Frequently Asked Questions:
General ethics questions

As of May 1, 2017

AICPA Professional Ethics Division
Introduction

The answers to these frequently asked questions (FAQs) are based on guidance the AICPA Professional Ethics Division staff provided in response to members’ inquiries. The FAQs are not rules, regulations, or statements of the Professional Ethics Executive Committee and, therefore, are not authoritative guidance. The Conceptual Framework for Members in Public Practice (ET sec. 1.000.010)\(^1\) and the Conceptual Framework for Members in Business (ET sec. 2.000.010) should be used in conjunction with these FAQs. Further, the answers do not address the requirements of other regulatory bodies, such as the state boards of accountancy, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and the U.S. Government Accountability Office whose positions may differ from those of the AICPA.

Terms that are defined in the AICPA code appear in italic. The first time a defined term or citation to the AICPA code appears, it will be linked.

The date the FAQ was added or revised appears in brackets at the end of the answer. Dates are not given for purely editorial revisions (for example, revised citations for the code).

\(^1\) All ET sections can be found in AICPA Professional Standards.
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Blind trusts

**Question.** A **covered member** creates a blind trust and transfers assets into the blind trust. The **covered member** will not supervise or participate in the trust’s investment decisions during the term of the trust. Will the trust and the underlying assets be considered the **covered member’s direct financial interests**?

**Answer.** Although the **covered member** will not supervise or participate in the trust’s investments decisions during the term of the trust, the trust and the underlying investments will be considered the **covered member’s direct financial interest** if: (1) the **covered member** retains the right to amend or revoke the trust, or (2) the underlying trust investments will ultimately revert to the **covered member** as the grantor of the trust. See the “**Trusts Investments**” interpretation (ET sec. 1.245.020) under the “**Independence Rule**” (ET sec. 1.200.001) for other rights and responsibilities that would cause a trust and the underlying investments to be considered **direct financial interests** of a **covered member**. [December 2012]

Campaign contributions

**Question.** May a **member** make a political contribution to the campaign of an individual that is associated with an **attest client** in a **key position** or holds a **financial interest** in the **attest client** that is material and/or enables the individual to exercise **significant influence** over the **attest client** without **impairing independence** or violating any other rule of conduct?

**Answer.** Yes. A **member** would not **impair independence** or be in violation of any other rule of conduct provided the political contribution is not made with the intention of influencing the procurement of **professional services** or in contravention of federal or state laws or regulations. Related Guidance: “**Offering or Accepting Gifts or Entertainment**” interpretation (ET sec. 1.285.010) under the “**Independence Rule**” and “**Offering or Accepting Gifts or Entertainment**” interpretation (ET sec. 1.120.010) under the “**Integrity and Objectivity Rule**” (ET sec. 1.100.001) [August 2012]

Disclosure of commissions

**Question.** When is a **member** required to disclose to a **client** that a commission will be received under the “**Commissions and Referral Fees Rule**” ET sec. 1.520.001)?

**Answer.** A **member** should disclose that a commission would be received at the time the referral is being made so that the **client** can decide whether to act on the recommendation.

Related Guidance: “**Receipt of a Commission**” interpretation (ET sec. 1.520.020) [August 2012]
Independent contractors

**Question.** Would *independence* be *impaired* if a CPA *firm* retained an independent contractor (as defined by IRS regulations and other federal regulatory guidance such as case law and revenue rulings) on a part-time basis that is employed by or associated with an *attest client* in a *key position*?

**Answer.** Yes. *Independence* would be *impaired* if an independent contractor retained by the *firm* was simultaneously employed by or associated with an *attest client* in a *key position*. However, if the independent contractor is employed by or associated with the *attest client* in a non-key position, a *member* should consider the following criteria when determining if *independence* (in fact and appearance) is *impaired*:

- Location of the *firm office* where the independent contractor will work in relation to the location of the office providing services to the *attest client*.
- Whether the independent contractor performs services for other *firms* or entities or solely to the *member’s firm*. Factors to consider include but are not limited to:
  1. The percentage of income the individual derives from the *member’s firm* in relation to the individual’s total “self-employed” or earned income.
  2. The percentage of income the individual derives from the *client entity* in relation to the individual’s total earned income.
  3. The amount of time the individual devotes to the *member’s firm* versus time devoted to the *attest client*.
  4. The amount of time the individual devotes to the *member’s firm* versus time devoted to other *firms* or entities.

In situations in which the *threats* to *independence* (in fact or appearance) are deemed not significant, the *member* or the *member’s firm* should consider the potential conflict of interest arising from such a relationship as set forth in the “Conflicts of Interest for Members in Public Practice” interpretation (ET sec. 1.110.010) under “Integrity and Objectivity Rule”. If *threats* are deemed significant, the *member* should consider whether *safeguards* are available to eliminate or reduce them to an *acceptable level*. If no *safeguards* could eliminate or reduce *threats* to an *acceptable level*, *independence* would be considered *impaired*.


**Letter of intent to purchase practice**

**Question.** Would *independence* be *impaired* under the “Independence Rule” if a *member* enters into a non-binding letter of intent to sell his or her practice to a purchaser that is not *independent* with respect to one or more of the *member’s attest clients*?

**Answer.** No. A non-binding letter of intent to sell the *member’s practice* would not *impair* the *independence* of the *member* if the purchaser is not *independent* with respect to one or more of the *member’s attest clients*. [August 2013]
Pro bono/below cost fees

Question. May a member perform professional services for a client for no fee or for a fee that is below cost without impairing independence or violating any other rule of conduct?

Answer. Yes. However, regardless of what fee is charged, members are required to comply with all professional standards that are applicable to the services performed. For example, a member must comply with the “General Standards Rule” (ET sec. 1.300.001), which requires members to

- only undertake those professional services that the member or the member’s firm can reasonably expect to be completed with professional competence.
- exercise due professional care in the performance of professional services.
- adequately plan and supervise the performance of professional services.
- obtain relevant data to afford a reasonable basis for conclusions or recommendations in relation to any professional services performed.

The member’s state board(s) of accountancy may have rules that are more restrictive than provided in the above guidance. Accordingly, members should consult with their state board(s) of accountancy for guidance.

Professional services performed for a client for no fee or a fee below cost would not be considered a gift for purposes of applying the “Gifts and Entertainment” subtopic (ET sec. 1.120.010) of the “Integrity and Objectivity Rule” and the “Gifts and Entertainment” subtopic (ET sec. 1.285.010) of the “Independence Rule.”


Compliance with SSCS's when member does not hold out as CPA

Question. The “Compliance with Standards Rule” requires that a member who performs professional services, including consulting services, comply with standards promulgated by bodies designated by Council, regardless of whether the member is holding out as a CPA. The standards applicable to members performing consulting services are set forth in the Statements on Standards for Consulting Services (SSCSs) and specifically state that such standards apply to members holding out as a CPA while providing consulting services. Would a member who does not hold out as a CPA be in compliance with “Compliance with Standards Rule” if the member did not comply with the SSCSs while performing consulting services for a client?

Answer. Yes. Because the SSCSs apply to those members holding out as CPAs, a member who does not hold out as a CPA would not be in violation of “Compliance with Standards Rule” if the member performed consulting services that did not comply with the SSCSs. The member must
still comply with all other rules of the code, including the “General Standards Rule” which requires that the member comply with the following standards:

a. Professional Competence. Undertake only those professional services that the member or the member’s firm can reasonably expect to be completed with professional competence.
b. Due Professional Care. Exercise due professional care in the performance of professional services.
c. Planning and Supervision. Adequately plan and supervise the performance of professional services.
d. Sufficient Relevant Data. Obtain sufficient relevant data to afford a reasonable basis for conclusions or recommendations in relation to any professional services performed.

Use of standards that have not been established by a body designated by AICPA Council

**Question 1:** May a member perform a professional service using standards that have not been established by a body designated by AICPA Council, as set forth in appendix A, “Council Resolution Designating Bodies to Promulgate Technical Standards” (Council resolution) (ET appendix A) of the AICPA Code of Professional Conduct (hereinafter referred to as “alternative standards”)?

**Answer 1:** Yes, there are circumstances in which a member is permitted to perform a professional service using alternative standards. However, the member must consider whether the professional service can be covered by technical standards established by a body designated by AICPA Council (hereinafter referred to as “established standards”). Examples of such standards are the Statements on Auditing Standards (SASs), Statements on Standards for Attestation Engagements (SSAEs), Statements on Standards for Accounting and Review Services (SSARsS) and Statement on Standards for Consulting Services (SSCS). The “Compliance With Standards Rule” (ET sec. 1.310.001 and 2.310.001) states the following:

A member who performs auditing, review, compilation, management consulting, tax, or other professional services shall comply with standards promulgated by bodies designated by Council.

The Council resolution sets forth those bodies designated by Council to promulgate technical standards and includes AICPA standard-setting bodies, such as the Accounting and Review Services Committee (ARSC), Auditing Standards Board (ASB), and Management Consulting Services Executive Committee. (See all bodies designated by Council at appendix A).

When a member is engaged to perform a professional service that can be covered by established standards, the member must perform the service using such established standards. The member is permitted to also apply any relevant alternative standards.

When a member is engaged to perform a professional service that, based on his or her professional judgment, cannot be covered by established standards, the member will not be
considered to be in violation of the “Compliance With Standards Rule” if only the alternative standards are applied.

Irrespective of the professional service performed by the member and whether he or she applies established or alternative standards, or both, the member must always comply with the “General Standards Rule” (ET sec. 1.300.001 and 2.300.001) when performing any professional service. This rule requires that a member comply with the following standards:

a. Professional competence. Undertake only those professional services that the member or the member’s firm can reasonably expect to be completed with professional competence.

b. Due professional care. Exercise due professional care in the performance of professional services.

c. Planning and supervision. Adequately plan and supervise the performance of professional services.

d. Sufficient relevant data. Obtain sufficient relevant data to afford a reasonable basis for conclusions or recommendations in relation to any professional services performed.

Members should also be aware that laws or regulations, including state boards of accountancy rules and regulations, may require the professional service to be performed under established standards. [May 2016]

Form of communication

Question. The “Transfer of Files and Return of Client Records in Sale, Transfer, Discontinuance or Acquisition of a Practice” interpretation [1.400.205] requires certain communications to the client be in writing. Would electronic communications such as email be an acceptable form of communication?

Answer. Yes, provided electronic communication is considered an acceptable form of written notice to the client under the applicable state law. [August 2016]
Transfer of files to another partner in the firm

**Question.** When a partner leaves a firm and his or her clients are transferred to another partner in the firm, do the requirements of the “Transfer of Files and Return of Client Records in Sales, Transfer, Discontinuance or Acquisition of Practice” interpretation need to be applied?

**Answer.** No. In such situations the ownership of the firm has not been transferred outside of the firm, rather the clients have only been reassigned to a different partner in the firm. [August 2016]

Transfer of client files in a merger

**Question.** The “Confidential Client Information Rule” does not prohibit the review of a member's professional practice, which, per the “Disclosing Client Information in Connection With a Review or Acquisition of the Member’s Practice” interpretation, includes a review performed in conjunction with a prospective purchase, sale, or merger of all or part of a member's practice. Would the “Confidential Client Information Rule” prohibit a member from disclosing confidential client information to the owners of the successor firm after the consummation of such a purchase, sale, or merge?

**Answer.** The “Confidential Client Information Rule” would not prohibit the member from disclosing confidential client information to the other owners of the successor firm after the purchase, sale, or merger of all, or part of, a member’s practice, provided the member retains an ownership interest in the successor firm and complies with the requirements of the “Transfer of Files and Return of Client Records in Sale, Transfer, Discontinuance or Acquisition of a Practice. [May 2017]

Electronic records

**Question 1:** Are the electronic data files created when a member prepares a tax return for a client using the member’s own tax preparation software considered to be a member's working paper or a member-prepared record as defined in the “Records Requests” interpretation (ET sec. 1.400.200), and must it be provided to the client upon request?”

**Answer 1:** The electronic tax data file would generally be considered a member’s working paper that has been created in the performance of the tax return preparation engagement but not a file that the member was specifically engaged to prepare (that is, the tax return is the work product the member has been engaged to prepare). The information contained in the tax data file is typically obtained from the client’s books and records as well as the client’s representations. Such information should therefore be available to the client through means other than the tax data file and the client’s tax return records would not be rendered incomplete without the tax data file. Accordingly, the tax data file would not meet the description of a member-prepared record. Working papers are considered to be the member’s property under the interpretation and therefore, a member would not be required to provide the electronic data file to the client.
However, state and federal statutes and regulations and contractual agreements may impose additional requirements on the member. The member must observe the highest standard of professional conduct which exists in the matter. [August 2015]

**Question 2:** Are account grouping schedules, depreciation schedules and carryover schedules prepared by a member to support a client’s business tax return considered to be a member’s working paper or a member-prepared record as defined in the “Records Requests” interpretation and must they be provided to the client upon request?

**Answer 2:** Grouping schedules, depreciation schedules and carryover schedules, are considered member-prepared records. However, since the client’s records would be incomplete without this information the member would need to provide them to the client unless fees remain unpaid for the tax engagement. [August 2015]

**Question 3:** Are the adjusting entries proposed by a member to reconcile a client’s book and tax records considered to be a member’s working paper or a member-prepared records as defined in the “Records Requests” interpretation and must they be provided to the client upon request?

**Answer 3:** These adjusting entries are considered member-prepared records. Since the client’s records would be incomplete without this information the member would need to provide them to the client unless fees remain unpaid for the tax engagement. [August 2015]

### Sample - Client Provided Records

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25,000</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Balance Sheet and Income Statement
- Unadjusted Trial Balance
- Third-Party Tax Forms, such as 1099 series (MISC, DIV, INT, etc.)
- Original Receipts or Substantiation Logs
- Payroll or Sales Tax Reporting Returns

### Sample - Member’s Working Papers

- Adjusted Trial Balance
- Scan or Copy of Client Records with Footing and Notes
- Results of Research, Notes to File and Calculations

### Sample - Member Prepared Records

- Tax Return Grouping Schedules
- Book and Tax Adjusting Entries (Schedule M Support)
- Depreciation Schedules, Carryover Schedules

[August 2015]