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The Soul of Professionalism

Who is a professional and who is not? The question is confusing. Professionalism means several different things. The only certainty about it is that it cannot be conferred by others. Professionalism must come from within ...

The current use of the word "professional" in reference to business attitudes is ironic in view of its traditional meaning. For centuries in western societies, a professional was precisely what a business person was not. It was commonly assumed that there was a higher purpose to professional activities than merely making a living. This put professional people on a higher social level than those "in trade," who in turn were assumed to have only money in mind when doing their work.

The idea that a profession had a moral dimension denied to more straightforward commercial pursuits could be traced to the origin of the word in the Middle Ages. Then, a professional was someone who had vowed or "professed" to devote his or her life to the service of God. It did not take long for certain secular workers to point out that they too had taken vows to serve mankind in the same selfless spirit. Thus teachers (or "professors"), physicians and lawyers combined with the clergy to form the professional class.

In theory, professional people put ethics ahead of money-making or other personal interests. In practice, the reverse was often the case as professional codes were wantonly honoured in the breach. Sleazy lawyers figure prominently in the literature of Elizabethan times, demonstrating that today's professional scandals draw on a long and dishonourable tradition. But since the majority of professionals over the ages proved honourable enough to retain public respect, the established professions enjoyed a degree of social esteem that was the envy of similar occupational groups.

These strove to gain greater prestige by claiming professional status. By the beginning of this century, dentists, accountants, engineers, architects and others

had been formally added to the list of professions. From then on, the meaning of the word expanded informally to include other workers who had university degrees or the equivalent, and did not dirty their hands in their jobs.

Dictionaries took to defining a profession broadly as a "calling involving some branch of learning." These days, yuppies (young urban professionals) constitute a type rather than a social class. They are identified more by how much money they make and how they spend it than by their specific careers.

Money has always had a good deal to do with the public perception of the professions, since doctors, lawyers and the rest are known for their relatively high incomes. At the same time, though, it has been understood that there are some acts forbidden by ethical codes which no amount of money can entice a scrupulous professional to commit.

Indeed, professionalism in its purest form calls for a dedication which transcends pecuniary or any other private considerations. One of the most telling illustrations of what being a professional is all about came in an anecdote told by a World War II correspondent who once encountered a nursing nun tending to some horribly wounded and diseased Japanese prisoners.

"I wouldn't do that for a million dollars," said the newspaperman.

"Neither," said the nun, "would I."

But professionalism has a second meaning which collides directly with the spirit of the first. In the second sense of the word, a professional will do absolutely anything for money. One could be a "professional" torturer if the price were right.

Being a professional in this sense also means doing for pay what others do for nothing. It is the opposite

of being an amateur, although in its application to sports, the distinction between the two designations has become blurred.

The mixing of amateur and professional values in sports has raised moral as well semantic confusion. The amateur sportsman or sportswoman plays a game for its own sake, and theoretically puts a higher value on sportsmanship than on winning. A professional in the second meaning of the word theoretically plays above all for profit; if something unsportsmanlike must be done for the sake of making that profit, then by definition it will be done.

Being a professional further means doing full-time what others do part-time or occasionally. A

*The interaction
between
professional pride
and standards of
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professional photographer, for example, takes pictures not just on vacation, but day in and day out. If a professional musician does not perform every day, he or she practices every day to

maintain professional standards of performance. The mark of a professional is being ready to perform whether one feels like it or not.

The saying that "the show must go on" might not be taken seriously in an amateur theatrical company, but it is an article of faith among professional troupers. Amateur athletes might skip a game because their muscles ache or they have personal business to attend to. Pro athletes "come to play" despite sprains or bruises or whatever psychological troubles might be weighing on their minds.

Once on the field, they throw themselves body and soul into the game, putting their personal feelings and preoccupations behind them. So the "real pro" at any activity can be relied upon consistently to do his or her best.

In most cases, that "best" will be better than an amateur's. Here we come to another perception of professionalism, which is that professionals are very good at their work.

Hence the expression "a really professional job," which could just as easily apply to the serving of a meal or the installation of a window as to a surgical operation or a set of architectural drawings. In this instance, performing professionally means doing a job that is well worth the price being charged.

Professional pride interacts with professional standards of workmanship. One is proud to be able to do an outstanding job; one will not do less than an outstanding job because one is proud.

In many cases, professional pride may be mingled with the animal joy a person finds in the exercise of

a natural ability. Those with a strong talent for a particular line of work may feel that this is what they were born for. Young people with this conviction have a sense of professional dedication before they ever take up their specialties.

"He was in love with his work, and he felt an enthusiasm for it which nothing but the work we can do well inspires in us," the American man of letters William Dean Howells wrote of a colleague. Here he touched on three attributes of a great professional in any field: a sense of vocation, enthusiasm, and the special inspiration which is generated from within.

But, as Jean de la Bruyere remarked about authorship, it "requires more than mere genius" to perform up to professional standards of proficiency. If a professional will normally surpass a gifted amateur at most activities, that is because the professional has applied the mortar of technique to the bricks of natural ability.

There are little tricks of any trade which become second nature if one practices them constantly. These lend an unconscious professional touch to the expert practitioner's every working move.

As the American biographer Bernard de Voto wrote, "the skilful man is, within the function of his skill, a different integration, a different nervous and muscular and psychological organization.... A tennis player or a watchmaker or an airline pilot is an automatism but he is also criticism and wisdom."

The criticism referred to is more likely to be of oneself than of others. What has been said of a true scholar may be said of any true professional — that he or she is constantly seeking and finding his or her own mistakes.

The polish that makes a professional piece of work shine is usually the result of copious sweat and perhaps even tears of frustration. The more agonizingly one toils at it, the finer the product. As Daniel Webster wrote about his own sometime profession, "If he would be a great lawyer, he must first consent to be a great drudge."

The first thing a novice notices about an old pro

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in any field is that he or she makes difficult tasks look easy. Along with their other acquired expertise, professionals become expert at never showing the intensity of their efforts. They are

more aware than anyone of the meaning of the classical aphorism, "The perfection of art is to conceal the art."

The English language has never known a more

readable stylist than Charles Lamb, whose prose flowed with the clarity and brilliance of spring water. But his author-sister Mary, in a letter to friend, has left us with a endearing picture of how painfully he achieved his mastery: "You would like to see us, as we often sit writing at the same table.... I taking snuff, and he groaning all the while, and saying he can make nothing of it, which he always says till he is finished, and then he finds out he has made something of it."

Lamb's uncertainty over his work clashes with the image of cool professionalism held by the public. Seasoned professionals are supposed to "know their stuff," meaning that they know exactly what they are doing at any given time, and that they know their subjects inside-out.

Professional persons tend to present an air of calm capability to the world for the very good reason that what they essentially have to sell is trustworthiness. None of us would want a dentist who is evidently unsure of which tooth to drill or an accountant who confesses his confusion over a newly-passed tax law.

And indeed thoroughgoing professionals must have confidence in their own abilities. It is self-confidence that allows them to break with tried and true techniques in the search of fresh approaches to problems.

Professional self-confidence comes from having a sure grasp of the fundamentals of one's subject. Where self-confidence goes wrong is when senior practitioners in a field become too sure of what they know, and come to believe that they have completely mastered their subject. When they conclude that they know all there is to know, they are no longer professionals, but hacks.

Complacency is a distinctly unprofessional trait.

Almost every occupation has become like a profession, in which something is always developing

The reason there are scholarly journals is to make it possible for professional men and women to maintain a knowledge of the ceaseless developments in their chosen subjects.

The journals also carry debates over new ideas in the field, which stimulate lively and creative thought about professional concerns.

If there is one characteristic of the established professions which sets them apart from other employment, it is the continual renewal of knowledge and expertise through publications, conferences, seminars and so forth. That distinction, however, is becoming less and less relevant with the passage of time.

It was once possible for a man or woman to get

a job in business or public service and retire from it 50 years later with pretty much the same body of knowledge he or she acquired in the first few months of working. Now, almost every occupation in the western economy has become like the professions, in which something new is always happening to enhance knowledge and alter techniques.

Technicians and crafts persons nowadays are constantly having to learn about new equipment, processes and methods. People in sales are just as constantly being called upon to learn the intricacies of ever more complex product lines.

In no industry are products and conditions the same today as they were two or three years ago. Keeping abreast of developments has become a way of life for anyone involved in administration, production, servicing, or sales.

The renewal of knowledge is only one of the characteristics of the established professions which are becoming common in other occupations. As summarized by the American newspaper executive Charles E. Scripps, some others are "high academic standards, rigorous training, peer review, and permit by way of government licence or some other empowered body."

Mr. Scripps made his observations in a letter to the editor of a journalistic trade magazine. In it, he concentrated on professionalism in the context of public responsibility. He pointed out that anyone responsible for the physical or psychological wellbeing of other people is capable of causing great harm which cannot be completely dealt with by the legal system. Journalists clearly are in a position to cause such harm.

For many years there has been talk about having journalism designated as a profession, if only to encourage journalists to exercise greater responsibility. Mr. Scripps argued against such a move because of the threat it raises of government control.

Going down a list of "professions," he wrote: "The practices of medicine, or tennis, or prostitution are not civil rights or human rights. The right to speak and write, to hear and read, are human rights everywhere and civil rights in civilized nations. Journalism is a noble calling, a skilled craft, a respectable trade, or ignoble, sloppy, or disreputable depending on the character and skill of the practitioner."

In this he echoed the widely-held opinion among journalists that professionalism is where you find it. Professional and unprofessional journalists may work side by side on the same story or even in the same news room.

Whether a particular person deserves to be called



professional or not depends entirely on how conscientiously he or she collects and handles information. It can be argued that the same applies to lawyers or accountants or architects; that calling them professionals does not necessarily make them act like professionals. Some do and some do not.

It is impossible to curtail cheating among business people who are inclined to cheat

Because dereliction inevitably occurs in the best-regulated of professional families, some have formed their own governing councils with powers to punish offenders by expulsion if necessary. One reason journalism has never formally become a profession is that is too amorphous to allow for the kind of self-regulation practised in the law, medicine and the like.

Journalism ranges in quality from newspapers and magazines in which every word is checked for accuracy to tabloids full of "reports" about the ghosts of movie stars, grotesque multiple births and visitors from other planets. Add to these the electronic media in all their diversity, and it is just too unwieldy for any professional body to grapple with.

If journalism is too big to lend itself to the formal imposition of professional discipline, how much more so is the whole broad field of business. True, individual industries — notably those having to do with personal finance — have set strict standards of ethics and training for people in sales. Still, there is no controlling behaviour in business in general. Any product can be made a little cheaper, a little less reliable, a little less safe; anything can be sold under false pretenses to those who have no need for it. Short of the law, which by no means covers all cases, it is impossible to curtail cheating among business people inclined to cheat.

So, despite all the talk about "sales professionals," "management professionals" and the like, business

people are unlikely ever to gain public recognition as professionals in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, professionalism in business necessarily will remain a matter of actions speaking louder than words.

Like all professionals worthy of the name, business professionals will put their customers' welfare before any personal consideration. They will never stop renewing and improving their knowledge and skills. They will conduct themselves with due professional pride and integrity. They will not cut corners, whether in terms of ethics, performance, or quality.

In the end, the professional man or woman is one who behaves in a professional way

Never has there been more need than there is today for professional attitudes in business. The large-scale financial failures in North America in recent years were brought about by a lack of the qualities which professionalism implies.

These include not only the ethical qualities implied in the first meaning of the term, but the workmanlike qualities implied in the second. The two meanings converge when they come to professionalism in business, because the business professional must be both a scrupulous dealer and outstanding at his or her work.

"A great society is one in which men of business think greatly of their functions," the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote. To think greatly of those functions is to regard doing business as a profession whether or not it is so called.

In essence, the professional man or woman is one who behaves professionally, not necessarily one who has been certified by a licencing body. Professionalism cannot be conferred on you by other people. It consists of what you expect from yourself.

