

# CONFLICT OF INTEREST

## Hello ISSA Journal readers

It is all too common to hear about bureaucrats being criticized over conflicts of interest and the effects that it may have on their careers. Depending on the seriousness of the charge, conflicts of interest can lead to embarrassment, expulsion and possible incarceration. Have you ever wondered what a “conflict of interest” is, why it is so significant and how you can avoid being the subject of the allegation?

## What is a conflict of interest?

*Black's Law Dictionary* defines a conflict of interest (COI) as “a real or seeming incompatibility between one's private interests and one's public or fiduciary duties.” COI can occur when a new situation or relationship is perceived to be in conflict with those already in place, such that motivations could be questioned. If someone is affiliated with more than one organization (with a commensurate duty of loyalty and furthering the organizational mission) and becomes affiliated with another organization that interacts in the same “space,” a potential for conflict of interest arises, in other words, when personal interests *appear* to influence official responsibilities or job functions. Perceptions or allegations can range from misuse of position, moonlighting, bribery, and influence peddling, just to name a few.

## Rising above a conflict of interest

Many members of ISSA are also employed by firms involved with IS Security and deal with this issue daily where deciding which “hat” one is wearing is key. For example, many ISSA chapter officers are also employed by IS Security services or product firms, and, as an Officer of the Chapter, requests for speaking resources or referrals lead to the question of deciding which is the “best” resource. In our experience, the majority of ISSA chapter officers are altruistically dedicated to improving the overall posture of each member and the chapter as a whole, and will refer a “plum” to other members, actually hurting their own interests for the greater good. Any officers who selfishly keep the “plums” to themselves usually would not last very long as they are voted out in favor of officers who demonstrate commitment to the organization as a whole.

Conflicts of interest routinely occur because our industry is fluid, and relationships form despite the potential for a conflict of interest. Addressing a potential conflict of interest can usually be accomplished by publicly recognizing the potential for the conflict, stating up front the general stance to situations most likely to occur, then sticking with the stated approach. For example if a chapter is seeking to pay an outside webmaster to maintain their chapter website and some of the officers are employees of companies that provide such services, by recusing themselves from the voting process their company's proposal can be considered by the remaining voting officers, and the situation can be resolved with minimal concern for a conflict of interest.

## Finally...

Sometimes our objectivity is clouded and it is not always easy to recognize when we are in a conflict of interest situation. One thing you can do is discuss a potential situation with a trusted colleague if you are in doubt or as stated above, disclose your concern publically and recuse yourself from the situation entirely.

What other examples of ways to deal with potential conflicts of interest can you share with the ISSA Ethics Committee? Please send your comments and questions to [Ethics@ISSA.org](mailto:Ethics@ISSA.org) and we will do our best to respond to each note.

*The committee looks forward to your feedback.*

*Betty Pierce, Joe Malec, and the entire ISSA International Ethics Committee*

---

*The ISSA International Ethics Committee is an active group of ISSA members missioned to maintain a framework for ethics relating to practices that support the ISSA Code of Ethics, provide guidance on ethical behavior for Information Systems Security professionals, and provide education and outreach that increase awareness and promote positive actions.*