

The Essentials of Professionalism: A Need Assessment

Abstract

The modern human life is touched by professionals in every sphere. Professional work is marked by the application of expert skills and a typical demeanour, often referred to as professionalism. Professionalism, which is the active demonstration of the traits of a professional, is imperative for not only the members of the classical professions but throughout all occupations and vocations. The qualities that constitute professionalism have been studied earlier in areas like medicine, pharmacy, etc. with a discipline-specific approach. The present study aims at understanding the professionals' viewpoint of trait requisites that would comprehensively define professionalism in organizational personnel across all disciplines.

Keywords: Profession, Professional, Professionalism.

Introduction

A profession is an occupation that has a unique requirement of human cognitive skills of knowledge, expertise, decision making and motor skills that are processed along with material inputs in systematic ways to produce outputs of value and utility, to the society. An important aspect of a profession is that there is a level of consistency and standard of effectiveness of practice among those who belong to it (Glazer, 2008). The concepts of profession and occupation have the exercise of a main activity of subsistence in common. During the industrial revolution, the activity of people became centred geographically in organizations and salaried work became the main form of subsistence for more and more people. The technical revolution reinstated in the company a reorganization of the occupation. In this perspective, the profession also plays the role of an institution because it fulfils three major roles viz., regulations with rules and positive or negative sanctions; normalization by creating obligations that must be met; and cognition by framing the way of thinking among its members (Pesqueux, 2010).

The word professional refers to a person who has gained requisite qualification in a professional discipline and is practising in the profession. A professional is an individual who pursues a profession as his occupation and is recognized by it, may use a title characteristic of the profession, possesses a specialized body of knowledge and certain skills that mark the uniqueness of the profession he is pursuing. He may or may not be a part of a formal organization. As an individual pursuing a profession, a professional is an institution himself, using inputs in the form of client needs, support from allies, other resources, processes the inputs by taking skilful decisions based on his knowledge to deliver outputs in form of expert service i.e., a bundle of utilities to a client. An important characteristic of being professional is professionalization, through the formation of associations, groups or bodies that not only set the standards of performance but qualitatively monitor performance of such professionals too (Furusten, 2012). A new reflection into the circumstances in which an occupation is attempted to turn it into a profession, and its members into professional people, gave a new term to the orientation, viz., professionalization (Hughes, 1958). Professionalization means the social construction of an activity into a profession by its holders as well as the recognition of the main activity exercised by the actors under organizational constraints (Delattre and Ocler, 2013).

Thus, professionalization is the process of transforming an activity into a profession. When a business identifies its agenda towards society, declares the underlying skills that would benefit the society in general and when the narrative is widely recognized, a liberal profession is born; this is the process of professionalization (Demarez, 1986). Professionalism is the active demonstration of the traits of a professional. Professionals were earlier regarded as people belonging to the learned professions like medicine, etc., but now the notion can be extended to all professions,

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involving technical and/or intellectual skills of individuals. Professionalism includes the ideas of competence and integrity, including the possession of the appropriate body of knowledge and maintaining the proper demeanour with clients, colleagues, and others (Lively, 2001). The core professional values of expertise, autonomy, collegiality, commitment to public service and societal impact are presumed to be universal (Hazard and Dondi, 2004; Terrell, 2009).

As compared to other complex knowledge fields such as medicine, law, auditing and architecture, where sophisticated abstract expert systems have evolved to help sort out the quacks from the professionals, the pathways to what is counted as trustworthy professionalism in some other expert systems like management advisory services, consultancies, etc. are obscure. Still, it is reasonable to label these service providers as experts too (Whitely, 1984; Reed, 1996; Furusten, 2009). When someone is convincing in his role as an expert, he is likely to be legitimized to play the role of expert in any particular setting. Hence, how these service providers are perceived by society and stakeholders is important in the construction of such experts as professionals (Furusten and Werr, 2005, 2009). Theories of professions focus mainly on conditions for pure professionalism. They thereby limit the meaning of the concept of professionalism to those occupations that fulfil all of the attributes that are required by the professionals in order to be defined as a profession. Whether or not an occupation is, in a formal sense and in absolute terms, a profession, still experts of different kinds are perceived as professionals in society and act accordingly (Furusten, 2012). Due to the rise of the knowledge society and professional service organizations it was argued that the meaning of labels such as professionalism, professions, and professionalization need to be redefined in order to also represent occupations that are increasing in number and significance in contemporary society (Leicht and Lyman, 2006).

Review of Literature

Professionalism is an issue that has engaged thinkers from disciplines as diverse as medicine (Castellani, 2000; Cruess, 2000; Rothman, 2000), accounting (Sergenian, 1998; Fogarty, 2000), politics (Mancini, 1999) and education (Bennett, 1998; Coulter and Orme, 2000). Business and economics are grappling with the issue too (Exworthy and Halford, 1998; Roberts and Dietrich, 1999; Donaldson, 2000). Even communication and certainly public relations scholars have addressed the issue (Kruckeberg, 1998; Sallot, *et al.*, 1998; Saunders, 1998). The most critical elements of professionalism were categorized into attitude, behaviour and communication. Considering the case of teachers as professionals, the qualities of positivity, love and care, assertiveness, troubleshooting, risk-taking, confidence and initiative form the component of attitudes; preparedness, punctuality, high moral and ethical standards, being a role-model, appearance appropriateness, respect and courtesy and being a team player form the components of behaviour; and collaboration, cooperation, support and encouragement a, participation in learning

communities, and proper usage of language can be grouped under the component of communication (Kramer, 2003).

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The strategy behind founding national associations whose membership was open only to the serious actors of a profession, followed the same pattern in which knowledge intensive specialist work was organized in the late nineteenth century; for example, the work performed by medical doctors, lawyers, accountants and architects (Abbott, 1988; Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990). Hence, it was believed that the good representatives of a particular specialized field should then be those that have become members of the association. Typical examples of prerequisites for such membership included: a specific education, documented experience of a certain kind, conduct consistent with clearly defined ethical codes, control mechanisms to ensure members adhere to these codes and sanctions for those who do not, and authorization or certification procedures supported by public authorities (Larson, 1977).

Teaching experience, academic and professional qualifications, and professional development activities are possible determinants of teacher professionalism (Lam, 1983). According to the APhA-ASP/AACP Council of Deans Task Force on Professionalism, pharmacists and pharmacy students act professionally when they display the following ten broad traits: accountability for his actions; commitment to self-improvement of skills and knowledge; conscience and trustworthiness; covenantal relationship with client i.e., patient; creativity and innovation; ethically sound decision-making; knowledge and skills of a profession; leadership; pride in the profession; service oriented (Pharmacy Professionalism Toolkit, 2004). Legal professionalism is an occupational and normative value that has gradually developed alongside the formal institutions that characterize the rule of law. The possession of requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities is universally accepted as a central component of legal professionalism (Lively, 2001; Suttle, 2011; Swailes, 2003). The norm of altruism and orientation toward the service of others is a commonly cited characteristic defining legal professionalism (Goldsmith, 2008; Lui et al., 2003; Wallace and Kay, 2008).

Professionals are not only members from the traditional learned professions for example, medicine,

law, architecture, etc., but also people who are experts in their fields, or are holding expertise in particular skill, trade or body of knowledge e.g. scholars and teachers, engineers and scientists, accountants and business specialists, psychotherapists and counsellors, journalists, government officials, military officers, etc. (Kultgen, 1988). The concept of professionalism has been explained in different perspectives, by thinkers from different fields. In connection with the academics, profession may be viewed as depoliticized in contrast to being an intellectual; professionalism would mean as considering one's work as intellectual one, as something one does for a living, within defined working hours and exhibiting professional behaviour by not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making one's self marketable, presentable, uncontroversial, apolitical and objective (Said, 1994). A professional in strict terms, is one who maintains loyalty to a code of ethics that transcends loyalty to the rest of the organization (Follet, 1941). According to this strict usage of the term, very few employees would qualify as a professional. In more popular terms, professionals are likely to be defined as employees with specialized or technical education who utilize that knowledge in performing their regular work.

A professional is one who creates, processes, and distributes as his or her primary job (Naisbitt, 1982). An early attempt to measure professionalism was made by (Hall, 1968). Hall's scale was further modified and used by (Snizek, 1972). Attempts to measure professionalism among students as well as practitioners, in the area of pharmacy were done by (Schack and Hepler, 1979; Hammer, 2000; Lerkiatbundit, 2000; Chisholm et al., 2006). In the area of medicine and health care, (Arnold and Blank, 1998; Cohen, 2006; Elam et. al., 2009; Finn et al, 2009; McLachlan, 2010; Morrow et. al., 2011; Kelly et al, 2012) have attempted to measure aspects of professionalism. Professionalism among teachers was attempted to be measured by (Miros, 1990). All these studies indicate that people in the same occupation or categories tend to hold similar values (Toh, et.al., 1996, Parashar, et. al., 2004).

Rationale

A professional is a multi-faceted personality and plays different roles in the light of his being in a profession and being a part of a professional organization. For example, a doctor, who may also hold an administrative position in a health care institution, is accountable to his profession; his professional predecessors and peers; organization and organizational peer group; clients; and society in general. Further, he is also responsible for the welfare of his family and as a citizen he is expected to exercise some social accountability too. Thus, professionalism among professionals is a multi-dimensional construct involving cognitive as well as behavioural aspects that are required to be a part of the professional's personality and attitude whenever he interacts with stakeholders at various interfaces. An extensive review of relevant literature revealed that apparently not many attempts have been made to study a professional's opinion of the desirable traits that any professional should possess in order to

exhibit professionalism at the workplace. Hence, the current study is being undertaken to understand the desirable traits in an organizational personnel in order to exhibit professionalism from the professional's point of view.

Objective

To understand the professionals' viewpoint of requisite professionalism traits across various disciplines.

Methodology

The extensive review of literature and discussions of the researchers with various practicing professionals and academicians revealed that professionalism is a multi-dimensional construct and that in order to display professionalism or possess professionalism as an ideal; a professional's role has to be reviewed from certain perspectives. This gave a direction that a 360-degree observation of professionalism's cognitive and behavioural attributes can be done appropriately only when a professional's role is considered at the various interfaces or with different stakeholders, i.e. aspects related to the job; the manner and dispositions of professionals with their peers, their clients, etc.; and the manner and disposition of the professional towards the society in general. Hence, a panel of 25 professionals from various professions and occupations were chosen, e.g., chartered accountants, doctors, engineers, academicians, administrators, entrepreneurs, IT experts, lawyers, etc. The panel members were asked to give their frank opinion on a questionnaire with response options on a Likert-type scale on the following open-ended questions:

1. What should be the desirable qualities in a professional that are related to the performance of his job?
2. What should be the desirable behaviour of a professional towards his/her team, clients, peer group and the society?
3. What should be the desirable qualities of a professional at the individual level?
4. From the above mentioned facets of a professional personality, which one (I, II or III) is the most important and why?

Results and Discussions

The survey resulted in more than hundred traits that were deemed necessary for organizational personnel in order to exhibit professionalism. These were screened for content saturation and the following traits were obtained under the three categories:

1. For the efficient performance of his job a professional is needed to have thorough job knowledge, he should be ethical, have the ability to learn on the job, should have good communication skills, be able to think out of the box, be able to lead a team, have appropriate experience in the line of job, should be able to manage his time properly, take accountability of his actions, be strategic, should be able to leverage on contacts and decision making ability.
 - a. With his team members, a professional should work in team spirit and strive to maintain a healthy work ambience, he should be honest with his team and always maintain proper communication, he should be tactful

- in his approach and be a trouble shooter and he should share new learnings with his team.
- b. With his clients a professional should always be clear in communication and aim at building customer relationships, he should be polite, prompt in responding to customer needs or queries, be customer oriented, have persuasion skills, be ethical in client dealings, be open to customer feedback and have a synergistic approach towards client dealings.
 - c. With his peer group a professional should pose a healthy competition, be cooperative towards the members of his profession and be responsive to their requirements, he should be a role model for the younger members and always lead by example, he should have courage to blow the whistle if faced with unethical practices.
 - d. With the society in general a professional should be socially responsible, law abiding, engage in philanthropic activities, be social and have an amicable personality, he should take steps to create awareness on social issues and in general be humane towards all.
2. As an individual, a professional should be emotionally stable, adaptable, straightforward, ethical, proactive and responsible, self-motivated, strive towards personal excellence, be growth oriented, have good communication skills and possess the ability to balance his personal and professional life.

Further, the respondents emphasized that in order to exhibit the desired qualities at the various interfaces, i.e. at the job, with clients, peer group, etc. a professional need to have certain qualities that are a part of his personality as an individual. Therefore, the third category of qualities were considered the most important ones as compared to the other two categories by the respondent professionals.

Conclusion

Professionalism is a multi-dimensional concept and has to be understood in the light of the multitude of role expectations that a professional has from the different stakeholders associated to his profession as well as organizational position in the current times. Hence the constitution of professionalism has to be defined taking into account various interfaces of a professional's interaction and not just the most essential one e.g. doctor with a patient, teacher with a student, lawyer with his client, etc. Such an approach will not only help in shaping the professional attitude with the right kind of training requirements but also help to understand professionalism in the current times from a more relevant stand point. Further, this study indicates that the constitution of professionalism should be similar throughout various professions and disciplines rather than being unique and exclusive to a particular profession.

Suggestions

This study has established the modern professional's view of requisite traits in a professional that would ensure professionalism. Future studies may be conducted in this direction towards empirically

establishing the constitution of professionalism and examining its relationship with other managerial variables.

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