

ADAPT

Moonshot Audit

December 2021



About Moonshot

Moonshot is an organisation committed to ethics, evidence and putting people at the centre of what it does is using online communication to help individuals to move away from violence and hatred. It seeks to provide alternative direction to those attracted to hatred and violence and also provides high quality analysis of the problem. It seeks to create benefit for both individuals and society.

Scope and goals

The process undertaken by Adapt was to review Moonshot's internal approach to ethics both in terms of project management and project development. Particular attention was given to how staff operated the comprehensive ethical policies and any constraints or problems they experienced in the process.

The overarching goals of the document analysis meetings were to understand:

- How staff apply ethical processes to their day-to-day work
- Staff perceptions of Moonshot's ethical policy
- The impact of ethics on project work and any ethical dilemmas encountered
- Moonshot's approach to ethical business development
- Whether staff draw upon the organisation's resources in assessing ethical issues
- The role of the ethical committee
- Organisational culture and leadership on ethics

Key findings

Adapt reviewed a range of internal policy documents and interviewed key staff to assess Moonshot's approach to ethics. We noted the formalisation of ethical policies compared to our previous audit of 2020 - considerable time and effort has gone into providing a coherent approach to business development and project implementation to ensure they are ethical. Formal policies are sustained and made legitimate by an informal culture, which is both leadership-shaped and peer-to-peer reinforced. We noted that Moonshot has refused to take on projects where there are significant ethical concerns and is also capable of a sophisticated application of ethics to projects where nuance is required. Overall we felt that Moonshot not only has ethical aspirations and policies but has also understood - and this is very unusual - how to make them operational and core to the business.

One minor point that our audit revealed was the utility of adjusting the ethical business development framework to take account of the variety of projects both substantively and in terms of time. There is a great deal of separation between a two year project that involves collecting a substantial amount of data and a six week project with no real data collection. The significant challenge facing the organisation is how to sustain this culture as the company grows in dispersed centres around the world. While the policy framework can be consistent, the question is how to supplement the informal legitimising culture ("they don't just talk about, they do it") that is so prevalent in the London office. Regional offices tend to become subject to centripetal, developing their own culture and moving away from the head office.

Moonshot has successfully integrated ethics moving from a small staff and informal culture into a larger staff team shaped by formal policy and informal culture. As Moonshot becomes global and continues to grow, the challenge for the leadership of the organisation is to adapt to this next level.

Conclusions

It is customary for audits of this kind to find some fault in the organisation. This is not our experience. Overall, we were extremely impressed by the way that ethics has been built into the DNA and business model of Moonshot. All the staff we spoke to valued the ethical approach and felt it was critical to their own work and the work of the organisation. The policies are comprehensive and well thought through though perhaps the framework could be adjusted to reflect very different types of projects.

While the formal policies are critical, the informal culture is what gives the policies meaning and legitimacy – when people are seen to believe in the values and practice them it makes the formal policy credible. The challenge in the future is how to sustain the interaction of formal and informal policies with new staff joining and working from home, and in particular with the development of regional offices – such as DC or the tech team in Ireland. There is some anxiety / questioning about how the ethical approach can be sustained when there are always tendencies for regional offices to develop their own identity and culture based on the people who are recruited and the frequent sense that “head office” is remote from the day-to-day pressures.

It is not an impossible challenge – Moonshot’s ethical approach is, we believe, central to its success and growth as an organisation – one that separates it from its competitors. There is also no evidence that it damages the organisation’s relationship with clients, even if project ideas are rejected. On the contrary these principles engender trust inside and outside the organisation. But how that culture is rolled out and sustained will require thought and commitment from senior managers and the founders.

About Adapt

Adapt works with data-driven companies to re-frame their relationship with data - helping them realise their strategic objectives through a more responsible and ethical approach.

We are a team of data policy, security and human rights experts with deep experience working alongside governments, private donors and tech companies of all shapes and sizes across the globe. As Adapt, we bring a unique and detailed understanding of ethics within the digital sphere, and practical proficiency applying those values to startups, high-growth and established businesses.

Our approach focuses on creating value. We build partnerships with our clients and champion their growth into responsible and ethical companies of the future.

We take a holistic view of data responsibility, positioning it in the context of a company’s entire digital ecosystem. We work to identify gaps and collaboratively develop new practices, policies and behaviours that ensure data responsibility and cybersecurity is embedded across the organisation.

The Founders

Charles Bradley -- A leading business management and digital policy practitioner who has worked globally with tech companies and governments.

Andrew Puddephatt OBE -- An international expert on data protection, transparency and human rights. An advisor to UNESCO and several major foundations, Andrew has an OBE for services to human rights.