Meet a dozen of the best thought leaders in ethics and compliance today:

ELLEN HUNT  4
FOUAD KHALIFEH  8
ALAN HALFENGER  12
ROBERT BARRINGTON  16
CHRISTOPER MICHAELSON  20
KAMI NIEBANK  24
MIKE LAMBERTH  28
JOEL KATZ  32
ALISON J. TAYLOR  36
RICHARD WALLACE  40
K.C. TURAN  44
STEPHEN NAUGHTON  48
Christopher Michaelson

Christopher Michaelson works as a professor of ethics and business, as well as a practicing business adviser. By keeping a foot in both the academic and practical worlds, he sees a path forward for ethics and compliance not just as a professional or as a discipline, but as a business model for the 21st century.

BY BILL COFFIN

David A. and Barbara Koch (pronounced “coach”—no relation to the political donor) Distinguished Professor of Business Ethics and Social Responsibility at the University of St. Thomas in the Opus College of Business and a Fellow with the Holloran Center for Ethical Leadership in the Professions in the School of Law. He teaches the foundational course in compliance programming in the Organizational Ethics & Compliance Program at St. Thomas, is on the faculty steering committee, and was a founding faculty member of the program, one of the first degree programs of its kind. He is also an adjunct professor with the New York University Stern School of Business and a part-time advisory director for PricewaterhouseCoopers—a relationship he continues to maintain, keeping a foot in both the academic and the practicing world.

In 1998, Michaelson finished grad school with a degree in philosophical ethics, but knew it would be difficult to have much of an impact on the world as an academic philosopher. “Philosophers speak a different language,” Michaelson says. “They ask narrow, difficult questions.” Rather than pursue a professorship, he joined PwC (then Price Waterhouse) as one of the first five consultants to its newly formed business ethics practice that is now part of a much larger risk advisory business.

In 2002, he got a call from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania with an offer to become a visiting lecturer. It amounted to a full-time opportunity to see if he liked the world of academia. He negotiated an arrangement where he could go to Wharton yet keep a foot in PwC while pursuing academia, and he’s grateful to both his academic employers and to PwC that they have recognized the value of the arrangement.

As a practitioner, Michaelson felt he could have an impact with his clients, but not always a deep or lasting one, or one in which he felt a sense of ownership. As an academic researcher, he felt he could make a deep impact but it could take a long time to see the results. “Teaching in the classroom is a happy equilibrium between the extremes,” he says. “Teaching future business people about business ethics, teaching future lawyers about compliance and ethics management … this gives me an opportunity, through my students, to have an immediate and lasting impact. Working with students for a semester, we can dig deep and inquire about issues and answer not just what should we do, but why should we do it. That’s why I love academia.”

Michaelson came to the University of St. Thomas because he and his wife are both Minnesota natives and, after having lived in New York for many years, decided to move back to be closer to family. This dovetailed nicely with his burgeoning academic career.

Michaelson could not have picked a better place to walk such a path. As a mission-driven institution, the University of St. Thomas has a deeper commitment to business ethics...
than many other schools, Michaelson says. "Since Enron, even pre-Enron, most business schools felt obligated, or were obligated by their accreditors, to teach business ethics," Michaelson explains. "Some universities did it before they were required to, and others made a stronger commitment. At the University of St. Thomas, we have a strong institutional commitment to principled leadership."

"It hasn’t always been easy, though, Michaelson still sees an uphill battle to get organizations to justify spending money on ethics and compliance—things sometimes seen as not creating value. It is important to learn that not everything that matters can be measured, Michaelson notes, but he is realistic: If his students cannot get their recommendations for robust ethics and compliance functions funded at the organizational level, then what good can they do? That is why he made it a goal to create a program like this is partially reflective of a generational interest in doing work that people see as meaningful, rather than just as value-maximizing. There is nothing wrong with that, but a lot of students want to do something where they genuinely feel they are making the world a bit better through what they do. They are looking for a way to broaden their impact and have more systemic influence on an organization that makes it world better both through what it makes and the way it makes it," Michaelson says. "Now that we have created this program with the idea that there is a professional career path in compliance and ethics, we have an obligation to help our students realize the value of their investment in getting this degree. Our job is to make sure that the job market for compliance and ethics professionals continues to grow, flourish, and uncles told him, as well as fictional details to fill in the gaps. He knows of his grandfather, supplemented by stories his aunts faced exile afterwards. The story is taken from what Michaelson's eye on the philosophical and the practical dis- tinguishes him from his academic and his practice counter - parts. Early in his career, an academic mentor told him, "it’s okay for you to engage in the world’s practice, as long as you portray your colleagues in your research as lab rats." Michaelson recounts the story with a laugh, but admits it is reflective of the supercilious attitude some academics still have to the real world outside of the ivory tower. But not only scholars turn up their nose at the other side. Whenever he brings up ideas that business people don’t like, the easy, go-to answer is "well, that’s too academic."

"On a good day, he can neutralize that mutual suspicion and help colleagues build a bridge between the academic and the purely practical. On his bad days, when he gets flack from his academic colleagues for being too practice-oriented, or from his practice colleagues for being too academic, he always has the other side in which to find solace. "I would not be completely happy if I was totally in academics and I know for sure that having tasted academics, I don’t want to go back to full-time consulting again," Michaelson says. "But I think it can be really fulfilling to be the person who speaks both languages."

"An interesting project Michaelson is working on is a narra - tive research. Before, ethics was seen as an esoteric discipline by some, and was seen as only for the practitioners, not for the people that everyone else has a role in the collaborative narratives of 21st Century global capitalism. And this is a narrative research. As a businessperson, you need to be able to relate to other people ... the soft skills that people need in the compliance & ethics profession, and in business in general. He designed an informal research study with the World Economic Forum a few years ago and asked business leaders what were some of the most influential books in their personal and professional development. The headline books were all war- and conflict-oriented ... Darwin’s Origin of Species, Michaeliselli’s the Prince, even books based on a misinterpretation, like The Art of War, which is really a peaceful book. Maybe, he thought, there are books that do more good than harm."

"One thing I’m encouraging students to think about is what the collaborative narratives of 21st Century global capitalism business activity will be. My number one candidate is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein." Michaelson says. "First, it was written by a woman, and women are increasingly equal participants in global capitalism. And, ultimately, this book is about a guy who neglected his stewardship over his creation, and it ran wild. We face that today as business leaders and as private breaches, with climate change, industrialization, and forgetting to limit activi - ies. Some worry that genetically modified organisms might be another example of trying to create something beneficial that could do more harm if not well understood and looked af - ter. All of these are compliance-related issues in that they en - capsulate the analogy of taking care of your creation. It is the job of business to create things of value, but hopefully without making the world a worse place at the same time."