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Data, Values and Ethics

Format 2-hour workshop

Place Fribourg, Colab

Output

- Mapping of the ethical challenges of SwissSDI's activity
- Strategic roadmap of measures to be implemented to meet these challenges

Follow-up

- Development of an «ethix label» for data processing companies
- Certification of Swiss-SDI as a pioneer in ethical data analysis

«The ethix workshop allowed us to structure our vision of ethics related to the use of the data entrusted to us. The Ethix team was able to challenge our thinking to obtain clear and precise guidelines that allow us to guide our strategic discussions. »

Benedikt Ramsauer, Co-founder

The Swiss-SDI startup, founded by 4 people, has set itself the task of enabling its clients to make the best use of different types of data. Through data analysis, the company offers data evaluation, a better understanding of processes, and decision support tools based on predictive analysis. The statistical and mathematical expertise of Swiss-SDI's engineers thus complements the business experience of various clients. The Swiss-SDI team has supported clients in various sectors of activity, from machine productivity improvement to human resources issues. Swiss-SDI is a B2B company.

The workshop organized by ethix took place at the Colab de Fribourg, with 2 of the 4 co-founders and one employee. It has two objectives:

- a mapping of Swiss-SDI's ethical challenges
- the development of important elements for a strategic road map of ethical challenges

To achieve these objectives, the workshop was organized around the «Ethical Product Design» framework developed by the ethix laboratory. This framework helps to structure the discussion and facilitate the identification of risk areas.

Mapping ethical risks

The discussion facilitated the identification of the following ethical risk themes. The discussion also highlighted some measures to address these challenges.

The raw material of Swiss-SDI's work: the data

The data with which the company works is usually provided by the customer. The customer bears the primary responsibility for ensuring that the data is obtained in accordance with legal requirements. However, the conditions for collecting data concerns Swiss-SDI, particularly in terms of reputation risks. This applies to explicit and informed consent obtained from individuals and to quality of information provided on the intended use of the data. If the data are the raw material of Swiss-SDI's work, it is essential to ensure the quality of their harvest.

It is also essential that Swiss-SDI ensures that it uses the provided data for its own purposes only. In addition to fulfilling its commitments to the customers, it must determine how it wishes to manage its own data.

Measurement ideas:

- strengthen the dialogue with the client to jointly identify legal obligations and good practices in data collection
- make credible public commitments for how Swiss-SDI manages the data in its possession

Normative evaluation in data mining work

Once in possession of this data, Swiss-SDI works to create meaning and added value. In order to do so, the company carries out an evaluation at several levels and makes a decision to best fulfil its mandate. These moments of choice and evaluation are an integral part of the data specialist's job. It is interesting to transform seemingly innocuous choices into conscious choices on the part of data mining professionals. These choices can be found on at least 4 levels:

- interpretation of the mandate given by the client
- organization of the data provided by the customer
- choice of statistical and mathematical method used
- interpretation of preliminary results and adaptation of model

Measurement ideas:

- present the assumptions of Swiss-SDI's work in a way that is accessible and understandable to the general public

Misuse of the final product

The analysis prepared by Swiss-SDI is provided for the end customer. It is the latter who decides what they wish to do with it. This use can be problematic. The analysis could be used for purposes that Swiss-SDI does not wish to endorse. Despite being a company with expertise, the reputational risk weighs on Swiss-SDI. This ethical risk is reminiscent of «dual-use» objects, which can be used legitimately and illegitimately (a drone used for rescue and/or targeted assassinations). This risk is an integral part of any consulting firm's business model.

Measurement ideas:

- strengthen the dialogue with the client on the end use of the expertise provided by Swiss-SDI
- present clients with the reputational risks for all scenarios of hazardous use of the final product

Negative impact of the final product

The analysis prepared by Swiss-SDI can lead to negative impacts on several parties. In the case of human resources work, the analysis could justify dismissal or automation measures leading to job loss. More indirectly, it could reinforce certain types of behaviour among employees. Since the data only reflect a certain aspect of reality (which can be expressed as quantifiable data), a data-based assessment provides a biased picture of human behaviour. Nevertheless, it can create an imitative effect among employees, encouraging them to behave in a way that can then be expressed as data.

Measurement ideas :

- identify and publicly communicate tensions between innovation and potentially negative impacts

- determine and communicate the contours of Swiss-SDI's liability
- strengthen the dialogue with the clients on the potential impact of the analysis results on the way in which they evaluate employees

Reinforcement of inequalities

The use of the analysis prepared by Swiss-SDI may lead to the reinforcement of some of the biases contained in the data provided by the client. The quality of the data from a representativeness perspective is at stake. In terms of HR, the analysis of behaviour in a predominantly male or female job will necessarily include certain biases. Careless use of these data may lead to the reinforcement and reproduction of certain processing differences.

Measurement ideas:

- strengthen the dialogue with the client on the quality of the data provided
- provide analyses to mitigate the effects of bias in baseline data
- accompany the final product with a full explanation of the risks of increased bias and unequal treatment

Contribute to caring oversight

Data and analysis on human behavior can lead to the creation of a society where all our activities are traceable and tracked. This generalized surveillance is not necessarily the work of malicious actors. It can be precisely the work of well-meaning actors, who wish above all else to help individuals to live better lives. However, these approaches, such as «nudging», must respond to a criticism of paternalism. What is the legitimacy of actors who claim to know better than individuals what is desirable for them?

Measurement ideas :

- draw up a Swiss-SDI charter of values and address this issue and the social vision that accompanies the project head-on

ethix – Lab for Innovation Ethics is made possible by Engagement Migros, the development fund of the Migros Group.

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About Engagement Migros

Engagement Migros supports pioneering projects in the midst of social change that break new ground and test future-oriented solutions. The impact-oriented funding approach combines financial support with coaching-like services in the pioneer lab. The development fund was founded in 2012 as a voluntary commitment by the companies of the Migros Group. With its independent approach, Engagement Migros supplements the funding activities of the Migros Culture Percentage.

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