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Ethics

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Introduction

The aim of the following report is to investigate an ethical dilemma in a construction scenario. Then breakdown the potential outcomes dependant on the action you take, and propose a course of action that proves ethical standards

The situation given positions you as the project manager constructing a large publicly funded hospital. There is intense pressure to meet completion deadlines.

A situation arises where the concrete supplier has supplied concrete that does not meet the required strength, the supplier argues the concrete “meets practical standards” however it could affect the long-term durability of the structure. The supplier has offered discounts on future orders to dismiss the issue.

To rectify the problem, there is a significant cost & time delay plus reputation implication with the client and the public. However, to not address the issue could cause large issues in the future which could have been avoided.

Ethics is crucial in construction to maintain trust, improve quality & ensure safety. As quoted in the RICS Rules of Conduct “Professional practice will often involve balancing competing interests and using values and ethical judgement to come to a decision about what is right” (RICS, 2021, p.4, para.3).

The Ethical Problem

The problem identified is that a concrete mix supplied in the construction process is found to be below the specified strength requirements. This is not seen as an immediate concern however “could affect the long-term durability and safety of the structure, especially under heavy loads”

It would feel ethically wrong to complete the project knowing that the structure is not to the strength standard requested by the client, without informing them and taking measures to address the issue. However, there is pressure on the project manager from different stakeholders to not address the issue.

Stakeholders

Manager – The project manager is responsible for delivering the project on time, within budget, and to the required standard.

Supervisor – The supervisor is aware of the issue but has stressed the importance of a timely handover, and the costs to rectify the issue. This feels ethically wrong as they are influencing the project manager to not address the issue and prioritising the cost and delivery over quality

Contractor – The contractor’s reputation could be affected by any delays to the project, and also could also damage the contractor financially by having to rebuild the sections in question. There is also a financial opportunity for future discounts with the concrete supplier if they do not rectify the issue. In the long term the reputation of the contractor could be damaged if the strength issue is to arise.

Client – The client will be expecting the project to be delivered on time and to the standard agreed in the contract. There is an importance of timely handover although the client will also need to maintain the building over the lifespan of the building so could incur substantial future cost to repair later

Public – Delaying the handover of the project by addressing the issue would affect the public, as the hospital could lose weeks of being operational. However, in the long term there could be future disruption to repair the building and even safety risks to a functional hospital

Concrete Supplier – There is a greater financial risk to the concrete supplier in rectifying the issue on site, and they have proposed a discount to future to not address the issue. This is unethical and classed as bribery as they are offering a financial incentive to avoid taking the correct action. Bribery is defined as “offering, promising or giving a financial or other

advantage to a person to induce or reward a person to perform a relevant function or activity improperly" (Law Society, 2010).

Options and Consequences

Option 1 – Ignoring the Issue

One course of action the project manager could take is to ignore the issue, handing over the project without fixing the issue with the sub-standard concrete.

The benefits and consequences of this decision are shown in the table below

Table of Benefits & Consequences for Option 1 – Ignoring the Issue

Stakeholders	**Benefits**	**Consequences**
Project Manager	Can complete project without major delay, reputation gain in short term	Not acting with honesty and integrity, long term reputation loss if issue occurs
Contractor	Financially benefit from no delay costs and not having to repair substandard work	Long term reputation loss & large financial risks if future issue occurs
Client	Hospital handed over without delay, no operational downtime	Complete building not to the standard specified in the contract, potential future problems with structural repair cost and operation of the building
Public	Hospital handed over without delay, short term positive	Potential catastrophic consequences if issues happen in future which could endanger public safety and cause major delays to hospital if future works need to be carried out
Concrete Supplier	Avoid cost of rectifying issue	Potential reputation damage if future issues arise
Site Supervisor	Hand over project on time, reputation gain	Reputation loss if future issues arise

Option 2 – Rectifying the Issue

Another course of action would be to bring the issue to the client, and repair the issue to give the client the structural standard specified in the contract

The benefits and consequences to this decision are shown in the table below

Table of Benefits & Consequences for Option 2 – Rectifying the Issue

Stakeholders	**Benefits**	**Consequences**
Project Manager	Acted in with integrity and to professional standards	Project delays and costs incurred
Contractor	Avoidance of future damages to rectify issue	Cost implication for delays to completion
Client	Project handed over to required standard & quality	Short term delay in building being operational
Public	Project handed over to required standard, no future risk to public due to this issue	Short term delay in building being operational
Concrete Supplier	Avoid future potential financial claims to rectify issues	Costs to rectify the substandard concrete work
Site Supervisor	Project handed over to required standard & quality	Missed deadline of completion due to rectifying substandard work

What is the Right thing to do?

To distinguish the “right” outcome, the two options will be evaluated using an ethical framework, the framework used to evaluate the options is Virtue Ethics.

> “Virtue Ethics is an ethical theory that places emphasis on the character of the moral agent. It is distinct from other ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, because it focuses on the development of the individual's character and understanding of the virtues that make up good character. This theory holds that a good and moral person will naturally act in the right way, and that this is the best way to determine right and wrong. Virtue Ethics places importance on understanding the virtues, such as courage, justice, and wisdom, that make up a good character. “(Rueter, 2023)

By using a Virtue Ethics framework, the goal is to determine what a morally good person would do in this situation. Given this, they would be courageous and resist the financial & timely pressures being placed upon them.

They would have honesty and would be open with the issue on the project and inform the client. They would have integrity and would not hand over a project which is not to the quality required and would look to remedy the issue.

Finally, they would have the wisdom of understanding the consequences of handing over a project with substandard structural work and would place the safety and wellbeing of the public as a priority and would not risk this by letting this substandard work to be passed.

Rules and Responsibilities

Given this dilemma is from a Project management perspective, they are likely to be part of a professional body such as the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB). The CIOB and other professional bodies have codes of conduct to promote ethical practices

Evaluating the dilemma using CIOB rules of conduct would be using a deontology ethical framework

> “Deontology is a philosophical theory that focuses on the moral obligations and duties of individuals in society. It holds that an individual's actions should be based on their duty to obey a certain set of ethical rules and principles, regardless of the potential outcomes”. (Reuter, 2023)

If the project manager was to ignore the issue the following rules would be breached:

- “1. Members shall at all times act with integrity, honesty and trustworthiness” (CIOB, 2018).
- “6. Members shall ensure that all work undertaken is in accordance with good practice and current standards” (CIOB, 2018).
- “7. Members shall act in the best interests of the client at all times and deliver good customer care and service” (CIOB, 2018).

Also, further to the above, if the project manager was to accept a discounted rate for future concrete they would be in breach of 3.3 “at no time improperly offer, solicit or accept gifts or favours with a view to obtaining preferential treatment or gaining an unfair advantage” (CIOB,2018).

Decision & Conclusion

After analysing the dilemma and evaluating the best course of action using two different ethical frameworks, the correct option would be “Option 2” rectifying the issue on site. By choosing to rectify the work, the project manager has prioritised the long-term safety of the public and quality of the building.

This is an ethical approach as it shows all the strengths of a virtuous character, honesty, integrity, justice & wisdom. It is also correct from a professional perspective, as the decision would align with the CIOB rules of professional conduct.

The report concludes the importance of ethics in construction and shows the impacts this can have on stakeholders with different perspectives and priorities. It also shows how applying ethical frameworks can help inform challenging decisions.

> “All organisations need to demonstrate they are trustworthy in order to operate effectively and sustainably. Reputations are not based solely on the delivery of products and services, but on how an organisation values its stakeholders. Having a reputation for acting with honesty and integrity not only differentiates an organisation, it makes it more successful” (Alkhatik and Abdou, 2018).

References

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