Cheating in College and its Influence on Ethical Behavior in the Workplace

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Background

- Engineering students report higher rates of cheating than most other students
- No studies have explained these differences
- Students who cheat in high school are more likely to do so in college (Bowers, 1964)
- Students who cheat in college are more likely to:
  - Cheat in post-baccalaureate schooling (Baldwin, et. al., 1996)
  - Engage in unethical workplace behavior (Nonis & Swift, 2001 and others)

Work Experience Study

- Goals of study
  - To explore the decision-making process used by students when tempted to engage in unethical behavior in both college and workplace settings
  - To examine the influence of past unethical behavior and context on ethical decision-making

Methods

- Mixed methods: forced-choice items plus open response questions
- Surveys completed in selected courses (86 % response rate)
- Behavioral sciences IRB approval (voluntary and unmonitored participation)

Sample

- Two technically-oriented private schools
- 30 engineering undergraduates with average of 6.8 months of full time employment during past academic year

Instrument

- 13-item questionnaire
- Background (class level, GPA, workload)
- Frequency of high school cheating
- College cheating and violation of workplace policies
- Frequency of temptation for several contexts
- Specific situation which caused temptation
- Pressures and hesitations in the situation
- Ultimate decision

Results

Setting and Context

- Setting is not significant factor (p=0.11) in decision to engage in unethical behavior
- 38% did cheat in the situation they described
- 35% did violate workplace policies in the situation they described
- Context is important in decision
  - College: 15% cheated on an exam versus 45% cheated on homework
  - Workplace: 55% falsified records versus 70% improperly used supplies

Temptation, Pressure, and Hesitation

- Frequency of temptation is positively correlated with decision
  - College setting (r=0.29), workplace setting (r=0.37)
- Temptation is different across settings
  - Temptation in college is more frequent than temptation in the workplace (p=0.001)
- Temptation is different across contexts
  - Cheating on homework was most tempting, cheating on team project was least tempting
  - Using company resources improperly was most tempting, taking credit for work from others was least tempting

Sample

- High school cheating can predict unethical behavior in both the classroom and workplace settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of high school cheating</th>
<th>Didn't cheat in college</th>
<th>Didn't violate workplace policies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>70 %</td>
<td>50 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications

- Pressures are common across settings
  - Insufficient resources, importance of success, projection of blame
- Hesitations are common across settings
  - Conscience, moral obligation, risk of detection
- Other decision-making variables (i.e., past behavior) vary by setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College setting</th>
<th>Workplace setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressures</td>
<td>Hesitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Temptation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating works</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade pressure</td>
<td>Fear of getting caught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material too hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Temptation</td>
<td>Would lose respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>Shame or guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others needed help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Implications

- If an accurate model of the decision-making process regarding cheating in college can be developed and if interventions can be postulated based upon this model, the tendency of individuals to make ethical decisions in college and eventually the workplace could be enhanced

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