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Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the importance of ethical research

Today's advances in technology allow for collection of data, information and analysis of that information to depths and breadths like never before. As the technological world has changed, the business world has too. Business research and the ethical considerations in the collection, research and use of the results are now more important than ever. As the market calls for business to be conducted with more transparency and social responsibility, customers expect business research to be conducted ethically. This also means that if unethical research is used, technology makes it easier to discover and expose online which in turn diminishes social trust and may even decrease customer sales and retention for that business.

The world is now more connected than ever and even though a business may be in the United States, many customers or business partners may reside in countries all over the world. This increases the need to conduct ethical business research with this wider world connection in mind. Ethical research is one of the foundational components of business ethics to be aware of and to practice in order to create a competitive and sustainable business in today's world.

Ethical Research Principles

As a manager, part of your responsibility to a company and its employees is to ensure ethical research principles are understood and used when conducting research. It's important to know if those principles are clearly defined and stated within the company. If not, there are many resources to assist in defining ethical business research for you and your team.

Over time, various organizations have developed research principles as research guidelines for social, scientific, educational, and business research. Ethical research is important for fostering a trusting, relational connection between all parties connected with the research. So, what is the essence of these business research principles?

Ethical research principles include:

- **Respect for Persons and Their Autonomy.** A person's rights and decisions are respected.
- **Beneficence and Nonmaleficence.** Everyone involved is safe, considered and research ethically conducted.

- **Fidelity and Integrity.** Research is well designed, planned, process, outcomes, clear to everyone.
- **Justice.** Making sure the research is fair and inclusive.

Watch It: Ethical Research Principles

Watch this video explaining the meaning of these principles. This video is regarding international development, but it is just as relevant for ethical business research.



[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

You can also view a transcript for the video [“Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development” here \(opens in new window\).](#)

You still may be asking yourself why the need to conduct ethical business research? What is so important about following ethical standards? To answer those questions read through these next points and think through your own specific business scenario and how it benefits from conducting ethical business research.

It's important to follow ethical business research guidelines because they:

- Promote research to be truthful, inclusive, and minimize error or misrepresentation.
- Promote guiding standards of conduct for all people involved in the research.
- Promote accountability to businesses, customers, clients, and parties connected to the research.
- Promote public trust which can lead to public support of business.
- Promote compliance to laws, social responsibility, moral and ethical values, public health, etc.

What are ways to conduct ethical business research? Let's look at an example.

Example: Ethical Online Research

In today's world, billions of pieces of information are easily searched for online, but search engines do not determine what information is correct, useful, accurate, valuable, etc. Online searches return organized online data and information when search terms match the information, but search engines do not qualify that information. It is up to the researcher to validate and reference the source of the information being used.

How does a business researcher conduct ethical online research?

- Double checks information and sources used in business to account for its accuracy.
- Correctly attributes and sites data sources, reports, information, etc.
- Understands the copyright and fair use of images, content, audio, etc.
- Avoids plagiarism and taking credit for someone else's ideas

With all of the information available on the internet, it is especially important for business to maintain their ethical standards and not rely on incorrect information or misuse another business or person's work without the correct siting or payment for using images, ideas, audio, etc.

Practice Question

A company's business research was well conducted because it made sure all participants involved were treated with consideration and all safety precautions followed keeping participants and information safe. What part of the ethical research principles did this company use?

Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

But what potentially happens to a business if ethical methods aren't used? Let's look briefly at a different example.

Non-Ethical Research Consequences

What if a business fostered an environment where its research was not conducted with guiding ethical standards? Can you think of a few examples? Here are a few ways businesses use unethical activities with research:

- misrepresent research results;
- break respondent confidentiality;
- violate non-disclosure agreements;
- avoid legal liability;
- plagiarism;
- manipulate research data or participants for favorable outcomes.

Example: Tobacco Research

One very public and famous example of research manipulation occurred over decades in tobacco and cigarette companies. Even though the scientific research proved smoking caused lung cancer and did harm to those who used it and people who were around it, tobacco companies' manipulated the research results and denied the scientific facts thus endangering people's health in the pursuit of profit. Now millions of dollars have been spent in lawsuits and the true results have been exposed to the public.

Additional consequences for unethical business research mean faster exposure and customer reaction happen now because of the rise of the internet, citizen reporters, whistleblower laws, and informed customers, when shady research practices are discovered.

Learn More: Whistleblowing

Technology and strengthened whistleblower laws have made it safer for customers or employees to expose unethical practices when discovered. Check out this article about one such instance: [Duke University Agrees To Pay U.S. \\$112.5 Million To Settle False Claims Act Allegations Related To Scientific Research Misconduct](#).

The United States Department Of Labor also has a [Whistleblower Protection Program](#), put in place to protect those who report.

As the world and business becomes more transparent, customers, clients and business partners can more easily find out if research has not been conducted ethically and the business backlash can be expensive and even cripple a company's revenue and public image. Yet one more reason it is important for a business to conduct its research ethically.

Practice Question

Company XYZ has been selling a new medication called XYZeeup that helps with hiccups. Recently a news story broadcasted that XYZ conducted its research by paying college students to pretend to be cured of the hiccups for its studies. This is an example of what type of unethical research?

Misrepresentation of research results

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Setting up ethical business research practices from the beginning and creating a company which adheres to those practices not only help a company to avoid social backlash for unethical practices, but continually foster customer trust and in turn can lead to better relations between business, customers and society.

Sources

Bryman, Alan, and Emma Bell. "Ethics in Business Research." In *Business Research Methods*, 3rd ed., 122–46. Oxford University Press, 2011.

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