

Case 2: The Nudge

Steve is in charge of employee wellness at his company. The flu vaccination policy at his company is an “opt-in”: employees are required to schedule their own appointment to receive a flu vaccine. Knowing that people have a tendency to stick with default options and choices, Steve changes the company flu vaccination policy to require employees to “opt-out.” Employees now receive an email from the occupational health department informing them about when and where their vaccination is scheduled. They have the option of calling to cancel or rescheduling their appointment. After implementing the new opt-out policy, Steve finds out that employee vaccination rates have gone from 30% last year to 45% this year.

Steve’s decision to change the flu vaccination policy is an example of “nudging.” Nudging is typically a reference to evidence-based insights, usually from the behavioral sciences, about how people make decisions. The nudge insight is used to design how a given choice is presented in a policy to make certain choices or behavior more likely. Steve used the evidence for “the status quo bias” to try to make it more likely that employees would get their annual flu vaccinations.

Nudges can be used in different contexts. Examples include: changing product placements to influence purchasing decisions; making retirement savings opt-out rather than opt-in to increase them; and etching the image of a housefly onto urinals to improve sanitation by improving “the aim” of men using the restroom. Nudging has been used by a variety of organizations, including businesses and nonprofits as well as the governments of the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. Nudging can be motivated by any number of reasons: a government might use it to increase the number of organ donors, while businesses might use nudging to increase sales and profits.

Proponents argue that nudges are relatively nonintrusive, keeping a person’s ability to freely make a decision intact. Opponents, however, argue that nudges usually work because they are intrusive in some way. An example of an intrusive nudge often cited by opponents is “Toxic Release Inventories,” used to reduce polluting by companies. Such Inventories are government-mandated public records of what hazardous chemicals a company is storing or releasing into the environment. For nudging advocates, the government simply requires companies to publish Toxic Release Inventories, and as a result is relatively nonintrusive. Opponents counter that this nudge only works because the media and environmental groups use these reports to create

“environmental blacklists” to put intense public pressure on a blacklisted company to reduce their pollution, making this nudge quite intrusive.

Study questions:

1. Was it ethical for Steve to change the flu vaccination policy from opt-in to opt-out? Explain why or why not.
2. Does nudging wrongfully violate individuals’ autonomy? Explain how it does or does not.
3. Under what conditions is it appropriate to use nudging? Under what conditions is it inappropriate? Does *who* is doing the nudging (e.g., government, business, or nonprofit) affect whether nudging is appropriate or not? Give justifications for your responses.
4. Does nudging have to be intentional, or does anyone who creates a decision context (e.g., Steve’s flu vaccination policy) become a “nudger” whether they mean to or not? Justify your response.

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