“Morals and ethics pertain to the principles of right and wrong. Moral behavior is behavior that helps people. Ethics provide an essential foundation for business and personal transactions based on morals.”

Paul Neuenschwander

“Office Space” is a comedy movie about company workers that hate their jobs. It is a workplace comedy written and directed by Mike Judge and was released in 1999. The movie reflects on the experience of millions of people that go to work every day and hate what they do. The movie breaks down everything that makes an office worker’s life miserable from the morning commute, to dealing with coworkers and a boss that totally ignores his workers.

The story is about Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston), a software engineer and his two friends Samir (Ajay Naidu) and Michael Bolton (David Herman) who works with him at Initech. Also, in his life is his neighbor Lawrence (Diedrich Bader), a laid-back construction worker, and Joanna (Jennifer Aniston), a waitress at a local restaurant who he admires. All of them hate their jobs and the bosses they have to work for.

At an appointment with an occupational hypnotherapist, who Peter unwillingly sees with his then girlfriend Anne (Alexandra Wentworth), Peter hopes for some help in having a more positive outlook on life, but instead the hypnotherapist dies of a heart attack leaving him in the middle of a hypnotic state. The next morning Peter seems to not have a worry in the world. He ignores his manager’s attempt to have him work over the weekend and hangs up on his girlfriend Anne, who demands answers for his bizarre behavior. She breaks up with him, after telling him she cheated.

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on him, which he suspected all along. Peter shows no feelings towards his boss or the girlfriend that cheated on him and goes back to bed.

Monday morning, instead of going to work, Peter decides to finally ask Joanna out for lunch. Over lunch they learn about each other, including the fact that they both hate their jobs and the bosses they work for. Peter then heads over to Initech to retrieve his address book, but instead end up meeting with the efficiency experts hired by Initech to help improve the efficiency at the company. Peter takes this opportunity to speak his mind. He tells them that there is a lack of motivation and that it is frustrating to answer to seven levels of management. The efficiency experts are so impressed with him that they offer him a promotion. During this meeting he also learns that his friends, Samir and Michael, would be losing their jobs at Initech.

After sharing this information with Samir and Michael, Peter encourages them to inject a virus into the company system. This virus is programmed to take fractions of every penny that remained on every bank transaction of the company and would then be deposited into a separate account. They convince each other that it is a foolproof scam, and that it is so gradual that it would take a long time for someone to notice. He shares this information with Joanna, but is not able to convince her that what they were doing is not stealing.

The illicit penny-pinching scam ends up more than they bargained for. The account created to collect the fraction of pennies ends up having a balance of $305,326.13 on their first check. Convinced they are not good criminals, Peter decides that he would take the rap for his friends and return the money to Initech. He slips the money and a confession note under his manager’s door and waits for his dues. At the same time, a twitchy, mumbling long term employee, Milton (Stephen Root) frustrated with how he has been treated, decides to burn down the building that
same evening, grabbing the money and note that Peter left, erasing any proof that a crime had been committed. Peter, Samir and Michael are relieved by this outcome.

The business world is portrayed is a very negative way. The work environment is not inviting and managers are not fair in their dealings with employees. Milton, for example, is brushed aside as meaningless and inconsequential. There is a lack of mutual respect for each other. Moral leadership doesn’t seem to exist. Confidential information is shared very loosely with other employees. For example, the efficiency experts shares information of other employees to be fired with Peter without any hesitation. Good employer-employee relationship seems to be nonexistent. The business ethics issues portrayed were of the main character’s ethical and unethical decisions to advance his career. Ethical decisions made by organization management covered conflict of interest, worker’s rights, confidentiality and preferential treatment.

The most troublesome issue is that of stealing money from the company. Peter, after learning that his friends Samir and Michael will be fired, encourages them to plant a virus in the company system. The virus is to set aside fractions of pennies used in transactions into a separate account for themselves. Peter makes light of the issue by calling it a soft crime, requiring if caught, a couple months in a “white collar, minimum security resort”. He rationalizes it as not stealing because they are just fractions of pennies, not even whole pennies, and that no one will ever notice that they are missing. The only thing that made them have second thoughts was the large amount of money that had collected in the account in a very short time. Fear sets in on all of them and Peter decides to take the rap for the problem. After returning the money with a confession note attached, sliding it under the manager’s door, Milton, the other disgruntle employee sets fire to the entire complex, thereby burning any evidence of a crime taking place. The strong influence Peter had over Samir and Michael convinced them that it was the only way
to deal with the unethical employer they had. Lesson learned is that what may feel right is not always right when it comes to white collar crimes. Peter should turn himself in.

Another issue is to do with confidentiality. The efficiency experts freely discussed confidential issues with Peter regarding the firing of employees. They discussed issues about pay, benefits, and the terminating of employees without feeling uneasy about what they were doing. With no concrete corporate guidelines, it is easy for employees and managers to be relaxed in their dealing with employees. This can just open up to other problems in the future. Was the information shared appropriate? Should the information have gone beyond the person the information was shared with? Was Peter right in sharing that important information with his friends Samir and Michael? No it wasn’t. Employers need to be careful of how, when and to whom information should be given. Having personal files on each employee and dealing with them in private is the how companies should work.

The other issue with Initech is the avoidance of employees by upper management. There seems to be no responsibility towards their employees. For example, Milton, employed for a very long time, was fired a long time back, because of a glitch in the payroll department, he continued to receive his paychecks. Now, instead of talking to him about the situation, management decided to quietly stop paying him, and have the matter go away on its own. A well documented personal file would have avoided any misunderstanding earlier in the process, instead of now avoiding the issue entirely.

Corporate governance guidelines and business ethics should be the backbone for any business to be successful. Without these procedures in place, a company risks damage to reputation, criminal and legal action and regulatory penalties resulting in loss of customers, reduced market
share, and the loss of control over the business. A strong business code of ethics is required for any company to prosper. It should provide the foundation and structure by which the company operates and the values it possesses when it deals with its employees, customers and or the public at large. This code of ethics should be tailored to the organization and its industry, with company-wide training to teach employees about following the company ethics code.