

## Engineering and the Ethics of Changing Jobs

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### Abstract

Engineers have become fairly adept, in recent years, with ethical dilemmas concerning rights to continued employment in the aftermath of events such as “whistle-blowing.” In fact, since relationships in the aftermath of whistle blowing have been codified, they are arguably *legal*, rather than *ethical* issues. Similarly, ethical dilemmas concerning proprietary information and intellectual property have been considered and written into statutes and employment contracts, spelling out employer and employee obligations upon termination. But what other ethical rights and obligations concerning the end of employment is the engineer or the engineer’s employer morally obliged to respect, and how are those rights (if any) affected by the employer’s investments, or the employee’s personal behavior?

Engineers seldom stay with the same employer for an entire career. Certainly, engineering jobs never really held the expectation of lifetime employment. Corporate downsizing and the loss of employment is not just a remote possibility limited to a few well-known, volatile segments within the engineering profession. Alternately, since “promotion from within” presents the engineer with problems of adjustment and resentment, “fast-tracking” by changing employers has become an important means of career advancement.

Accepting a new job or a new employee entails cost, both emotional and financial. How do these costs affect ethical considerations when the engineer’s employment is ended? How are the obligations of employment altered by the provision of continued professional development (for example, jobs that hold little opportunity for career development; or employers who provided resources from outside vendors to meet the continuing professional education needs of their engineers)? How are these obligations affected by the costs of relocation (whether assumed by the engineer or reimbursed by the employer)? Does the engineer’s age, health, or competence; or the firm’s market share, changing ownership, or product obsolescence change the ethical responsibilities inherent the employment relationship?

This paper will examine the moral dynamics of changing jobs in the engineering marketplace from the ethical perspectives of duty, rights, utilitarianism, and the ethics of care. Examples will be drawn from Herbert Hoover’s career as a mining engineer. Suggestions will also be made concerning the integration of this discussion into a lecture or module of instruction on engineering ethics.