



BT and human rights

Better World – Our Commitment to Society

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BT and human rights

BT is committed to protecting and enhancing the human dignity of everyone who works for the company and everyone who has dealings with it.

BT's potential impact – both positive and negative – on the rights of the individual is managed by a number of departments and units throughout the business. By reading the sections listed below, you can find out more about how we manage specific issues.

Human rights are about people, and it's often closest to home – in the way we treat our employees (www.groupbt.com/betterworld/employeerelations) – that we can have the greatest impact.

Our people policies and procedures are based on the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm)

But this is not a static process. New challenges will arise as our business develops and legislation changes. The recently introduced UK Human Rights Act has, for example, been integrated into the way we manage our people.

But not everyone who works for us does so under the BT banner. That's why we aim to ensure that the working conditions in our supply chain meet standards based on the Universal Declaration and the International Labour Organisation Conventions.

We have set up Sourcing with Human Dignity, a supply chain initiative which seeks to promote these universal standards to our direct suppliers, and gain their support in advancing them throughout our supply chain. You can find out more at: www.groupbt.com/betterworld/ethicaltrading

We have also started to consider the human rights impacts of the communications industry – rights relating to freedom of expression, privacy and intellectual property, discussed below.

These rights are also enshrined in the Universal Declaration, and BT people have to make decisions on them every day as part of their working lives.

We've checked our policies with the declaration and made sure we come as close as we know how to minimising any negative impact.

Different industries face different human rights challenges, ranging from the use of private security services, to the discovery of child labour in the supply chain and the ethics of working in oppressive regimes.

We think a major challenge for our industry is to ensure that ICT has the greatest positive effect on improvements in human dignity, and this is discussed below.

We are part of an industry that can promote change globally, open minds and reveal injustices.

We hope to show that seizing the possibilities of ICT – enhancing digital inclusion – can result in a better world – fairer, safer and more dignified.

BT and intellectual property

Article 27

Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

The UN World Intellectual Property Organisation provides the following definition of intellectual property on its website:

Intellectual property is divided into two categories; Industrial Property, which includes inventions (patents), trademarks, industrial designs, and geographic indications of source; and Copyright, which includes literary and artistic works such as novels, poems and plays, films, musical works, artistic works such as drawings, paintings, photographs and sculptures, and architectural designs. Rights related to copyright include those of performing artists in their performances, producers of phonograms in their recordings, and those broadcasters in their radio and television programs.

www.wipo.int

Developments in information and communications technology – in particular the use of computers and digital networks for storage, transmission and use of works – have had fundamental implications for intellectual property.

On the internet, for example, text, graphics, photographs and sound can be exchanged between computers at the click of a button, and the real-time transmission of audiovisual works is increasingly common. Nor is there any reason to believe that this trend will slow down or that the internet will play anything other than a major part in the future dissemination of protected subject matter to the general public.

It could be argued that in the early years of public use of the internet, the emphasis was primarily on freedom of expression, the sharing of ideas and information and creative collaborations. But as it grew, not only did the opinions represented by users diversify, but the economic impact of internet activities took on significant proportions.

The consequences of this change range from legal proceedings against organisations such as Napster, to the on-going creation of a copyright directive in the European Union.

The issues of industrial property and copyright have been carefully managed in BT for many years. Our impacts upon them could be huge, and our own business resources and inventions are also subject to their protection.

We have applied stringent policies to the management of our intellectual property to ensure against any infringement of our rights.

We continue to make our opinions clear to regulators often as part of the industry-wide debate and are actively considering the copyright implications of new technology and services.

And we hope that the internet remains a place where those who wish to are able to freely share and distribute their ideas and inventions.

BT and freedom of expression

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, and a critical means of promoting human rights in general.

However, like many of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, new challenges to and interpretations of free expression have emerged with the technological advances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The internet, for example, which is opening new doors to cross-cultural understanding and information transfer, is the site of much intense debate about this issue.

Indeed, with no international consensus on internet regulation, freedom of expression or issues such as encryption, many individuals and civil society organisations are looking to the corporate internet service providers to offer a solution.

This can, for example, require the industry to strike a balance between the safeguarding of free expression, and the protection of children when accessing the internet.

BT is a board member of the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA), the explicit aim of which is to “protect children from potentially harmful material; and, to protect free speech on the internet”.

This is achieved by asking web authors to give details of what is and isn't present on their site, information which is then used to generate a content label (a short piece of computer code) which the author adds to the site. Parents can then set their internet browser to accept or reject access to certain types of content. The key point for freedom of expression is that ICRA does not itself rate internet content – the content providers do that if they wish to participate.

And, of course, we co-operate with legal authorities in issues of illegal content (such as child pornography, racism and anti-Semitism) on the internet.

We have also contributed to the work of The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS).

Part of ICSTIS' remit involves registering certain types of phone service in the UK, such as dating services, betting, fundraising and services of a sexual nature. This allows for free speech while ensuring protection of users, legality and quality.

These are difficult waters. With so many different national approaches to censorship and access to information, companies such as BT have to balance our support for free expression, with our commitment to abide by the law, wherever we operate.

But we believe that, ultimately, developments in information and communications technology will have a beneficial impact on this and other rights. And BT is determined to play a key part in the debate.

BT and the right to privacy

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor attacks upon his honour and reputation

Privacy is not a new issue, but developments in information and communication technology have raised some new questions about it.

It may be, for example, that some abuses of privacy result as much from a misunderstanding of the way new technologies interact with the old rules as from malicious intent.

The internet in particular is prompting a lively discussion about the meaning of privacy.

Is the information “cookie”, generated by a website and used to smooth the experience of the user an infringement of that user’s privacy? What about a log kept of a user’s shopping pattern, so that advertisements can be tailored to his or her preferences? It may be that the user would not be too worried if some of this “soft” information was made publicly available. But what about information given to a medical website being passed on to an insurance company?

And all these issues have to be managed for the long-term benefit of our business, our customers and our shareholders.

If BT customers in the UK wish to use our website (bt.com) to manage their account, check their bill and buy various products or services, they have to register first – which involves the disclosure of certain personal information. We have a specific privacy policy covering this situation.

We know that privacy is very important to our customers and we aim to respect and protect that privacy at all times.

We have published leaflets on Protecting your Privacy and Disclosure of Information, which explain why we need to keep certain details about our customers, how our customers can protect their privacy when using our services, and the restrictions on passing of customer information between certain departments within BT.

BT complies with and is registered under the Data Protection Act in the UK, and we take all reasonable care to prevent any unauthorised access to personal data.

BT’s Caller Display and Call Return services in the UK can make customer numbers available to those who they telephone. Dialling 141 before calling can prevent this, and we are also able to withhold numbers permanently free of charge.

A UK Telephone Preference service is also available which screens out most direct marketing calls.

British Telecommunications plc (BT) operates under a licence granted by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, under section 7 of the UK Telecommunications Act.

Condition 79 of the Licence obliges us to produce a code of practice for use by those employees working in the systems side of the business – creating and maintaining the main public telecommunications network.

This code is intended to regulate the disclosure of information about a customer acquired in the course of that business. This means, for example, that the information that a customer has ordered a new exchange line should not be passed without the customer's consent to a BT sales team.

There are some circumstances under which BT will disclose information without customer consent – for example, in the prevention or detection of a criminal offence, in the interests of national security, as specifically permitted by law – eg for the purpose of any criminal proceedings, and for the purposes of collecting debt or as required by auditors.

We have several policies and codes relating to the use of BT telephones, e-mail and the internet by BT staff.

All staff have been made aware that e-mail and internet access may be monitored and that certain types of message and use of the internet are considered inappropriate while at work and using our system.

Such policies can be controversial but we believe that mutual respect can be maintained between staff, provided that cases are investigated carefully and that everyone is fully aware of what is expected of them (as they have been, for example, about the sensible use of work telephones for personal calls for many years).

Positive benefits of telecommunications on human rights

The protection and enhancement of human rights around the world involves more than direct action. One of the most important jobs undertaken by human rights organisations and committed individuals is the collection, organisation and effective dissemination of information.

The internet provides an extremely efficient, fast and mainly safe means of managing and communicating that information.

The right sort of information, presented in the right way at the right time can stimulate global public awareness of human rights violations and can lead to governmental and policy pressure to relieve the situation and prevent further violations.

And given that the human rights community has always been close knit and interdependent, the internet has also provided a means of enhancing and broadening these relationships.

The Amnesty International website, for example, receives more than three million hits per month. This is how Amnesty sees the advantages:

“The use of the internet has enabled Amnesty International to spread its message around the world to places and people it might never have reached using traditional media, including those who might otherwise not have taken an interest in human rights. People in countries where government censorship makes it difficult to disseminate human rights information can also access our documents via the World Wide Web.

The Web allows us to distribute all our reports and news releases to millions of people around the world very quickly and free of charge. For a very small input in terms of resources, we are able to send thousands of documents to people worldwide.

E-mail has enabled us to network much more quickly and cheaply on an international level than was ever possible before. News releases go out each day by e-mail to thousands of subscribers and e-mail has been indispensable in our many urgent action networks to create a fast response to serious human rights threats.”

www.amnesty.org

BT has been a long-term supporter of the Oneworld network, and especially their informative and credible website, that seeks to promote human rights by providing a media gateway on the issue. (www.oneworld.org)

We feel that Oneworld is an excellent example of the sometimes simple but extremely effective power of information distribution.

The BT intranet also gives our people a direct link to the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We hope that those who are interested will use that facility to learn more about the potential of their industry to play a part in underpinning the promotion of human dignity worldwide.

It should also be recognised that violation of human rights often happens in an atmosphere of economic deprivation and lack of political and business transparency.

It is to be hoped that the economic potential of e-commerce and the transparency imperative of the new technologies will also have a indirect positive impact on the conditions for human dignity.

However, worldwide respect for human dignity is more than a click away. We would never expect information and communication technologies to be a panacea to the complex social, economic and political aspects of human rights violations.

We only hope that the industry of which we are a part, and the products and services we provide, can be a facilitator to maintaining and enhancing human dignity.