

Case Study: Darl UX Patterns

The case study (ACM, 2026) highlights some of the legal and ethical issues that affect computing professionals. Nearly all professionals will face ethical dilemmas in the workplace. While a small proportion of these may represent legal issues, code of practice provide a useful framework to secure ethical as well as legal standards. The case study examines a scenario where a client requests an contracted IT firm to make changes to their web-site. These changes have been deliberately designed to mislead customer, obscure disclaimers and drive sales covertly. The web-designer raises the issues with his manager, but makes that changes anyway. The case study raises several interesting lines of enquiry:

1. Did the web-designer participate, or fail to report in illegal activity?

The case study is set in the US, but this response considers the legal implications in the UK and globally. The UK Equality Act 2010 aims to ensure that disabled people have equal access to information, goods and services. In this example, it could be argued that the website disadvantages visually impaired users and, as such, breaches the Equality Act (Gov.uk, 2010). Furthermore, unlike the ACM Code of Ethics, the BCS Code of Conduct specifically references the need to the ‘geographic area in which you are carrying out your professional responsibilities’ and ‘the geographic area in which your responsibilities will be discharged.’ This is an important point for computing professionals who may find that their work transcends geographic borders and they must consider legislation in multiple regions.

2. To what extent does raising the issue with the line-manager absolve the web-designer of responsibility?

A failing with the ACM Code of Ethics is that there is a separation of standards for those in managerial positions. The ACM state, ‘While these principles apply to all computing professionals, leaders bear a heightened responsibility to uphold and promote them.’ (ACM, 2026). It is easy to see how this can be disempower the worker to stand up to poor ethical standards. In this case study, the web-designer raised valid ethical concerns, but the manger asked them to make the changes regardless. The ACM statement applied ethical principles differently to those with more power which is absurd as the principals of right and wrong apply to all. History has shown many examples where following orders without question can result in catastrophic consequences. (Radermacher, 2025)

3. Do codes of practice substitute or enhance an individual's moral responsibility?

The ACM analysis of the case study places the blame with the web-designer's manager, and minimised the role of Stewart, the web-designer. 'The leadership of Stewart's company should articulate policies and processes (Principle 3.4) that ensure their clients' designs are not deceptive and harmful to users. Taking stronger position in this regard would guide Stewart' (ACM, 2026). This position infantilises the worker who, as a professional adult demonstrated that he knows right from wrong but makes the changes anyway. The whole point of ethics are that they are the pinnacle of the hierarchy of decision making. While there may be a toxic environment in the workplace, or the need to earn an income may influence decision making, these influences are secondary to ethics. The BCM Code places more weight on the individual, but nonetheless, well-educated adults should not need to be told right and wrong and a poorly constructed code of practice, such as the ACM, allows adults to hide their own responsibility behind the decisions of their so-called superiors.

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