

Ethics Guide

Virtual Ethics?

The term *virtual* means something that appears to exist but does not exist in fact. A virtual private network (VPN) is a computer network that appears to be private but in fact operates on a public network. The term *virtual meeting* describes a meeting in which everyone is present, but via an information system and not face to face.

However, and it is a big however, "Is everyone present?" Is the person who signed on as Adam truly Adam? Or is it someone else? Or is it Adam with a staff of seven people, all of whom are anonymous to the rest of the group? Consider a team composed of Allison, Abby, and Amy. What if none of them was really involved? What if, in fact, those contributions were really made by Betty, Betsy, and Beatrice, but none of them knew the others were spoofing (pretending to be someone they are not)?

Suppose you run a consulting company and you want to send less experienced consultants out on jobs. During an initial meeting (held electronically, using text chat) with a potential client, you tell the client that he is meeting with Carl, a new and inexperienced employee. But the meeting actually includes

Carl and Cathy, your most experienced and senior consultant. During the meeting, all of the remarks attributed to Carl were actually made by Cathy. The client is most impressed with what it thinks are Carl's perceptive comments about its situation and agrees to hire Carl, even though he is inexperienced. You keep using Cathy this way, spoofing several of your young associates to get jobs for them. You justify this by saying, "Well, if they get into trouble, we'll send Cathy out to fix the problem."

Or suppose you have an archrival, Danny. You and Danny compete for a future promotion, and you just cannot stand the idea of him moving ahead of you. So you set up a sequence of virtual meetings, but you never invite Danny. Then, just before a crucial meeting, one that involves senior members of your organization, you invite Danny to be your silent helper. You tell him you do not have the authority to invite him, but you want him to have a chance to express his thoughts. So you attend the meeting and you incorporate Danny's thinking into your chat comments. People think you are the sole author of those ideas and are impressed. Danny's work is never attributed to him.