

Critics also reject the idea that the offending applicants were “hackers.” After all, they used their own personal identification and passwords to log on legitimately; all they did was to modify the URL to go to a different page. They couldn’t change anything in their files or view anyone else’s information. In fact, some critics blamed the business schools and Apply Yourself more than they did the applicants. If those pages were supposed to be restricted, then it shouldn’t have been so easy to find one’s way to them.

In an interview, one of the Harvard applicants said that although he now sees that what he did was wrong, he wasn’t thinking about that at the time—he just followed the hacker’s posted instructions out of curiosity. He didn’t consider what he did to be “hacking,” because any novice could have done the same thing. “I’m not an IT person by any stretch of the imagination,” he said. “I’m not even a great typist.” He wrote the university a letter of apology. “I admitted that I got curious and had a lapse in judgment,” he said. “I pointed out that I wasn’t trying to harm anyone and wasn’t trying to get an advantage over anyone.” Another applicant said that he knew he had made a poor judgment but he was offended by having his ethics called into question. “I had no idea that they would have considered this a big deal.” And some of those posting messages at *Businessweek Online* and other MBA-related sites believe the offending applicants should be applauded. “Exploiting weaknesses is what good business is all about. Why would they ding you?” wrote one anonymous poster.

Dean Schmalensee of MIT, however, defends Harvard and MIT’s automatically rejecting everyone who peeked “because it wasn’t an impulsive mistake.” “The instructions are reasonably elaborate,” he said. “You didn’t need a degree in computer science, but this clearly involved effort. You couldn’t do this casually without knowing that you were doing something wrong. We’ve always taken ethics seriously, and this is a serious matter.” To those applicants who say that they didn’t do any harm, Schmalensee replies, “Is there nothing wrong with going through files just because you can?”

To him and others, seeking unauthorized access to restricted pages is as wrong as snooping through your boss’s desk to see whether you’ve been recommended for a raise. Some commentators, however, suggest there

may be a generation gap here. Students who grew up with the Internet, they say, tend to see it as wide-open territory and don’t view this level of web snooping as indicating a character flaw.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that you had been one of the MBA applicants who stumbled across an opportunity to learn your results early. What would you have done, and why? Would you have considered it a moral decision? If so, on what basis would you have made it?
2. Assess the morality of what the curious applicants did from the point of view of egoism, utilitarianism, Kant’s ethics, Ross’s pluralism, and rule utilitarianism.
3. In your view, was it wrong for the MBA applicants to take an unauthorized peek at their application files? Explain why you consider what they did morally permissible or impermissible. What obligations, ideals, and effects should the applicants have considered? Do you think, as some have suggested, that there is a generation gap on this issue?
4. Did Harvard and MIT overreact, or was it necessary for them to respond as they did in order to send a strong message about the importance of ethics? If you were a business-school admissions official, how would you have handled this situation?
5. Assess the argument that the applicants who snooped were just engaging in the type of bold and aggressive behavior that makes for business success. In your view, are these applicants likely to make good business leaders? What about the argument that it’s really the fault of the universities for not having more secure procedures, not the fault of the applicants who took advantage of that fact?
6. One of the applicants admits that he used poor judgment but believes that his ethics should not be questioned. What do you think he means? If he exercised poor judgment on a question of right and wrong, isn’t that a matter of his ethics? Stanford’s Derrick Bolton distinguishes between a lapse of judgment and a lack of integrity. What do you see as the difference? Based on this episode, what, if anything, can we say about the ethics and the character of the curious applicants?