

# THE PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYEES REGARDING ETHICAL MISDEMEANOURS IN SMALL TSHWANE BUSINESSES

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## Abstract

With the world wide focus on large corporations and the ethical conduct of specifically the top managers it has become clear that ethics are part and parcel of all businesses. This however does not mean that only large corporations will be screened – it also applies to smaller businesses. The small business sector plays a vital role in the economic development and job creation in the Republic of South Africa. It is important to consider the perception employees have towards their ethical responsibilities in the business sector in order to ensure the successful development of the small business sector of South Africa. The main purpose of the study is therefore to determine the perception employees have towards their ethical responsibilities as well as the types of ethical misconduct employees of small businesses have experienced in the business environment. The research followed a quantitative approach where a survey questionnaire was used as the data collection method. The results indicated that employees of small businesses have a positive view regarding their responsibilities as an employee to acting ethically. Respondents also indicated the most encountered misconduct is observing unethical behaviour and wanting to tell someone regarding unethical misconduct observed. The study also found that employees mostly turn to family members for advice on ethical misdemeanours. The study also found that employees mostly turn to family members for advice on ethical misdemeanours.

**Keywords:** SMEs, South Africa, Perception, Ethical Environment, Ethics, Misconduct

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## 1 Introduction

During the past number of years, increased pressure has been placed on all businesses as their ethical behaviour is under scrutiny by stakeholders and the public. Since the collapse of the major banks in Europe and the devastating global recession in 2008, managers expected an increase in misdemeanours, such as Ponzi schemes, fraud, bribery and theft inside businesses (DeMarco, 2011:33). Various studies have noted that managers, leaders and employees lack strong ethical standards and morals (Gino & Bazerman, 2007:3). Smaller businesses often follow the example set by larger organisations and industry leaders, and therefore cannot be excluded from extensive examination regarding ethical concerns and ethical misconduct in business.

The small business sector plays an essential role in economic development and has become the primary building block of job creation in the Republic of South

Africa (Valadez, 2011:1; Wielicki & Arendt, 2010:162). Operating in today's complex business environment can be challenging and stressful for small businesses and can have a negative effect on the way they conduct business to be profitable. Most unethical behaviour, according to Ferrell (ND:3), is not committed to attain personal achievement, but rather to meet ones performance goals and objectives. Failure to understand this basic fact is a major obstacle in educating managers, stakeholders and employees as to how to avoid an ethical catastrophe. Mahdavi (2009:2) observed that, with the expansion of global businesses, the study of ethics and unethical behaviours has become increasingly more important, due to the raise in ethical and social responsibilities.

Limited research was conducted regarding unethical behaviour or misconduct that employees of small businesses in South Africa have indentified in their working environment as well as their perception regarding their ethical responsibilities. Therefore, the

aim of this study is to determine the perception small business employees have towards their ethical responsibilities in the working environment and to investigate the possible ethical misconduct employees have observed in the small business sector. In the subsequent section of the study, the objectives and research methodology used to conduct this study will be discussed followed by a review of the available literature. The research findings, recommendations and concluding remarks will then be discussed to conclude the study.

## 2 Research objectives

The aim of this research is to determine the perception small business employees have towards their ethical responsibilities in the business environment of South Africa. Additional objectives of the study comprise of the following:

- To investigate the perception employees have towards the commitments they, as employees, should make in order to act ethically in the business environment.
- To investigate ethical misconduct small business employees of South Africa have observed in the small business environment.
- To determine where employees of small businesses would turn to for advice regarding ethical misconduct they have observed in the business environment of South Africa.

## 3 Research methodology

To establish the perception employees have towards their ethical responsibilities in the small business environment, the research followed a quantitative analysis and a survey questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. Secondary as well as primary data were used to obtain information in order to analyse the perception employees of small businesses have towards their ethical responsibilities. To address the problem adequately, the research methodology was based on the primary data collected between the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2012 and the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, from employees of small businesses. The population for the research survey consisted of employees from small businesses in the Tshwane region of South Africa. The sample comprised of 24 employees from micro-sized businesses and 21 employees from small businesses. Convenience sampling was used as the sampling method for this study due to the fact that it is the most effective method to gather questionnaires in a short period of time (Zikmund & Babin, 2007:273).

The main construct of this study was determined through the use of a questionnaire comprising a 7-point Likert-scale question with five statements to consider. The first section of the questionnaire examined the perception employees of small businesses have towards their ethical responsibilities

in the business environment. The next two questions were in the form of multiple-choice, multiple-response questions, which aimed to determine the ethical misconduct employees encountered in the small business environment as well as where they would turn to for advice if they witnessed unethical behaviour. The last section of the questionnaire aimed to determine the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

## 4 Ethical misconduct in the small business environment

The ethical environment is a relatively new sub-discipline with the intention to rationalise moral motivations and beliefs for the purpose of environmental protection (Raisner, 1997:1331; Yang, 2006:23). Business ethics can be defined as recognising and implementing commonly agreed upon standards of conduct that ensures that the company will not impact its stakeholders negatively (Shakeel, Khan & Khan, 2011:59; Shaw, 2002:4). In other words, business ethics is what is regarded as right and wrong or good and bad human behaviour in the business environment. These commonly agreed upon standards and issues will differ from person to person and company to company, and is influenced by a wide range of factors such as culture, background, and reference groups. Today's challenge for business leaders is to be profitable while still conducting business in a way that is ethically acceptable in the broader business environment. Consequently all organisations, big or small, must ensure that they conduct business in an ethical manner and not ignore these ethical issues.

The literature shall discuss the commitments businesses and individuals have to make in order to act ethically. Thereafter, issues concerning ethics in the business sector shall be discussed, as well as the most commonly found forms of fraud in the business environment. The literature will conclude with a discussion on where employees turn to for advice regarding ethical misconduct they observed.

### 4.1 Business and individual commitments to be ethical

Ethical behaviour and the perception towards ethics subsequently do not emerge from the morals and beliefs of individuals in isolation from external factors. The ethical responsibilities of businesses and individual employees are very broad and vary from treating others with respect, contributing to the community and operating ethically. Even the most loyal employees in a business can find that their interests collide with those of the organisations. This is known as conflict of interest and can be defined as a morally risky situation that should be avoided by employees at all times (Shaw, 2002:280).

Employees and especially managers are responsible for the moral dimension of their working environment. In a situation where the unemployment rate is extremely high, for example in South Africa, people cannot afford to decide whether a particular job suits them or not. Individuals are essentially forced to take any job which is available at that time. There is thus no luxury of waiting around for the ideal job. (Rossow, 2004:3). Regardless, employees generally have a very high ethical expectation from businesses and other organisations they are in contact with, such as in the study conducted by the St. James Ethical Centre (2009). Transparency, trust, confidence and comparability emerged as crucial matters in the new environmental and economic environment, making methods of responsibility across all business operations essential (St. James Ethical Centre, 2009).

The St. James Ethical Centre (2009) identified certain factors that determine employees' perception regarding the commitments they have to make towards the organisation to act ethically. These include the following:

- If employees know their organisation is run ethically, they will put extra effort into their work.
- Employees would risk losing their job if the organisation they work for is not operating according to their personal code of ethics and morals.
- The organisation should have a logical and understandable code of ethics available that the employees can follow easily.
- Employees might consider resigning from the organisation if their personal ethics had to change due to the work they do or the ethical business environment in which they operate.

It is evident that there are various commitments employees have to make in order to operate ethically in the small business sector. The main aim of this study is to investigate small business employees' perceptions regarding the commitments and responsibilities they have to make in order to perform ethically in the business environment. The next section will look at the various issues that exist in the business sector of which employees, and management, should be aware of.

#### **4.2 Issues concerning ethics in the business sector**

Small and medium businesses (SMEs) are the entities that suffer the most from corruption due to their size. Their size ultimately limits their resources and capabilities to avoid corruption and fraud in the business sector. Consequently, many small businesses accept corruption and fraud as normal acceptable practices and utilise it as a means of getting something done quicker, despite knowing it is illegal and unethical (Rune, 2011:1). It is observed that ethical standards in the business environment is extremely complex, which involves problems such as societal

protection, legal protection and rights and social responsibilities (Daveninderak, 2009:2).

Botha (2012:6-10) identified the following ethical concerns as the most commonly found forms of misconduct in the business environment of which employees should be aware of:

- **Bribery:** Bribery is used to manipulate people and can be described as the act of taking or receiving something with the intention of influencing the recipient in some way favourable to the party providing the bribe.

- **Coercion:** Coercion (or better known as bullying) controls individuals by power or intimidation. Coercion is defined as impulse, grievance, or compelling by force or threat and may be actual, direct or positive.

- **Deception:** Deception can be described as manipulating people by misleading them or providing them with false information.

- **Theft:** Theft is the taking of something that does not belong to you. It is the act of stealing, the taking of belongings without the owner's permission.

- **Discrimination:** Unfair discrimination is when an individual is treated unfairly or denied of normal privileges, by co-workers or management, due to their race, age, sex, health, religion or nationality.

- **Fraud:** Rossow (2004:155) defines fraud as the act of dishonesty with the intention to deceive another party which results in gain for the deceiver and/or loss for the deceived.

- **Harassment:** Similarly to discrimination, harassment is defined as an unwelcome demeanour that is based on race, colour, religion, sex, nationality, age, disability or generic information from a supervisor, co-worker, or non-employee, such as a customer or supplier (Collins, 2012:215).

St. James Ethical Centre (2009) surveyed respondents to determine what ethical wrongdoing they encountered in the business environment. The most respondents (30.8%) indicated that they had ethical concerns about the actions of a co-worker or senior personnel and 14.7 percent specified that their care and concern for one person conflicted with their care and concern for another. Other aspects included:

- Employees wanting to give the right advice, but knew that it may cause bigger problems.

- Employees experienced conflict between confidentiality and transparency.

- Knowing the advice employees provided was not completely necessary, but it would lead to the benefit of the organisation or the individual itself.

- Employees wanted to respect the beliefs and culture of a co-worker, but to do so felt they would have to violate their own core principles.

- Employees may have considered 'blowing the whistle' on the actions their organisation or co-workers was taking.

Collins (2012:6-7) identified that the most commonly observed ethical misconduct experienced by respondents was the abuse of the company's

resources, abusive behaviour towards employees, lying to employees, Internet abuse, conflict of interest, discrimination, lying to stakeholders, employee benefit abuse, employee privacy violation and falsifying expenses. This ethical misconduct was observed in both large and small firms, and in all sectors examined. In a survey of small business professionals, the major concerns were kickbacks, honesty in contracts, honesty in internal communications, and the granting of pay raises. By nature of their limited size, small businesses may also be more prone to experience bullying from a large unethical customer or supplier (Collins, 2012:9).

#### **4.3 Advice on ethical misconduct observed**

In addition to the unethical concerns employees observed in the workplace, respondents in the study conducted by St. James Ethical Centre (2009) were also asked to indicate where they turn to for advice regarding ethical misconduct or concerns. Respondents (44.8%) indicated that they go to co-workers or mentors within their own organisation for advice, and 37.1 percent turn to family members. Other determinants included employee's turning to written information (legislations, manuals or code of ethics), colleagues or mentors outside their organisation, religious leaders, academic institutions, ethical counselling services, individuals with ethical training or nowhere.

The above mentioned problems that were identified concerning misconduct and people they turn to for advice, were used in this study to determine the ethical issues employees of small businesses are confronted with and where they turn to for advice. The following two sections will discuss the problems identified in the literature as well as the objectives that were used to obtain the main purpose of the study.

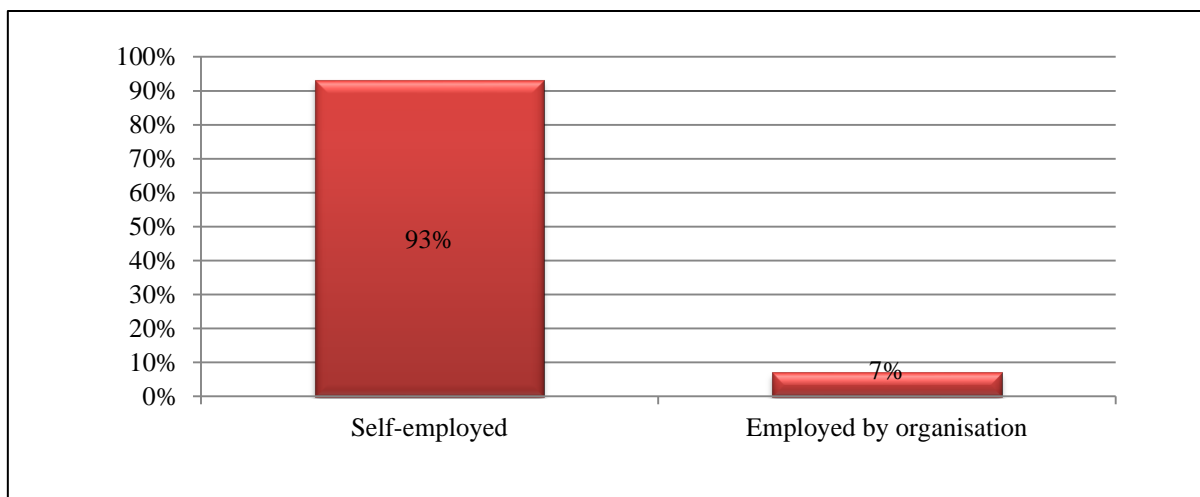
## **5 Research findings**

The population for the research survey consisted of 45 small business employees and owners in the Tshwane region of South Africa. According to a study compiled by World Wide Worx (2012:9), there are 650 000 active registered small businesses in South Africa, contributing approximately 55 percent of the total GDP and providing about 61 percent of the country's employment. Although the sample size (45) does not represent the entire small business population of South Africa, it is sufficient to provide a holistic approach to employees' perception regarding their ethical responsibilities in the working environment and misconduct that they have experienced in the workplace. The following research findings were observed in the study.

### **5.1 Self-employed or employed by a business**

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they are a self-employed small business owner or employed by an organisation. Ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated that they own their own small business in the Tshwane region, and only 7 percent of the respondents indicated that they are employed by a small business.

**Figure 1.** Employment type



## 5.2 Personal commitments employees have to make to be ethical

The 7-point Likert-scale question asked respondents to rate five statements. These statements attempted to determine the commitments the respondents, as employees, have to make in order to act ethically in the business environment. Respondents had to indicate whether they strongly agree or strongly disagree with each of these five statements.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) describe the mean as the most frequently used measure of

central tendency. The mean is then calculated by adding a list of scores and dividing them by the total number of scores (Wellman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2007). Standard deviation, according to Gravetter and Wellnau (2009), is using the mean as the reference point and it measures variability by calculating the distance between each score and the mean. Table 1 illustrates the mean scores and standard deviation of the perception employees have towards their personal ethical responsibilities in the organisation.

**Table 1.** Personal commitments employees have to make to be ethical

	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	Total
<b>Mean</b>	3.578	3.378	4.778	3.400	4.733	<b>3.973</b>
<b>St. Deviation</b>	1.602	1.585	1.295	1.355	1.116	<b>1.391</b>

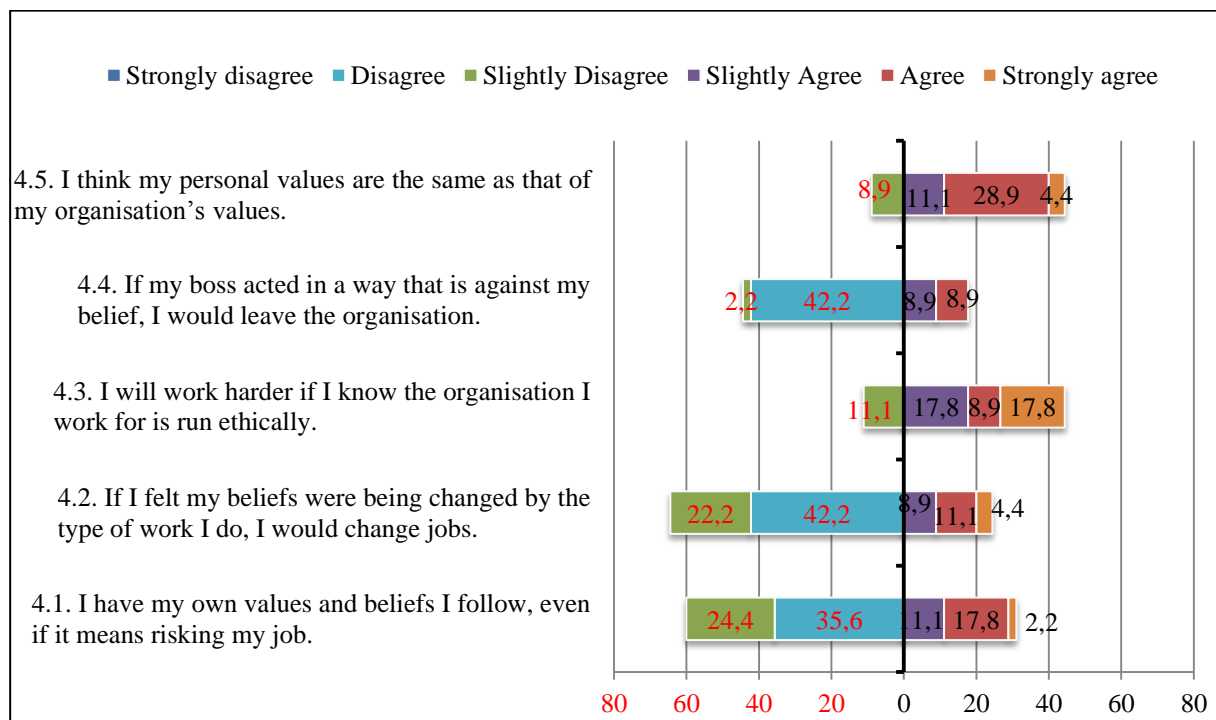
Measurement was done on a 7-point Likert scale, whereby 1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree

It is evident from table 1 that the highest degree of agreement was from statement 3, "I will work harder if I know the organisation I work for is run ethically" (Mean = 4.778). This is closely followed by statement 5, "I think my personal values are the same as that of my organisation's values" (Mean = 4.733). The lowest degree of agreement was found to have come from statement 4, "If my boss acted in a way that is against my beliefs, I would leave the organisation" (Mean = 3.400). The standard deviation

for statement 1 and 2 is high, indicating a large distribution of value in these two questions.

From all the statements that were asked, the general perception employees of small businesses in the Tshwane region have towards their own personal ethical responsibilities can be seen to be positive in nature, with a total mean score of 3.973 and a standard deviation of 1.391. Figure 2 graphically portrays these statements and therefore presents the degree of agreeability and disagreeability.

**Figure 2.** Individual commitments to acting ethical in the small business environment



Although 28.9 percent of the respondents agreed that they perceive their personal values to be similar to

the values of the organisation, respondents (35.6%) would not consider risking their job even if it means

changing their beliefs and values to comply with the beliefs and values of the organisations. This perception can be due to the fact that the business environment has become very competitive and it is equally difficult to find a job that is right for the specific employee and that operates according to the individual's ethical morals and values. Today, individuals have no luxury in choosing where they would like to work and therefore their perception regarding their ethical behaviours and responsibilities are to be in line with the values and beliefs of the organisation, even if it means being unethical or against one's own morals and values.

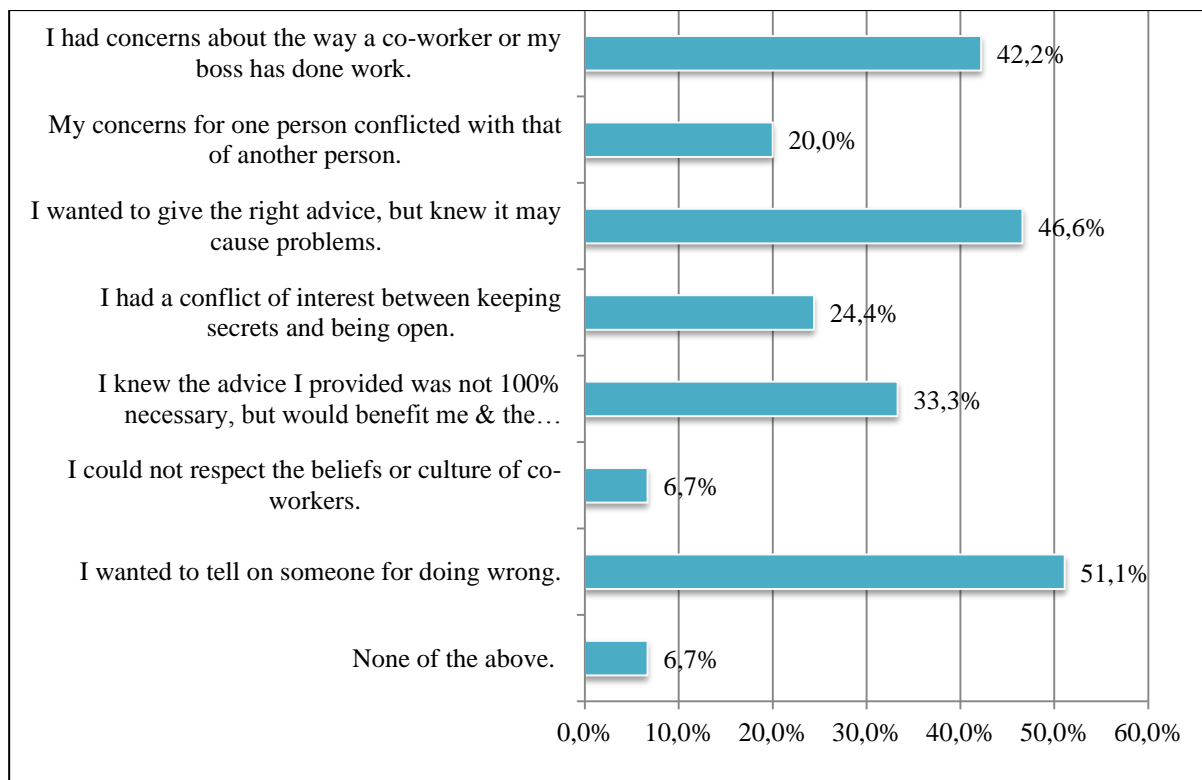
Respondents (42.2%) also said that they would not leave the organisation if their boss or management team is unethical and operates against their own beliefs and values. This is in contrast with the respondents' answers provided in statement 3,

agreeing that they (44.5%) would work harder if they knew the organisation they work for is ethical.

### 5.3 Ethical misconduct experienced in the small business environment

The next question aimed to determine the ethical misconduct that employees of small businesses have encountered in the small business environment in which they operate, as well as who they turn to for advice if misconduct has been observed. The question was in the form of a multiple-choice, multiple-response question, where respondents could choose as many options as they wish. Figure 3 depicts numerous situations of ethical misconduct that can occur in the business environment as well as the findings from the respondents.

**Figure 3.** Ethical misconduct observed in the small business environment



It is evident from figure 3 that the most observed or encountered ethical misconduct is firstly (51.1%) "I wanted to tell on someone for doing wrong" followed by "I wanted to give the right advice, but knew it may cause problems" with 46.6 percent. The least observed misconduct is "I could not respect the beliefs or culture of co-workers" with 6.7 percent or 3 respondents choosing this option. Illustrated in Figure 4, are the people or places that these small business employees would turn to for advice when they have

encountered ethical misconduct. Compared to the results found in the study conducted by the St. James Ethical Centre (2009), 30.8 percent of the respondents had concerns about the way co-workers or top management has done work and 14.7 percent concerns for one person conflicted with that of another. These statistics are very similar as to the statistics conducted in this study from a South African small business perspective.

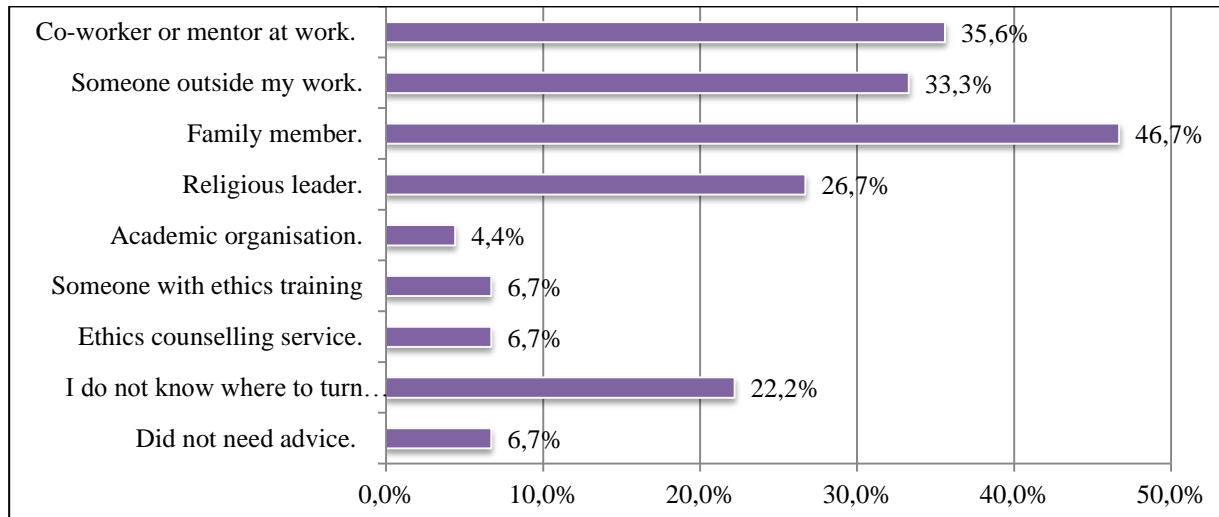
**Figure 4.** Advice regarding ethical misconduct observed in the small business environment

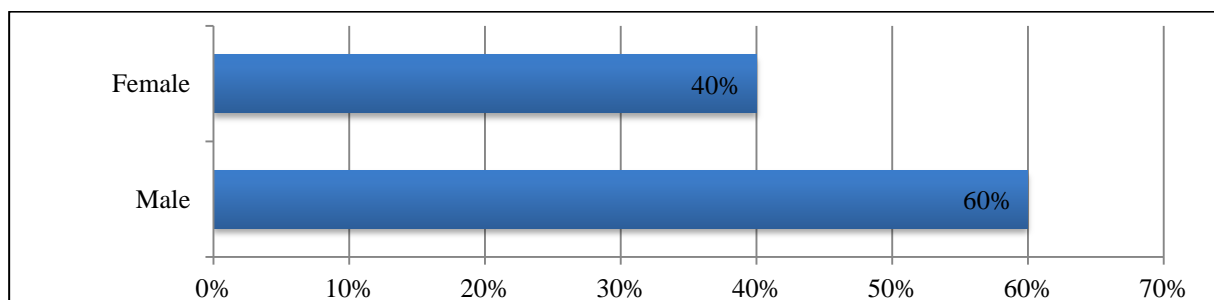
Figure 4 illustrates where small business employees would turn to for advice when they have observed unethical misconduct. It is evident from figure 4 that employees mostly turn to family members (46.7%) for advice on ethical misconduct they have observed followed by co-workers and mentors (35.6%) and members outside their working environment (33.3%). This indicates that employees do not have a lot of trust in people from the organisation, and would rather speak with someone not involved in the organisation. Compared to the study conducted by the St. James Ethical Centre (2009), 44.8 percent of the respondents indicated they turn to co-workers or mentors inside the organisation for advice and 37.1 percent turn to family members. This is the exact opposite from the findings in this study, as employees rather turn to family members for advice.

It is noteworthy that a staggering 22.2 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not know where to turn to for advice and 6.7 percent indicated that they felt they did not need advice when it comes to ethical misconduct that they have observed in the working

environment. It is therefore important for the organisation to provide a support structure for these employees where they can turn to for advice on ethical misconduct. Interestingly, 35.6 percent indicated that they turn to co-workers or mentors inside to organisation regarding ethical misconduct and therefore, the organisation should insure that the proper channels are available for employees to blow the whistle anonymously for themselves or on behalf of someone else.

#### 5.4 Demographic profile of respondents

Lastly, respondents were asked to indicate their socio-economic and demographic information for the purpose of the study. Questions such as the respondents' occupational level, gender, age and racial group were asked in the demographics section of the questionnaire. The following information were gathered from the respondents and used to establish the demographic background of respondents who participated in the study.

**Figure 5.** Gender profile of respondents

The sample consisted of 60 percent (or 27) male respondents and 40 percent (or 18) female respondents, as illustrated in Figure 5. Figure 6 indicates the age distribution of the respondents who

participated in the study. The majority of the respondents were between the age of 26 and 35 (42%) and 19 to 25 (40%). Sixteen percent of the sample consisted of respondents between the age of 36 and 45

and only 2 percent were older than 56 years of age. No respondents who participated in the study were younger than 18 or between the age of 46 and 55.

**Figure 6.** Age distribution of respondents

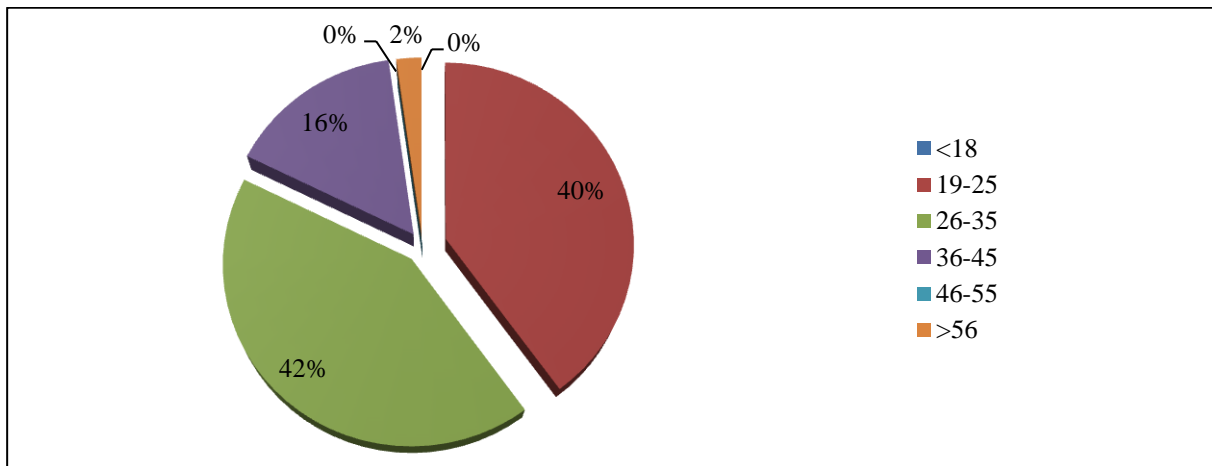
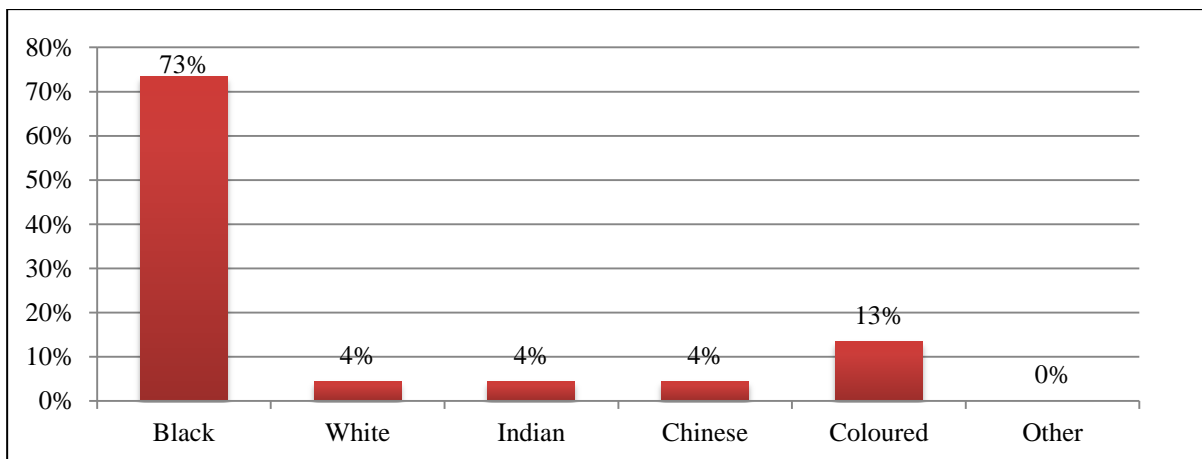


Figure 7 graphically portrays the racial profile of the respondents who participated in the study. The majority of respondents (73%) were black employees or owners working in small businesses in the Tshwane

region. Thirteen percent consisted of coloured respondents and Indians, Chinese and white people each made up four percent of the sample.

**Figure 7.** Racial groups



## 6 Recommendations

A number of problems can and will occur in the business environment with regards to unethical behaviour. Collins (2012:241) indicated that when problems arise in the business environment, managers depend upon their employees to take immediate action or inform them so that managers can address the problems before the situation worsens. Employees may be hesitant to share personally sensitive concerns with senior members or co-workers. Employees of the organisation should be aware of ethical misconduct at work and be willing to discuss the matter with the person involved in ethical misconduct or someone else in the organisation with authority (Collins, 2012:241). Alternatively, it is the responsibilities of management

to ensure that the business has a clear, understandable and transparent code of ethics in place. Management also have to ensure that their employees are aware of this code of conduct, understand it and have access to it when needed or in doubt.

In order to prevent unethical behaviour, management can provide training, practice examples and continuous assessment of the working environment to ensure employees are productive but still ethical in the way they conduct business. In order to ensure employees abide to legal and ethical requirements, a corporate culture can be instilled, such as providing a code of conduct, statements of values or ethical documentation. Ethical standards can also be accomplished through corporate culture such as dress codes, tales about company heroes and villains,



handling customer and employee complaints, how meetings are conducted, and when and how incentives are provided to employees (Ferrell, ND:7).

## 7 Conclusions

The small business sector of South Africa plays an essential role in the development of South Africa's economy and has become the primary source of job creation. These small businesses are under great pressure to perform in an ethical manner and therefore, the aim of this study was to determine the perception small business employees have towards their ethical responsibilities in the business environment. The results reflected in the study indicated that employees of small businesses, on average, have a positive perception towards their ethical responsibilities in the small business environment. Respondents also indicated that the most encountered ethical misconduct were that they wanted to tell someone about unethical behaviour. The study also found that employees turn to family members for advice on ethical misdemeanours. Further research can be conducted by considering the perception of employees in different regions and sectors of South Africa and investigating possible cases of employee theft in the small business environment.

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