the accurate information, that's great. However one in eight people in the UK spends more online than they can afford.



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And they may even know they're being influenced by these tactics that have been used to pressure people to buy quickly. So when you're having those conversations about, do we do this, how big do you make the buttons and so on, it is worth considering how much are you trying to influence people. It is an ethical choice, you are trying to make somebody do something that they may have other reasons not to do. And you know, it's not just about, "how many people can we get to buy?" if you're selling to people that can't actually afford it.

Adrian Reed: It's interesting, because as you were speaking earlier, I was thinking perhaps there's a distinction between a nudge towards something that is genuinely good for someone in most circumstances, like, for example, automatically opting them into a pension that's free for them. That might be considered a nudge, versus providing information that enables them to make a decision, versus manipulation. And there's a sort of spectrum there along those lines.

Liz Calder: There absolutely is. People, react when things are scarce. The more we learn about how people react instinctively without being consciously aware of it, the more feasible it is for people to use that to influence people to do things that they might not choose to if they had more time or more choice.

Adrian Reed: Definitely. So Liz, In a word, or in 30 seconds, what would your biggest tip or takeaway be?

Liz Calder: The biggest takeaway for me is, it's not somebody else's problem. It's down to you. You can't rely on other people doing the right thing and scoping your project to make sure that nobody gets hurt. It's down to everybody involved in an IT system to have it in the back of their minds and raise it if they are concerned that something may lead to unfairness.

Adrian Reed: Liz, thank you so much for taking the time to be here today, I'm sure that people will have enjoyed watching what you've had to say. So what's the best way for people to stay in touch with you?

Liz Calder: I'm on Twitter [@LizCalder](#), you can also get to me on [LinkedIn](#). So that's probably the best way to contact me.

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