

Milgram Experiments and Workplace “Common Sense”

The Milgram Experiment was a famous psychological experiment in which participants administered “shocks” to other humans under the direction of authoritative-looking “scientists” in lab coats. Long story short, the experiment found (much to the surprise of its creators) that the majority of people would follow authority to the point of “killing” the actors they were shocking.

We all know the lesson of this experiment: people give up responsibility for their decisions to authority figures. But people could note that the experiment never really ended, and that despite its lessons we’ve learned little about saying no.

At some point you’ll pick up on how full of ethical tests the workplace can be. What you might not recognize is how the “wisdom” of “common practices” can serve the same authority role that the instructor served in the Milgram experiment.

There are some common practices that are frequently recommended and even expected in the software industry – ones that in fact are considered strange to not follow. At the same time, they’re pretty clear violations of basic moral things like keeping your word, not stealing, and not lying.

Consider software agreements. Some services charge by the login and limit logins to access by one person for this reason. Yet most software users will bypass the cost of additional software seats by sharing logins. This seems like common sense, and understandably so. Yet signing up for these services almost always involves accept an agreement that you will not not share logins. To do otherwise is both deceiving and defrauding a company you’re doing business with.

In this common practice the unethical route has the ring of common sense because it has the endorsement of common practice. And that alone can be a more powerful source of authority to the average employee than any man in a white lab coat.

But to do what everyone else does in this case – to close your eyes to the problems with violating software agreements – is to fail this iteration of the Milgram experiment. To resist it, you have to be willing to stick your neck out past the common sense and common practice of a whole industry.

It’s so easy to give in and later say that you were just following best practices or “just doing what you were told.” But damn, do you want to be just another human who failed the Milgram Experiment? It’s still running, and it’s waiting for you at work tomorrow. Be ready for it, and watch for the shape the new authority figures have taken.