The Ethics Buzz
NEWSLETTER

Ethics in Action — Bentley University Spotlight

Ethics are everywhere, especially in the world of business. This edition of The Ethics Buzz focuses on shaping the conversation around integrity, leadership, and responsibility throughout our campus . We are proud to feature three thought-provoking perspectives from within our own community. In the style of a Q&A, three of our distinguished Faculty Fellows share their personal journeys in business ethics, reflecting on how their research, teaching, and mentorship have evolved in a time when ethical decision-making is more critical than ever. Complementing these insights, one of our Advisory Board Members offers a unique, real-world perspective on ethics in practice, bridging the gap between academia and corporate industries. Conjointly, these features embody the HCBE's mission: to provide leadership in the creation of organizational cultures that align effective business performance with ethical business conduct.

Aaron Ancell

Aaron Ancell is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy. His research and teaching focus primarily on issues in business ethics and political philosophy. Previously, he held postdoctoral fellowships at the EJ Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, and at the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto. He earned his PhD from Duke University in 2017.

Q: Many companies today take public stances on social or political issues. From a business ethics perspective, when do you think corporate advocacy becomes a moral concern?

A: There are many ways that corporate activism can be of moral concern. One is that it is often inauthentic; it's just a marketing tool that isn't backed by any real commitment to the values that corporations espouse. A second is that corporate activism can undermine democracy when companies wield too much influence over social and political debates, overshadowing the voices of individuals and smaller organizations. And a third, which I've written about in a recent paper, is that corporate activism can be a misuse of shareholders' investments. Ultimately, I don't think any of these concerns imply that corporate activism is always bad; but they are serious moral concerns that merit more attention.

Q: You've studied issues around employee speech. How can companies respect employees' freedom of expression while still promoting their own values and goals?

A: When it comes to employees' free speech, it's important to distinguish between two kinds of threats. The first is suppression of speech—employees being fired or disciplined for expressing their views. That's a serious

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issue, though not one I've written about. The second, which I have written about, is compelled speech—employees being forced to express political views that align with their employer's agenda. To avoid this, companies need to ensure that any initiatives aimed at promoting corporate political positions are genuinely voluntary. Employees shouldn't be forced to serve as mouthpieces for the company's beliefs.

Q: You've written about loneliness as a possible injustice. Do you believe businesses have an ethical responsibility to address social connection and well-being among employees?

A: I do think companies have some responsibility to look out for their employees' well-being, but I'm not convinced this extends fully to addressing social connection or loneliness. Companies should ensure workplaces aren't hostile, and fostering social connections can certainly support teamwork and productivity. But insofar as loneliness, or social isolation, is an injustice, I think that, like other injustices, the responsibility to address it falls primarily on governments.

Q: Your research brings feminist and social viewpoints into business ethics. How can these perspectives help companies make fairer and more inclusive decisions?

A: I think feminist theory and social epistemology—the study of how social dynamics shape what we know and believe—have a lot to offer business ethics. So last year, a colleague and I organized a workshop bringing together scholars from these different backgrounds to encourage more interdisciplinary collaboration. It turned out to be a very productive workshop!

Q: In a time of social and political division, what qualities do you think define an ethical business leader?

A: Many of the qualities that define an ethical business leader are also qualities of a good political leader: integrity, humility, transparency, and the ability to navigate deep disagreement constructively. Indeed, I think that corporate leaders often play the role of informal political representatives in much the way that activists and leaders of NGOs do. So the qualities of a good business leader will include many of the qualities of a good political representative.

Mareike Möhlmann

Mareike Möhlmann is Associate Professor at Bentley University's Department of Computer Information Systems (Business School). Previously, she worked as an Assistant Professor at Warwick Business School, a visiting scholar/part-time lecturer at the London School of Economics, and a postdoctoral researcher at NYU's Stern School of Business. She holds a doctoral degree (Ph.D. equivalent) from the University of Hamburg, and an M.Sc. in Management from the London School of Economics. Before starting her career in academia, she worked for the United Nations (NYC office).

Q: In your work on algorithmic nudges, how do you delineate the boundary between persuasion and manipulation from an ethical standpoint?

A: Companies are increasingly using algorithms to manage and control individuals not by force, but rather by nudging them into desirable behavior. In other words, they are learning from their personalized data and altering their choices in some subtle way. For instance, the flood of targeted advertising and highly personalized content on social media platforms such as Facebook can not only nudge users to purchase more products but also manipulate them into supporting particular political views or candidates. In my work (Möhlmann, 2021), I discuss how persuasion can easily slip into manipulation, such as when companies nudge consumers to buy things they neither want nor need. Ethical persuasion, by contrast,

aligns with users' own goals and remains transparent about its logic, whereas manipulative design covertly advances the company's interests. Ethical nudges should therefore preserve meaningful choice, offer easy opt-out options, and disclose the rationale behind the prompt.

Q: When studying algorithmic management in platform work, how do you address key ethical challenges for workers subject to automated decisions?

A: Algorithmic management has been enabled by digital technologies that allow for real-time, large-scale data collection and machine learning models that now perform learning and control functions traditionally carried out by managers (Möhlmann et al., 2021). My seminal work on Uber highlights key ethical challenges, including the surveillance of workers, algorithmic opacity, and the dehumanization of labor. To address these challenges, one HBR article (Möhlmann and Henfridsson, 2019) suggests more human-centered algorithmic management. Platforms can increase transparency or invite workers to voice their concerns, for example through councils that co-shape work rules. Building in human contact, such as real human support, helps counter isolation. Finally, companies can build trust through better social protections (e.g., sick pay, parental leave). Some regulators are already moving in that direction, but firms need not wait for regulation to adopt more ethical practices.

Q: How do you evaluate trade-offs between algorithmic accuracy and explainability/interpretability in organizational AI systems?

A: In my work, I argue that the "best" model is not always the most accurate one. In many organizational settings, especially high-stakes contexts such as hiring, performance evaluation, health, or drug development, explainability is a key part of organizational legitimacy, worker acceptance, and accountability. I therefore evaluate the trade-off by looking at the context of decision rights and consequences: where decisions are consequential and contestable, a slightly less accurate but more interpretable model may be more appropriate.

Q: In your research on content and social media platforms, how do you approach the ethical implications of algorithmic curation and filter bubbles?

A: In my recent work on YouTube (Möhlmann et al., 2025), we argue that the ethical challenge is not only that algorithms personalize content and thereby risk creating filter bubbles, but that content algorithms govern the interactions between creators, consumers, and advertisers. To this end, algorithms resolve (or fail to resolve) conflicts between stakeholders and can have unintended consequences such as misrepresentation, manipulation, or the marginalization of minority voices. This is why we conceptualize this as algorithmic stakeholder governance: algorithms shape stakeholder interactions and must integrate their diverse interests into governance. Ethical curation therefore requires transparency about the goals the algorithm optimizes for and meaningful stakeholder voice (e.g., reporting mechanisms, appeals, or participatory governance structures). The goal is to enable pluralism and informed user choice, rather than passively reinforcing filter bubbles.

Q: Across your projects on human-AI interaction, what ethical safeguards do you propose to protect human agency, dignity, and autonomy?

A: In my recent work published in MISQ (Stelmaszak et al., 2025), we show that in organizational settings algorithms rarely act alone. Their agency is collective, hybrid, and relational, and depends on ongoing human inputs, especially in multi-agent contexts like Uber. This means that a core ethical safeguard is to keep humans meaningfully "in the loop" so that delegation does not shift entirely to machines. This includes preserving points where humans can intervene when the delegation cycle breaks down, and ensuring humans are not reduced to passive data sources but remain co-decision-makers and co-interpreters of algorithmic outcomes. In short: protecting human autonomy may require designing human-AI interaction so that humans can still exert influence, provide context, and challenge or override algorithmic actions when needed, rather than letting algorithms fully replace human judgment.

Joel Katz

Joel Katz is EXL's Chief Compliance & Ethics Officer and is a member of the Operating Committee. In this role, Joel and the Compliance Team help ensure that EXL operates with the highest levels of integrity and in compliance with the law, as set forth in the company's Code of Conduct & Ethics. Joel earned his Juris Doctor with distinction from Hofstra University School of Law and his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan. He serves as a Member of the Board of Directors of BBB National Programs, an Advisory Board Member to the W. Michael Hoffman Center for Business Ethics at Bentley University, and an Advisory Board Member to Compliance Week Magazine. Joel is also a frequent speaker and author on issues related to business ethics and corporate compliance.

Q: In building compliance programs, how do you balance legal obligations with fostering a genuine ethical culture rather than a check-box mentality?

A: I think these are distinct issues—one relates to the overall compliance and control environment, and the other relates to the culture of the company. For companies that have truly created "Cultures of Integrity", they have embedded a commitment to ethical conduct and compliance with the law into everything they do—from how they run their business to how they onboard third-party vendors to how they hire, onboard, manage, evaluate and pay/promote their employees. The culture becomes almost self-policing because employees understand the expectations, are committed to the vision and mission of operating ethically and are quick to call out those who deviate from expected ethical norms. Legal obligations (and a strong compliance and control environment generally) are merely a component of a Culture of Integrity. I think that if you get the culture piece right, the compliance and control piece is a lot easier to implement and make effective. Conversely, if you only focus on legal requirements (for example) without the commitment required to build a Culture of Integrity, then it can become a bit of a "check the box" mentality where employees go through the motions, but neither understand nor are bought into the commitment to ethical conduct that many companies strive to achieve.

Q: What are the biggest tensions you face between meeting business objectives (profit, efficiency) and maintaining a Culture of Compliance and Integrity?

A: Two things come immediately to mind—the first is what I will call the gray zone—in the highly regulated world that many companies operate in, there is not always a "right" or a "wrong" answer—some issues fall between the two into a bit of a gray zone. These are often the most difficult issues to navigate. The second thing is that, in every company, there are going to be people who are super aggressive in their efforts to meet business goals. This is not a bad thing, but something that must be kept in check. In both examples, having a strong ethical compass and an enterprise-wide commitment to doing what's right (even when no one is looking) will usually lead you to the correct decision. In addition to asking whether something is "legal" (not always the best barometer, because throughout history, there have been truly awful things that have been "lawful") progressive thinking companies will go a step further and ask whether the proposed course of action aligns with their values, with who they are, and with how they want to be known in the marketplace. Using the law as a starting point but then asking these additional questions will usually help companies find the right place to land on issues.

Q: How do you ensure that your compliance initiatives have real impact, rather than being symbolic, especially in large organizations?

A: This is an ongoing challenge for every compliance program—measuring the effectiveness of the things that we do. Some things lend themselves better to measurement than others, and most companies struggle with truly identifying the effectiveness of certain compliance activities as well as the

return on investment for compliance initiatives. On Compliance and control issues, it is a bit easier to identify the impact by measuring outputs—i.e., did an AI tool flag instances of fraud correctly? Was a required clause put into a contract in accordance with company policy? Was a required third-party due diligence screening conducted when onboarding a new vendor? etc. On ethical issues, it's a bit harder to measure the impact of, for example, awareness campaigns and their impact on employee behavior. I've always found that listening closely to what our employees are telling us is a great way to get a sense of how impactful our initiatives have been. This can be formal (like in an employee ethical culture survey or focus group) or, informal by regularly soliciting employee feedback from anyone who will give it to you. Taking the time to ask the questions, thoughtfully consider the feedback and then use the feedback to continually improve your compliance program will increase the impact of the various compliance and ethics initiatives rolled out across the company.

Q: When dealing with global operations, how do you navigate cultural differences in ethics and compliance standards without imposing a one-size-fits-all model?

A: This is a very important question that companies need to carefully consider when building and refining their compliance programs. I would offer a few suggestions: First, if you are a compliance officer overseeing compliance in different countries, you must take the time to educate yourself on the cultural norms and business challenges in the locations you oversee. Personally, I have found that there is no better way to do this than by getting on a plane and visiting the location to both learn and develop relationships on the ground in these different locations. Next, build networks of people in various locations who can assist you in creating an effective compliance program locally—employees working in other control functions like HR, finance, legal and internal audit can be great resources to help you navigate the local business environment and ensure that your compliance efforts—from controls, to training to general communications—are as effective and impactful as possible. Finally, stay flexible in your approach to the things you are doing. Effective compliance is a journey of continuous improvement—the hope is that you can quickly identify the things that are working well and those that are not working well so you can stop doing certain ineffective things and keep doing the things that are effective.

Q: How do you measure and evaluate ethical risk proactively, and what tools or metrics do you use to monitor the ethical health of an organization?

A: Effective risk assessment is the foundation of a good ethics and compliance program and happens to be the first substantive element of an effective compliance program mentioned in the Department of Justice's "Evaluation of Corporate Compliance Program," so it is critical to get this part of the equation correct. There are many ways to go about measuring and evaluating risk, but it generally starts with a framework built around the various risks a particular company faces. These risks are identified in partnership with business leaders and other gatekeeping functions. Once identified, the company then evaluates the controls in place to mitigate the identified risks and determine whether any gaps exist that need to be addressed. In its simplest terms, a company wants to know, what are our risks? What are we doing to mitigate the risks? And are the controls we put in place to mitigate the risks working? Risk assessment is an ongoing activity, not a "one and done" exercise. Not only do companies have to continually assess known risks, but they also must build effective mechanisms to identify new risks that can result from, for example, taking on new types of work, moving into new markets and the ever-changing regulatory environment in which we all operate. ▪

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Business Ethics: Featured News

There's one key thing companies must do when they bring AI into the workplace, BCG's AI ethics officer says

Business Insider | OCTOBER 18, 2025

In an interview at the Semafor World Economic Summit, Boston Consulting Group's Global Chief AI Ethics Officer Steven Mills emphasized that companies rushing to integrate AI often overlook their biggest responsibility—training people. He said firms must provide at least five hours of hands-on instruction and rework workflows, because dropping AI tools into unprepared teams risks both inefficiency and ethical misuse, raising the question of whether innovation without human readiness can ever be truly responsible. Read more »

IMF's Georgieva says countries lack regulatory, ethical foundation for AI

Reuters | OCTOBER 13, 2025

At the IMF's annual meetings, Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva warned that most countries lack the ethical and regulatory infrastructure needed to manage AI's rapid growth. The IMF's new AI Preparedness Index revealed that "regulation and ethics" is the weakest pillar worldwide, particularly in developing economies, showing a widening divide between technological capability and moral governance and leaving us to wonder whether global innovation can remain equitable without universal ethical standards. Read more »

Ethics experts cringe as wealthy woo Trump with ballroom funds

Axios | OCTOBER 16, 2025

A recent Axios report described how a $200 million White House ballroom fundraising effort attracted major corporate donors from tech and defense sectors, sparking criticism from ethics experts who say it blurs the line between philanthropy and influence-buying. Although not illegal, the "pay-for-play" appearance highlights how easily corporate giving can challenge transparency and public trust, prompting reflection on how companies should balance political engagement with ethical integrity
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Major federation of unions calls for 'worker-centered AI' future

The Verge | OCTOBER 15, 2025

The AFL-CIO, representing 15 million U.S. workers, recently launched its "Workers First Initiative on AI," calling for AI systems that prioritize fairness, transparency, and worker protection. The union argues that automation and AI are reshaping industries faster than ethical guidelines can keep up, and insists that employees must have a voice in how these tools are implemented—raising an important question about whether technological progress should ever come at the cost of human dignity.
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Welcome: New Scholars

Avery Waterman

My name is Avery Waterman, and I am from Keene, New Hampshire. I am a freshman at Bentley University majoring in Marketing. My interest in business began in high school, where I took marketing and business courses that inspired me to pursue the field. I am considering adding a second major or minor in Artificial Intelligence or a related area to prepare for future career opportunities. I have also been a dancer for 17 years, serving as both a dance camp counselor and captain of my high school dance team, and am now a member of Bentley's hip-hop club team, Craze. During the summers, I gained valuable leadership and communication skills through my work at a hometown ice cream shop, where I advanced to a manager position, as well as at a local coffee shop. As a Sullivan Scholar, I am eager to become involved in the Hoffman Center for Business Ethics and make the most of my academic and personal growth at Bentley University.

Fun Fact: I work at a coffee shop and an ice cream shop in my hometown!

Saniya Cannon

My name is Saniya Cannon; I am a freshman studying business management and a minor of business administration. I want to get my masters in business administration, and I plan to be a head human resourcer in the future. I have worked in many places, my favorite being Audible as a Student Intern, and I cannot wait to return in the future—it was really an amazing time for me. I am currently in APO, as I love theatre and have been in many musicals. I love to sing, be creative, I love photography (I have my own camera and hope to take photos of more events around campus) and overall just have a great community around me. I am so, so grateful to have this scholarship, as it will give me that community that I want.

Fun Fact: I hit almost all vocal ranges!

Hoffman Scholarship in Business Ethics

The Annual W. Michael Hoffman Scholarship in Business Ethics at Bentley University rewards outstanding pieces on business ethics with a $1,500 scholarship prize! The scholarship is open to both undergraduate and graduate students graduating in May 2026 and requires papers to include a business ethics component. Topics can range from corporate social responsibility, corporate political activity, sustainability, organizational DE&I, conflicts of interest, ESG investing, social entrepreneurship, and much more. Submissions are evaluated on four criteria: ethical content, depth of analysis, originality, and writing quality. Papers are due by March 23, 2026. Look for an email coming soon!

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About The W. Michael Hoffman Center for Business Ethics

Established in 1976 at Bentley University, the W. Michael Hoffman Center for Business Ethics (HCBE) is among the world's oldest and most highly-respected business ethics research and educational institutes. HCBE is a nonprofit educational, research and consulting organization whose vision is a world in which all businesses contribute positively to society through their ethically sound and responsible operations. Our mission is to give leadership in the creation of organizational cultures that align effective business performance with ethical business conduct. We endeavor to do so by the application of expertise, research, education and a collaborative approach to disseminating best practices. HCBE strives to connect ethical thought and action, inspire ethical leadership, enrich ethical knowledge and promote ethical collaboration.

Contributors

Contributing to this edition of the newsletter are Elina Crosby and Fatima Kahn—current student interns and HCBE Leon Sullivan Scholars. Elina Crosby serves as the chief editor of the newsletter. Sullivan Scholars work as interns at the W. Michael Hoffman Center for Business Ethics during their undergraduate years to experience the true meaning of "business ethics."

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