Morals for your story

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Dilemma
My friend was recently offered a job in a new department at our company. I was actually the one who told him about the new opportunity. Recently, however, I've heard from a reliable source that this new department is not expected to survive, that it may be a holding tank for people the company wants to get rid of.

I don't want my friend to lose his job. I've told him he should find out more about the new job and make sure it seems sound, but he seems content to believe that it is the best thing ever. I don't want to tell him exactly what I've heard and from whom. My friend has a big mouth and I don't want it to be known that I have leaked private information.

What should I do? Do I have ethical obligations to my company? To my friend?
--Under the Weight of Knowledge

Responses
It's pretty uncontroversial in ethics that you have duties to friends of some kind, but those duties are limited. It would have to be a pretty special situation for you to have a duty to help a friend, say, rob a bank or something. And most people would probably say that you don't have a duty to make tremendous personal sacrifices to help a friend if there's no upside for you. But friendship is sometimes about making sacrifices. Duties to one's employer are definitely there as well, as long as the employer is doing his/her/its part to treat someone well as an employee. (But generally it's harder to argue that you have a duty to a company or corporation as opposed to the people who make it up.)

But all that isn't really so helpful, is it? In the end, it seems like the dilemma boils down to something pretty simple: do you have a duty to undergo possible professional embarrassment to give a friend a piece of advice that might keep him from making a bad career decision (and thus having a slightly crappier life)? So it's really a question of whether you have a duty to make a sacrifice for the sake of a friend. (Actually it's a little harder than that since you're somewhat responsible for the friend being in this position.) To be honest, it doesn't seem like it would be that much of a sacrifice, especially given that the consequences include possibly losing a job in a tough economy. And it seems like a no-brainer if you could figure a way to couch the information in a way that makes it very clear that your friend has a duty to keep the source secret. After all, as a friend, he has duties too, right? It never hurts to remind someone that these things go both ways. "I don't want to tell you this, because if I do it's going to tarnish my reputation but..." would be a good way to explain it. Or, if secrecy really is the only option, why not say something like "I've recently learned something about the new position which, if I'd known it earlier, would have kept me from telling you about the job, let alone recommending it to you. I can't tell you what it is because I'd be breaking a confidence, but as a friend I'm telling you: stay in your current position."
--Dr. Adam Pothast, Author of Ethics for Dummies

It appears to me that the best possible course of action to take, at this point, is no action at all. Take a look at what you have and haven't done. First of all, you've helped your friend find a job that he may or may not take. You have also warned him, even if indirectly, that this job may not be something that he will have long-term. This was an admirable gesture in attempting to protect your friend from the potential of him being laid-off in the future.

Because you made this effort, and despite the fact that your friend appears to be too stubborn to listen, it seems that any ethical obligation you have to your friend has been fulfilled. You not only have attempted to help them, but you have also warned him of there being potential danger. At the same time, you have not revealed any private information, or information that can be considered so, of your company.

You do have an ethical obligation to fulfill in regards to your company: keeping private information private. This ethical obligation is based upon a mutual understanding between you and the company when they hired you. In return for a paycheck, you agreed to work for your company, as well as to keep information meant to be private the way it was intended, private.

Additionally, despite coming from a reliable source, this information could in fact still be considered hearsay due to its "gossipy" nature. This presents another reason you should not tell your friend about the potential danger of getting the job.

If you feel you cannot sit by and let events unfold by themselves, however, I would suggest that you once again encourage your friend to look into the long-term security of this job as this action breaks no ethical obligations that you have with your friend or your company.
--Kevyn Young

You do have ethical obligations to your company, but you also have similar obligations to your friend. In this manner, you must discourage him from
accepting the position without leaking any private information.

You can be as creative with this as you like. You could get a really distressed look in your eyes and tell him not to take the position, no matter what. A little bit of fear might keep him from taking the job, but it also might impact your friendship because he may think you are crazy. In any case, the manner in which you discourage him is up to you, but remember not to say anything that would indicate why he should not take the job.

--Sometimes Eccentricity is the Answer

I would tell my friend indirectly without linking myself to the leaked information. This could be done through an anonymous note or email or posting the information somewhere your friend will see it.

--Anonymous

I believe that the correct moral thing to do in this situation is to inform your friend of the information. Being a friend always comes before a job. You will be able to have a clear conscience. It will also make your friend happier if he knows that he has someone who will inform him of bad news. I think he will respect you more and everyone will be happier; this goes along with utilitarianism in which maximizing happiness is the overall goal.

--Vinny Delaney

Friendship is the bond that makes humanity possible. Without it we could accomplish little. Your ethical obligations therefore lie with your friend. If he truly is a friend you can trust him to keep your leak hush hush and if word does happen to slip out you should be able to trust him to keep your name out of the picture. If the company were to put you in that position and your friend knew the truth behind the move wouldn’t you want him to tell you? Aristotle believes that morality is derived from honesty.

I say this next comment now with caution. As far as utilitarianism goes, which aims for the greatest amount of happiness, you have no obligation to your friend—as long as you won’t be greatly impacted by the guilt when your friend is fired. But if you cannot put that on yourself, then clearly the greatest happiness comes from being honest with him. Corporate America is ruthless and has no regard for anyone, not even you.

--Dakota Mitchell

Your friend seems to be set on the idea that he has a new job awaiting him. I would suggest you tell your friend that he should research the job more thoroughly and see if there is anything that could go wrong at all. If he cannot find anything wrong then he should accept the opportunity and live with the consequences whether they are good or bad.

That is one of life’s great virtues—being able to make our own decisions. You have a right to not tell your friend about your source, and you have the right to tell your friend what you want. Don’t try to convince your friend he’s making the wrong choice. Let him decide for himself.

--Kdog

Your friend obviously is so excited about the new job and most probably he is not looking at all sides. That’s why I would suggest that you sit down with your friend and talk about the positive side of it and then talk about the negative side and circumstances. This will make your friend more confident in his decision, and you will be satisfied that you did your best.

--Ghadeer Alselemi

Next Week’s Dilemma
I recently started my own business. In my field, my salary is derived in two ways: 1) an hourly charge, and 2) a mark-up on materials that I personally purchase for the construction projects. Since I am a business owner, I am able to buy supplies at wholesale rates; it is customary in my field not to tell clients the profit made on these purchases.

I think I should be honest with my clients, though. Since I am already making money by the hour, it seems excessive to also make a profit on purchases. However, I worry that if I tell my clients about the customary mark-ups I am revealing a secret of my industry, which will create complications for my colleagues in this field.

Should I follow my own ethical code and be honest with my clients? Or be loyal to my industry and follow its customs?

--Unnatural Capitalist