

Expertise as well as social standing may predict ethical tendencies, research finds

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The number of connections people have within a social network may keep them from acting unethically, but their level of expertise within the network may also influence their ethical predisposition or EP, according to a Colorado State University researcher.

While the current study, published in the January online edition of the [Journal of Business Ethics](#), studies people's self-reported intentions rather than their actual behavior, author S.H. Mark Lee says his findings can have significant implications for marketers, managers, directors of [nonprofits](#) and administrators of various organizations.

"Understanding EP is important because [misbehavior](#) in the marketplace or workplace can often pose significant cost to businesses and organizations," explained Lee, assistant professor of marketing in CSU's College of Business. "Investigating real ethical decisions, and how individuals interact within [multiple networks](#), will increase our knowledge of consumers' actual behavior, but this is the first study to explore how both individual expertise and standing within a social network can help predict EP."

Lee's study identified four types of individuals within three separate groups that interacted both socially and around a specific product or activity. He defined the types based on both their knowledge of the product and the number of social interactions they had within the group.

Central Experts or [Mentors](#) have the most knowledge and interactions;

they seek to maintain relationships and build social capital through educating and sharing their knowledge. Peripheral Novices or Apprentices are the "learners" of the group, who seek to build connections that will in turn help build their expertise. Peripheral Experts or Opportunity Seekers have high product knowledge but little group interaction; they tend to take selfish advantage of circumstances to build [personal power](#) and have less regard for the consequences of their actions on others. Central Novices or Compensators are highly visible within the group but little actual knowledge; they seek to cover up either real or imagined personal deficiencies and often place personal goals above communal goals.

"The research suggests that the interaction between network and individual differences uniquely affect individuals' ethical [predisposition](#)," Lee said. "People who define themselves through their relationships with others tend to have a higher EP, regardless of their level of expertise, while people who care less for how others view them have a lower EP, again regardless of their level of expertise."

Lee says central experts have higher EP than their peripheral counterparts because they are more protective of their position and their relationships, while the peripheral experts may take advantage of their lower visibility through fewer connections to act unethically. Peripheral novices tend to abide by the rules as they try to increase their self-worth through their group connection. These are all findings that run somewhat counter to previous research.

The most counterintuitive finding of the study was the lower EP of central novices.

"These individuals have a vested interest in protecting their position in the network, and it is important for them to show others that they deserve this prominent position," Lee said. "As performance becomes a

primary focus, and as novices they are unable to show results, they develop a lower EP due to their desire to increase their performance."

While he says further research is required, Lee sees his findings as a basis for managers and administrators to help central novices increase their expertise and peripheral experts to become more engaged to lower the possibility of unethical behavior. Marketers, especially brand managers, could target these same groups to educate them and emphasize participation in the brand community, perhaps with incentives.

More information: The entire paper, "Ethics and Expertise: A Social Networks Perspective," can be found at the website for the *Journal of Business Ethics*, link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-012-1609-7

Provided by Colorado State University

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