

A very modern professional: the case of the IT service support worker.

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Abstract:

The IT profession has retained a reputation as a 'privileged area of the labour market' (Webster, 2005, p.4; Bannerji, 2011). Workers practicing IT skills have been at the forefront of the competitive drive for innovation and efficiency gains promoted by a neoliberal enterprise ideology (Blackler et al, 2003). In the last two decades, as systems thinking (e.g. Ackoff, 1999) and customer-centric practices (e.g. Levitt, 2006) have converged in a globally powerful IT service management (ITSM) 'best practice' discourse (Trusson et al, 2013), the IT service support worker has emerged to be a worker-type of considerable socio-economic importance. Aside from keeping organizational information systems operative, when such systems fail these workers are called upon to rapidly restore the systems and thus head-off any negative commercial or political consequences. Yet these workers are acknowledged only as objectified resources within the ITSM 'best practice' literature (e.g. Taylor, Iqbal and Nieves, 2007) and largely overlooked as a distinctive contemporary worker-type within academic discourse.

This paper, through analysis of salary data and qualitative data collected for a multiple case study research project, considers the extent to which these workers might be conceived of as being 'professionals'. The project approached the conceptual study of these workers through three lenses. This paper focuses on the project's consideration of them as rationalised information systems assets within 'best practice' ITSM theory. It also draws upon our considerations of them as knowledge workers and service workers.

We firstly situate the IT service support worker within a broader model of IT workers comprising four overlapping groupings: managers, developers, technical specialists and IT service support workers. Three types of IT service support worker are identified: first-line workers who routinely escalate work; second-line workers; and 'expert' single-line workers. With reference to close associations made with call centre workers (e.g. Murphy, 2011) the status of IT service support workers is explored through analysis of: (i) salary data taken from the ITJOBSWATCH website; and (ii) observational and interview data collected in the field. From this we challenge the veracity of the notion that the whole occupational field of IT might be termed a profession concurrently with the notion that a profession implies work of high status.

Secondly, the paper explores two forces that might be associated with the professionalization of IT as an occupation: (i) rationalisation of the field (here promoted by the British Computer Society); and (ii) formalisation of IT theoretical/vocational education. A tension is identified, with those IT service support workers whose work is least disposed to rationalisation and whose complex 'stocks of knowledge' (Schutz, 1953) have been acquired through time-spent practice laying claim to greater IT professional status.

Thirdly, consideration is given to individuals' personal career orientations: occupational, organizational and customer-centric (Kinnie and Swart, 2012). We find that whilst organizations expect IT service support workers to be orientated towards serving the interests of the organization and its clients, the most individualistically professional tend towards being occupationally orientated,

enthusiastically (re)developing their skills to counter skills obsolescence in an evolving technological arena (Sennett, 2006).

Introduction

The paper starts with a brief discussion on the unstable and in elusive concept of professionalism, closing in to give particular attention to the information technology (IT) occupational field, and more specifically to those IT work environments where IT systems are manifestly managed from a service perspective.

The discursive context setting for the paper is completed by a consideration of the subject matter of the paper, i.e. the IT service support worker, and specifically how he/she might be categorised within the broader IT occupational sphere. A model is presented here situating 'IT service support workers' as one specific class of Information Systems (IS) worker alongside three other classes: 'developers', 'technical specialists', and 'managers'.

For this conference paper, methodological considerations are minimised, suffice to say that the data are taken from a recently published Ph.D. thesis which details the methodological approach taken (Trusson, 2013). The first data considered relate to salary levels within the IT 'profession'. Specific consideration is given to the salaries paid to support workers generally and more specifically front-line service support workers. This gives rise to discussion as to the extent to which such workers might be commonly regarded as 'professionals'. The second qualitative dataset is taken from a doctoral research project conducted across multiple IT service management settings in five organisations in the UK: two small/medium sized companies, one large multi-national company, one higher education establishment, and one county council. This data leads on to further discussion on the nature of professionalism informed by the presented and interpreted data. A conclusion is drawn that the nature of professionalism is not only contested but that a managerial rhetoric of 'professionalism' conceals a rationalisation (and perhaps 'de-professionalisation') agenda that stifles autonomy and learning.

Conceptualizing Professionalism in the Information Technology Arena

Although subjectively held notions of professionalism might retain elements of a shared common-sense normative ideal, (e.g. practicing work to a high quality), the concept as a social-construction that relates to the work realm necessarily remains in flux, subject to the vagaries of academic and social discourse and action (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Vaidyanathan, 2012). For example, whereas in the nineteenth century, 'the professions' might have referred exclusively to a limited range of high-status occupational realms (e.g. law and medicine), the twentieth century brought about technological and scientific professionalization (Hobsbawm, 1968) and a consequential rise in the number of

professional employees such as engineers and chemists (Drucker, 1954) and '*salary-earning technicians... and minor professional people*' (Cole and Postgate, 1949, p. 656).

If the concept of professionalism is seen as dynamically evolving then it follows that different common-sense understandings might be said to co-exist in different communities at any given moment (Billig, 1996). Further, these common-sense understandings might reasonably range from more exclusivist perspectives reserved for the 'old' status professions to more inclusivist perspectives that incorporate 'new', 'emergent professions' such as engineering (McClelland, 2002), and beyond to apply to all forms of working including those that might previously have been regarded as 'trades' such that the words 'profession' and 'occupation' become interchangeable. On such a journey to inclusivity, professionalism inevitably becomes associated with work that is subjected to managerial, bureaucratic, rationalistic, and/or consumer control (Freidson, 2001). This etymological evolution also necessarily entails the undermining of the concerns of those who choose to retain a more exclusivist perspective, for example, by arguing for the sacrosanctity of the professional's autonomy over their work practices (e.g. Wilensky, 1964). Thus, with inclusivity, comes a dilution of the concept such that what remains as a benchmark definition of a profession becomes no more, and possibly even less, than that offered by Grint (2005, p. 389): '*an occupation requiring specialist training which is often overseen and maintained independently of the state.*' Its usage continues to evoke an essence of older, traditional notions of human prestige whilst enthusiastically embracing a modernistic management notion of human objectification.

The importance of variable historical social constructions of the concept also comes across in the contrast drawn by Neal and Morgan (2000) between, in the UK, a 'bottom up' process by which occupations historically became professionalised and, in Germany, the 'top down' historical state-driven professionalisation process. This distinction serves to illustrate how power might be asserted upon workers working within an occupational field by the imposition of professional standards (and sanctions for breach of standards) by either an occupational 'elite' harbouring vested-interests within the occupational community and/or by political ideologues and bureaucrats external to that community. From the individual worker's perspective, power is asserted upon them from above: either by the occupational 'elite' or by agencies of the state.

Thus for example, a worker employed to service hot tubs might find power asserted upon him in terms of how he practices by 'The Association of Pool and Spa Professionals', a trade body who overtly flaunt the 'P' word as an honorific within a highly specialized occupational realm. Similarly, a pest control worker, might find herself bound to adhere to the standards laid down by the British Pest Control Association, typical of specialist occupational bodies that routinely define themselves in terms of representing 'professionals' and instilling 'professional' standards. The enduring rhetorical power of the word 'professional' is clearly evident here. The leading occupational body for human resource management (HRM) practitioners in the United Kingdom – the Chartered Institute of Personnel and

Development (CIPD) – clearly recognise this in their ‘official’ rhetoric, using the words ‘profession’, ‘professional’ and ‘professionalism’ 25 times in their brief Code of Professional Conduct (CIPD, 2012). In this code, no definition is attempted of the notion of professionalism; rather a circular definition emerges as they liberally apply ‘professional’ as an adjective variously to the notions of knowledge, competence, decisions, conduct, actions, integrity, honesty, judgement, development and their membership. The rhetorical assumption is made that all their members will be able to decipher a common shared understanding as to the meaning of ‘professional’ in all these contexts.

A strong rhetoric of professionalism is apparent within an IT arena that has established and retained a reputation as a ‘*privileged area of the labour market*’ (Webster, 2005, p. 4; Bannerji, 2011). Indeed, the practicing of IT skills has been an essential element of the neoliberal agenda that has dominated western macro-economic strategies over recent decades (Blackler *et al*, 2003; Harvey, 2007). Another element of this agenda – one that has been facilitated by the use of IT – has been the normalisation of HRM practices that advocate service worker commodification into flexible labour resources that might then be financially compared to non-human resources (Levitt, 1972; Barney, 1991; CBI, 2009).

In the UK context the prominent promoter of the notion of professionalism in the realm of IT is ‘BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT’ (formerly the British Computer Society, hereafter BCS). On its website it rhetorically claims to ‘*champion the global IT profession and the interests of individuals engaged in that profession for the benefit of all*’ (BCS, 2014). Thus theoretically it asserts an expectation of a common-sense shared ideal of ‘professionalism’ as an imposition upon IT workers, whether or not they belong to BCS. Additionally, along with another prominent occupational body, the IT Service Management Forum (ITSMF), it also colludes with Government in the promotion to industry of the rationalistic ‘Skills Framework for the Information Age’ (SFIA), thus supporting the assertion of state power upon IT workers through the commodification of standards that facilitate rationalistic resource planning, and thus worker objectification and interchangeability within a systems-thinking management strategy.

The implicit upholding of rationalising resource-based management strategies by these ‘professional’ bodies with ‘professionalization’ agenda appears to be at odds with one of the most generally accepted ideas underlying professionalism, that professional work cannot be readily rationalised (Abbott, 1991; Freidson, 2001). The resolution to this apparent inconsistency must be found in the etymological evolution of the usage of the word ‘professional’ and its derivatives. And it is with regard to this that we might consider the IT service support worker, the object of attention in this paper, as representative of a very modern professional: one whose work may include vestiges of the ideal-typical autonomous professional but who also practices within environments in which they are rationalised and operationalised with an expectation that as a human resource they might serve both their employer and their employer’s customer (Freidson, 2001; Levitt, 2006; Kinnie and Swart, 2012).

Professionalism and IT Service Management

Whilst BCS assert IT work to be professional work, and their role as champions of IT professionals, they also, in promoting a systems-thinking approach (e.g. Ackoff, 1999) to the management of IT systems/services (Taylor, Iqbal and Nieves, 2007), implicitly uphold the objectification and dehumanising of those ‘professionals’. By way of illustration, in the rhetoric of the hegemonic ‘best practice’ literature for IT service management (known as ITIL¹, a framework that is promoted by BCS and incorporated in the SFIA) (Taylor, Iqbal and Nieves, 2007, pp. 174-5; Trusson *et al*, 2013), it is held that:

All assets can fail to perform at the required level. Assets engineered and maintained for higher performance tend to have higher MTBF [Mean Time Between Failure] under the same operating conditions... The concept of MTBF applies to people... even if the actual metrics may be difficult... The idea is the same.

The reasoning here is clear: to apply the moniker of professional to IT service support workers is to in the first place acknowledge the very humanity that the ‘hard’ systems-thinking approach denies them by theoretically rationalising them into docile predictable resources operating within disciplining practices of established work processes (Foucault, 1975; Checkland, 2000).

Situating the IT Service Support Worker

In this section, we situate the IT service support worker within the broader IT occupational realm by employing a four category model that focuses on the worker’s high level purpose, thus: developers; technical specialists; managers, and IT service support workers.

Developers create IT products, typically programming software applications. Technical specialists contribute their particular expert skills and knowledge to the overall IT enterprise but are not developers *per se*. Managers might have management responsibilities for systems, processes, projects and/or people. IT service support workers are concerned with the smooth running of a live information system. These categories overlap and specific workers may have responsibilities within more than one category, but all IS jobs might reasonably be expected to be a fair fit for at least one of these four categories. The work of the IT service support worker, being operational, is typically not that of the developer whose concern is typically pre-operational. However some IT service support workers may do some maintenance programming to restore a failed service or to make minor service enhancements; and some programmers may be involved in writing code changes for live

¹ Information Technology Infrastructure Library

applications and thus may be part of the operational support service offering to customers. Similarly the IT service support worker's work might not necessarily be that of the technical specialist whose responsibilities may cut across different stages of the life cycle and not just reside in the operational stage. Likewise, whilst some IT managers will manage the work of IT service support workers only some will involve themselves in 'hands on' operational support work. Conceptually these groupings of developers, technical specialists, managers and IT service support workers may be presented by way of a Venn diagram showing four overlapping circles (Figure 1). Kroenke (2012) identifies 15 major job positions within the field of IS work (excluding workers who use IT as an integral part of their 'non-IS' job), which might then reasonably be plotted loosely on to the diagram.

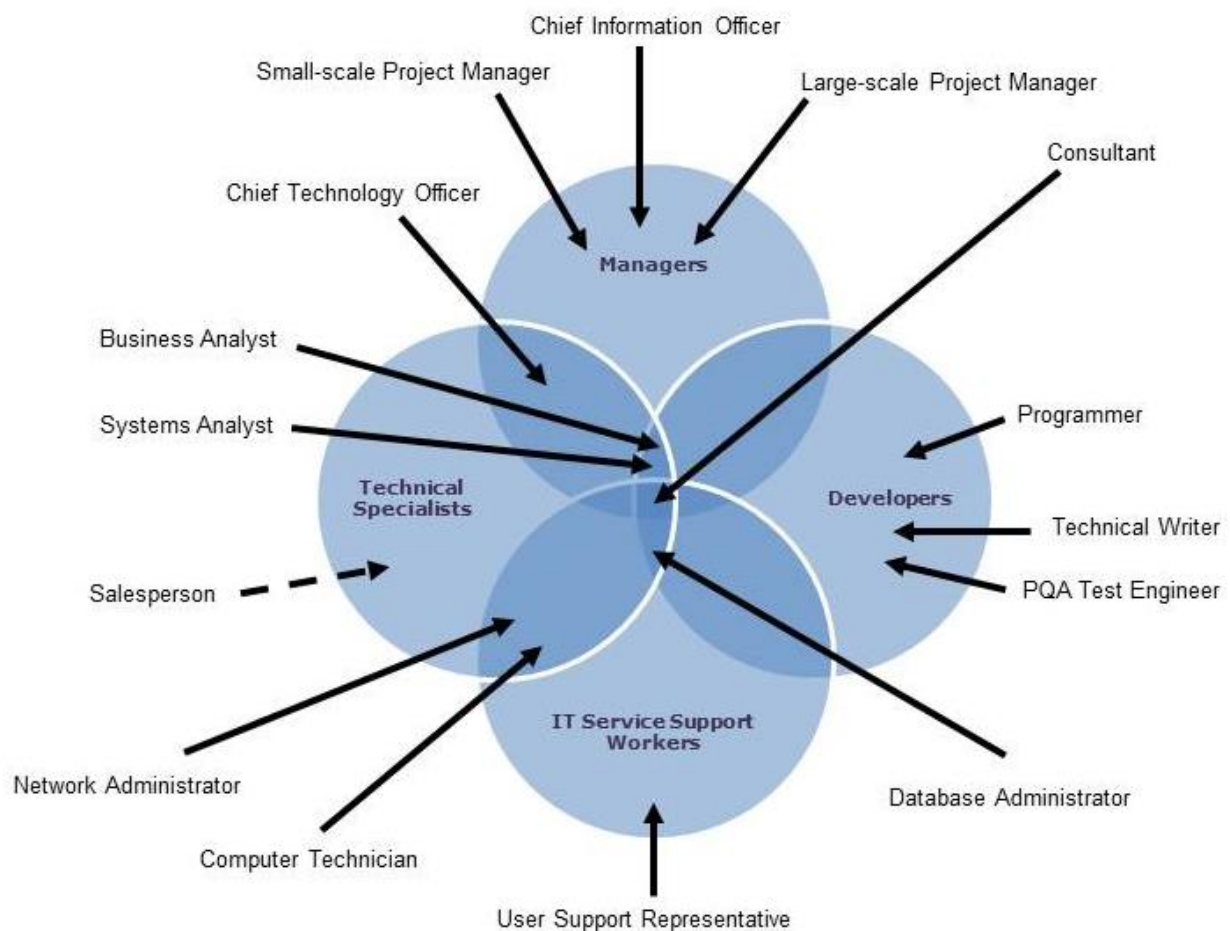


Figure 1: Four Category Model of IS Workers:
A broad-based classification loosely populated with 15 major IS roles identified by Kroenke (2012)

Whilst this diagram presents the IT service support worker within a single circle it is important to stress that they might also operate at times within the areas of overlap with the other three categories. Also this high-level diagram does not differentiate between different types of IT service support worker. Three discernible types were revealed in this study: front-line workers (Type 1) and second-line workers (Type 2) within organisations structured for functional escalation of work; and single-line workers (Type 3) operating with no structural capacity to functionally escalate work.

Findings

Status of IT Service Support Workers: Salary Comparisons

Having asserted the above classification model that indicates some of the scope of IS work (Figure 1), it becomes more possible to consider the status of IT service support workers vis-à-vis other IS workers. An obvious marker of the status of a profession or occupation is the monetary value accorded to workers within it. For an individual, their personal status within their field is similarly marked by the value accorded to them in terms of pay etc. In Marxist terms this relates to the labour-power the individual worker offers as a commodity to be traded in the labour market place with a buyer of labour (Marx, 1867b).

Whilst salary surveys relating to IT work are available (e.g. The Computer Staff Salary Survey, carried out annually by XpertHR) the information from these is unhelpful for comparing IT service support workers to other IT workers. More useful for these purposes is the data available on the ITJOBWATCH database. The website ITJOBWATCH (<http://www.itjobswatch.co.uk/>) tracks the salaries being offered for IT jobs advertised on IT recruitment websites in the UK and offers a search facility to mine the data on its database. By searching on four words to represent the four categories in Figure 1 ['support', 'developer', 'specialist', 'manager'] an indication of salary levels for jobs that include those words in the job title can be established, thus providing an indicator of the value accorded to support workers vis-à-vis other IS workers. Of course many jobs that might be considered to clearly fall within one of the categories will be omitted. For example the job of 'help desk analyst' is clearly within the support category, the job of programmer is that of a developer, and, most significantly, a very broad range of IT jobs might be considered to be particular specialisms (e.g. technical architect, security engineer, database administrator) but will be omitted where the word 'specialist' does not appear in the job title. However, the quantity of data within the ITJOBWATCH database is such that a sufficient number of job titles containing the search criteria are returned for each category to enable a reasonable comparison to be made between the respective salaries offered for IT support jobs, IT developer jobs, IT specialist jobs and IT manager jobs. Using this database it was possible to calculate average salaries being offered for roles within each of the four classifications (Table 1).

Category	Search Criteria	Number of Jobs Meeting Search Criteria in 3 month period	Average Salary
IT Support Workers	'support'	23,769	£31,960
IT Developers	'developer'	91,353	£40,970
IT Technical Specialists	'specialist'	4,246	£41,540
IT Managers	'manager'	37,653	£54,740

Table 1: IS Worker Salaries for 3 month Period during March-June 2011 using data from ITJOBWATCH website.

The distribution of salaries within each of these categories is shown diagrammatically in Figure 2. This shows that the most common salary for an IS support worker was in the region of £30,000, for a developer around £35,000, for a technical specialist around £40,000 and for a manager around £55,000. These data suggest that IT support workers may be paid in the region of 22% less than developers, 23% less than IT technical specialists and 42% less than IT managers. This would seem to confirm that the labour market considers IS operational support work to be unworthy of the pay given to other IS workers, pointing to the work being of lower status as has been alluded to in the literature (e.g. Marks and Scholarios, 2007).

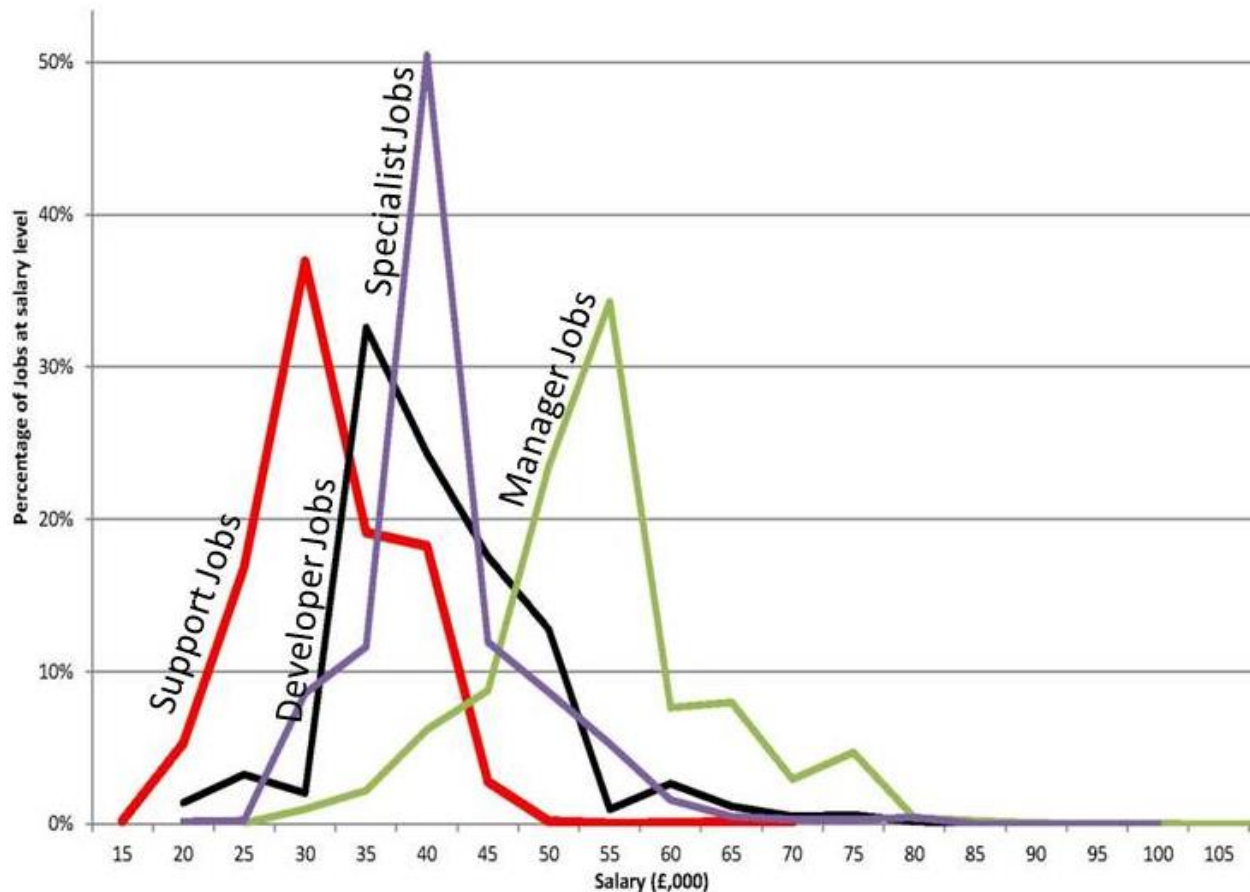


Figure 2: Distribution of IS Job Salaries
(3 month periods between March-June 2011).

If from this, we are to consider support work as the Cinderella of the IT ‘profession’ it is important to particularly consider those at the lower end, in terms of salary, of the IS support worker category. Whilst it was not feasible to clearly discriminate between Types 1, 2 and 3 IT service support workers on the database, it was possible to identify from job titles workers who were most likely to be Type 1 workers. A more comprehensive reflection of the salaries offered to these first-line support workers was garnered by doing successive searches on the strings ‘service desk’, ‘help desk’ and ‘1st line’ and then by using a secondary search criteria to exclude those with some level of management responsibility.

The results, based on a sample of 1923 jobs matching the search criteria, indicate that such operational workers have the least ‘labour-power’ amongst the general body of IT workers, earning an average salary of £21,500, 33% less than the wider body of ‘support’ workers; 48% less than ‘developers’ and ‘specialists’ and 61% less than ‘managers’. Figure 3 illustrates not only the Cinderella nature of front-line IT support work within the IT ‘profession’ but also that operational support work generally and the work of managing first-line teams pays significantly less than other IT work.

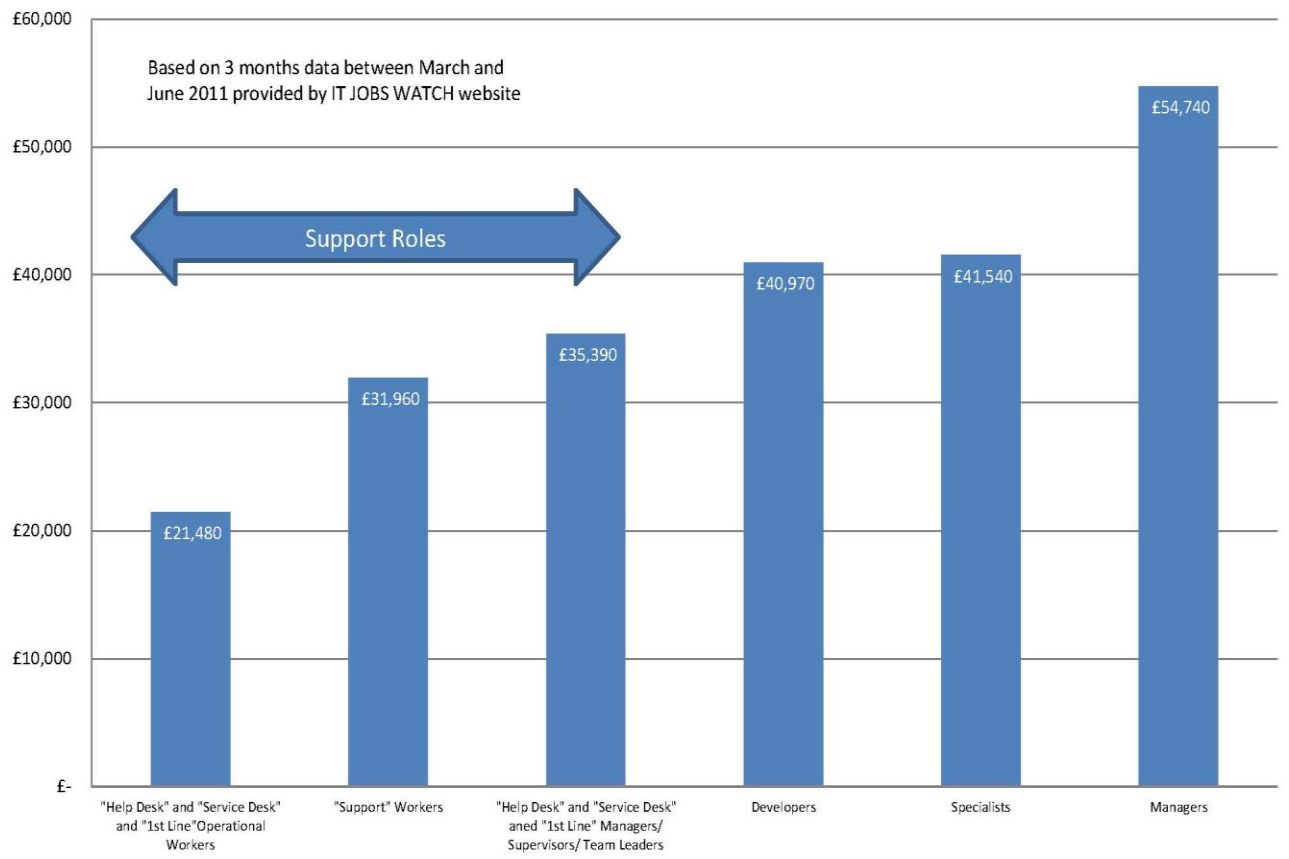


Figure 3: Average Salary comparisons for IS workers.

We might here affirm the noticeable similarities between the nature of this front-line IT service support work and the work of call centre workers. Indeed first-line IT service support work has often been synonymised with call centre work by researchers across academic disciplines (e.g. Beaumont and Hunter, 2002; Gray and Durcikova, 2006; Murphy, 2011). Such workers might be differentiated from many other call centre workers on account of the expectation upon them to take responsibility for the resolution of a technical problem that emanates from a customer. The reactive problem-solving element of their work may lead to the development of a broader specialised expertise than that that might otherwise be possible in many other call centre settings. Nonetheless the emergence of call centres has clearly had Tayloristic implications for the management of IT service support workers with, for example, the performance metrics (and incessant measurement) used for call centre management transferring to service desk management (Computer Economics Report, 2009). Further, call centre work has in contemporary Britain become notoriously synonymous with tightly-controlled, low status work with high rates of staff turnover. Such workers are commonly portrayed as belonging to an enfeebled and lowly-skilled 'working class' (e.g. Baldry *et al*, 1998; Beaumont and Hunter, 2002; Standing, 2011). Thus, there would appear to be valid similarities between call centre work and IT help desk or service desk work, notably in the work being lowly valued internally and often maligned by external

customer contacts (Bocij *et al* 2006, p. 736). This has clear implications when considering the ‘professional’ status claimed by BCS for first-line IT service support workers who are explicitly included in their ‘*Professional Development Scheme*’ (BCS, 2009). If such work is ‘professional’ work, then ‘profession’ and ‘occupation’ (or even ‘employment’) have indeed become synonymised and thereby any status accorded through identification with a particular occupation becomes irrelevant in any claim to being a professional. Specifically, we might argue that by its mere association with call centres, IT service support work can be seen to weaken the status reputation of an occupational field where the most direct route of entry is via a degree in computing (Inside Careers/BCS, 2010).

Status of IT Service Support Workers: Interpretive Data

Over a period of 34 days, qualitative data were collected from the IT divisions of five UK-based organisations (two publicly-funded and three private-sector), with a view to conceptualising the IT service support worker as an under-researched worker type. Specifically, in relation to this paper, data relating to qualifications and perceptions of status were collected via interviews with 24 IT service support workers. These data were collected to enable the emergence of patterns and typifications that might reflect the realities of IT service support worker experiences. It is held that such patterns and typifications can inform us and challenge our individually and socially constructed perceptions of the typical IT worker generally and IT service support worker specifically. The analysis of this data was formed around typology of IT service support workers into three types: Type 1 – first-line; Type 2 – second-line; and Type 3 – single-line.

Worker Type	Number of Workers Interviewed	Vocational Qualifications	Vocational Background	
		Workers with significant IT qualifications	Workers with >5 years working in IT roles	Workers with >5 years working for current employer
1 (front-line)	9	4	3	3
2 (second-line)	8	7	6	5
3 (single-line)	7	5	7	2

Table 2: Qualifications and Vocational Background of Interviewees

Whilst the population of research subjects is limited, the summarised data at Table 2 point to Type 1 workers tending to be less experienced in working within the IT field than other IT service support workers. These data also point to Types 2 and 3 workers being more likely to hold high-level IT qualifications (either from post-compulsory education or through proprietary practitioner programmes such as those that lead to Microsoft Certified Professional [MCP] qualifications).

Type 1 Workers

Across the interviews with Type 1 workers common themes emerge that confirm that first-line IT service support work is perceived to be low status work within organisations. Workers talked of it as being highly regulated work that was 'looked down upon' by others higher in the organisational hierarchy. Another general finding is that the work appears to be under-appreciated and marginalised within organisations. Type 1 workers also suggested that Service Desk work could alternatively: (i) offer career potential for younger workers who typically had studied IT at further education or higher education establishments; or (ii) mark the stagnation of the careers of older workers without formal IT qualifications.

Asghar's Type 1 work was typical in that it had been highly bureaucratised with calls typically queuing to be answered and dealt with quickly. The effect of this was that he was unable to develop his skills as he wished:

What I find frustrating is that in my head I've got a lot of technical knowledge... I believe I could move on and do a kind of desktop support role now.

By talking here about '*moving up in the technical roles*', Asghar effectively identified himself as being of a lower status than second-line workers. Jonathan similarly referred to service desk work as a lowly place to move on from: '*it's a brilliant starting point and springboard into IT.*' He also implied that, despite having been recruited into a service desk role as a senior analyst, his status was lowly vis-à-vis second-line workers and that this was reflected in the restrictions placed upon his autonomy and his pay which he implicitly referred to when positioning himself as being 'other' to and disunited from Type 2 colleagues: '*they are paid far too much to do stuff that we could be doing.*' His colleague, Navinda also intimated that the first-line workers had to manage their emotions in a similar way to call centre workers (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 1999; Deery *et al*, 2002), and in a way that second-line workers didn't: '*At the end of the day we are the ones picking up the phone and being shouted at in the ear.*'

The lowly status of front-line IT service support work might also be suggested by the workers' physical separation from other workers and the workspace allocated to them. Specifically, one of the Service Desk teams were visibly separated off in a glass-walled room

and were allocated desk cubicles half the size of the desk spaces allocated to other IT workers. Ravi, the supervisor of this team, was particularly forthcoming about his perception of the status of service desk work:

Generally Service Desk are kind of thought to be those people that are under you, and people... just think 'yeah, helpdesk, they'll deal with all that crap'... It is a bit of a dumping ground... These guys are... definitely not valued as much as they should be.

Adam revealed his perception of his status rather sardonically when asked what his job title was: 'Service Desk Assistant: very glamorous!' Indeed, a perception of being 'looked down upon' emerged as a common theme across the interviews, with Jonathan summing up the apparent reality of being a service desk worker within a hierarchically-structured organisation: 'It's kind of like: 'big shot, big shot'.

Type 2 Workers

Of the eight Type 2 IT service support workers, five had been educated to degree level and two others had post-compulsory-education technical qualifications. Only one Type 2 worker had not engaged with proprietary technical certification programmes (e.g. Microsoft Certified Professional, Apple Support Professional) during their IT career and in interview it was typical for Type 2 workers to strongly identify with being IT technicians who relished resolving technical issues and had over time acquired expert technical knowledge.

Stephen was typical in acknowledging IT technical work as a vocation that suited him: 'I love [my job] because... I love exposure to technology.' However, he also reported being frustrated when time-pressures prevented him from fully-engaging with the root causes of an incident: 'I do like getting my teeth into solving problems and it doesn't happen very often because... of the timescales we work to'. This desire to understand the technology at a deep level was also mentioned by Charles who explained that he got pleasure from 'getting to the bottom of [an issue]... actually finding out, learning something new, that's what gives me the buzz.' Similarly, Dick reported that he enjoyed working hard on 'a difficult issue [that's] been an interesting one to burrow down to resolve.'

From the data a pattern emerges of the status of Type 2 workers being in part different than and in part similar to Type 1 workers. The differences are in their apparent higher self-regard and the greater autonomy they have as workers. However they retain similar insecurities and a similar sense of being undervalued.

Dick's view suggests that Type 2 work by its nature is more resistant to the kinds of rationalising techniques of 'professionalisation' discussed previously (e.g. ITIL, PriSM and the SFIA framework) and particularly noticeable in observation of Type 1 service desk work:

Every day is a bit of a challenge because you don't know what you are going to be faced with ... something to almost look forward to coming in for. It's not routine.

However, Roger and Harry also pointed to their work showing signs of intensity more commonly associated with first-line work, with clear implications for the status of second-line work:

Harry: We get a feeling... that we're having to do more and more as the resources are being stretched more and more.

Roger: The second-line team [now] has to support the first-line on the phones quite a lot... because we've taken on extra jobs from other departments.

Nonetheless, several of the Type 2 workers also intimated that their expertise accorded them status with their peers within the team and more generally across the organisation. For example, Harry reported: '*Sometimes you can be like a knight in shining armour as you walk into a site that is down and you resolve it*'.

However, in contrast the expressed views of some Type 2 workers were more like those of the typical Type 1 worker. Stephen and Gareth bemoaned the lack of challenge in their work and Charles and Tom took exception to those who treated them contemptuously.

Tom: We get the ones who will suddenly just explode at you when you've just turned up... You know [long pause] you have to have a bit of a thick skin sometimes.

Type 3 Workers

Of the seven Type 3 workers interviewed, five were graduates with the remaining two having left school at 16. Most of them had programming skills and had picked up proprietary technical qualifications indicating specialist skill sets (e.g. in IT security and networking).

All but one of the Type 3 workers interviewed gave a strong impression of being confident, highly technical workers with the capabilities to engage with all manner of contextual IT related matters that came before them. From the interview data there emerges a common narrative of being enthusiastic about their work as technicians. Mike and John confidently spoke of themselves as being IT experts with specific specialities:

John: When it comes to Windows, servers and so on I'm an expert.

Mike: Without blowing my own trumpet too much, I'm certainly more than competent. I have to be.

Anthony, amongst other Type 3 workers, was keen to extend his technical knowledge outside of the boundaries of his role, thus affirming a strong vocational commitment:

I've been doing my CISCO qualifications which are... really more advanced networking and things, which is good because I can bring skills back here.

Similarly Darren's sense of vocation is illustrated by his IT career being founded upon his passion for home computing. As a hobby he had taught himself how to build computers and write Linux code, and it was this experience that had enabled him to enter the 'profession'.

Like the Type 2 workers, Type 3 workers presented themselves as having a high regard for their own capabilities as technicians. However, the interview data reveal the importance of organisational cultures for perceptions of status. At one organisation where support workers were massively outnumbered by developers, there was a perception of having low status with Paula complaining that '*We tend to be put upon by other departments who can't be bothered*'. Similarly Mike complained: '*I don't like being taken for granted*' and John commented on how '*There's a lot of people here that throw the teddies out at the drop of a hat because they can't get what they want*'. At another organisation, where the support function was more central to the strategic objectives, no such concerns indicating low organisational status were reported.

Consistently though Type 3 workers reported being valued by customers for their technical capabilities. For example, Anthony reported how customers '*will just call us up because we are the only ones who will talk to them*' about technical problems even if it was not directly related to the service they supported.

Discussion

The dominant rhetorical voices in the ITSM field proclaim ITSM to be a professional practice (Taylor and Nissen, 2007). These same voices, through managerial rhetoric, explicitly dehumanise IT service support workers into anonymous IS assets within processes (Taylor, Iqbal and Nieves, 2007). One of the mechanisms by which this has been done is through adopting a rhetoric of 'professionalisation' of IT work whereby workers might be objectified on account of their qualifications (range and level) and rationalised job descriptions specifying in detail their roles, accountabilities and responsibilities (as advocated by ITIL). These might be said to provide a facade for systems-thinking managers of human resource quality assurance. This discussion highlights how this trend towards rationalised professionalism is informed by the collected data and compares and contrasts it with an

alternative perspective on professionalism which is more intimately felt by many IT service support workers: the striving for personal fulfilment through autonomous and reflective practice.

The data from this study point to IT service support work becoming increasingly professionalised in terms of the credence given to reputable objective qualifications, albeit that these qualifications are fragmented to reflect the many specialisms within the work sphere (leading to confusion over credibility of qualifications). The interviewed and observed IT service support workers might be crudely dissected into those who had engaged with formal IT vocational qualifications and those who had arrived in their IT role without IT qualifications and had learnt to be capable at the job by doing it over time without becoming 'qualified' by certification to practice. The data suggest that accredited proprietary qualifications have established themselves as providing quality assurance to IT service managers relating to the (human) resources they are relying upon to perform complex problem-solving work within the information systems they are seeking to assert their control over.

For entry into IT service support roles, typically at Type 1 first-line level, having objective IT qualifications has also apparently become important. Given that Type 1 work is typically regarded as a first rung on the IT career ladder (BCS, 2011), the implication is that a greater emphasis is being placed on certification (Grimshaw *et al*, 2002) thus engendering a form of 'professionalisation' that aggrandises the objectification of workers to a value commensurate with the qualifications on their CV. The suggestion is that in line with the rationalisation of workers implicit in the ITSM 'best practice' literature, IT service support work is moving towards becoming more formalised 'professional' service work with a similarly formal knowledge base to traditional professions (e.g. medicine) but without any legal requirements for bona fide practice and with a more apparent business services orientation (Fincham, 2012). If IT service support work is representative of IT work generally, it would seem that in order to progress an IT career, and remain competitive within the IT labour market place, individuals must engage with the vast array of mainstream and niche IT qualifications that are marketed by the broader IT industry. Here we might note the vested interests not only of the corporate providers of proprietary qualifications (e.g. Microsoft, IBM, Novell) but also those of the 'professional' bodies such as BCS who financially benefit from endorsing 'accredited training providers' of BCS-approved 'professional certificates'.

These qualifications are 'badges' of having theoretical knowledge, and given the connection that Abbott (1991) makes between personally retaining theoretical knowledge, and professional status, it might be reasoned that those IT service support workers who have the superior mix of quantity and quality of IT theoretical qualifications can lay greater claim to being IT 'professionals' rather than 'mere' IT 'workers'. In this sense being a 'professional' is personal rather than occupational; professionalism is something earned

rather than bestowed upon rationalised human resources operating within an occupational sphere, regardless of their demonstrable-in-practice individual capabilities.

Further it might be seen that there is a need for IT service support workers to ensure currency of 'professional' credentials. It appears incumbent upon the IT service support worker to continually upgrade and update their IT qualifications to keep pace with technological changes. The evidence points to individuals engaged in Types 2 and 3 work (but not those in Type 1 work) being actively engaged in this, specifically targeting niche technical qualifications.

For organisations there is a danger emanating from this phenomenon in that by extolling the virtues of professional qualifications the risk is run of undermining the importance of deep-level experiential knowledge built up over time by IT service support workers (Trusson, 2013). By implication of the 'professionalisation' rhetoric of the IT 'profession' bodies (e.g. BCS, ITSMF), IT service support workers not holding relevant IT certificates are less 'professional' than those holding them. And yet the interview data (and observational data) from the study point to the importance of individual capabilities to problem-solve through individualised processes involving reflective self-reliance and interpersonal knowledge sharing. Across the interview data the issue of respect emerges as a theme. IT service support workers generally, but especially the lower-paid Type 1 workers, reported significant feelings of being disrespected. This disrespect runs counter to established perceptions of 'professional' status as according a worker respect. This raises a question as to the nature of professionalism. On the one hand the industry rhetoric suggests that IT work offers a worker professional status. On the other hand the advocated rationalising management techniques, with their focus on setting worker performance expectations, continuously monitoring activity, and assigning sovereignty to customers (Korczynski, 2002; Levitt, 2006) are all parts of a managerial professionalisation rhetoric that conceal a contempt for workers. As per Sennett's (2003, p. 3) definition of '*lack of respect*': '*no insult is offered... but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen as a full human being whose presence matters*'. In general, the study suggests that the more technically-skilled and autonomous the IT service support worker, the greater respect they are accorded by both their managers and those they serve. Such workers are those that are most able to resist in their real-time practice the effects of the managerial professionalisation agenda. And yet in the greater autonomy and respect they are accorded, and the greater expertise they are able to exhibit, they project themselves as being more akin to those workers who are traditionally more accepted as being professionals.

Conclusion

In the introduction a state of confusion was identified in the meaning to be attached to the moniker of 'professional'. From nineteenth-century exclusivity through to twenty first-century ubiquity, the evidence from this study points to its devaluation as a carrier of commonly shared meaning. Within the professionalisation rhetoric of bodies that claim to

represent occupational spheres (here, BCS and ITSMF) 'professional' is often associated with rationalisation. Here, professionalism is claimed through the aggrandisement of rationalisation: the advocating of systems thinking; the definition of skills frameworks, and the promotion of accredited qualifications. Of course, accredited qualifications are in the long tradition of the 'old' professions; however, in those professions, professional status can be seen to significantly derive from autonomy in practice and financial reward. Here, similar professional status is accorded only to those who, because of particular scarce expertise, are able to resist the rationalising forces extolled in the 'professionalisation' rhetoric. Ironically it is those workers who are most obviously subjected to the 'professionalisation' agenda of the IT professional bodies, who find their autonomy restricted and their labour-power reduced. In short their IT work becomes more de-professionalised as they become more objectified through the implementation of ultra-rational management practices such as ITIL.

Thus, if the word 'professional' is to retain an element of exclusivity then in the IT context the 'very modern' professional must fight for his/her autonomy-in-practice and strengthen his/her labour-power by carefully treading an individualised niche path, focusing on developing scarce skills with an occupational outlook keeping one eye on their career path ahead. Such professionals will chase the work that offers them the opportunity to (re)develop skills and (re)build stocks of knowledge (Schutz, 1953) to offset inevitable skills/knowledge obsolescence in a fast-changing technical environment, thus retaining labour-power (Sennett, 2006). Such a 'professional' will inherently resist any human resource management directions to orient their careers along a path of loyal service to their employer and that employer's customers (e.g. via performance management and continuous professional development initiatives) (Kinnie and Swart, 2012).

Alternatively if a commonly-held meaning of the word 'professional' is adapting to suit rhetorical meanings implicitly conveyed by a host of occupationally-representative bodies, then the 'very modern' professional is the antithesis of the autonomous, free-thinking individual. Rather, they are the worker whose time and activity is firmly under the control of management (through bureaucratisation and process definition), customers (through normative behavioural expectations and service level agreements) and industry bodies (through the promotion of worker rationalisation). The former definition is one of freedom; the latter one of repression.

As Scarbrough (1993, p. 947) noted twenty years ago, *'the self-directed career has become the principal means of acquiring IS expertise'*. The IS worker becomes naturally attuned to the march of time as technologies develop and move in and out of fashion (Sennett, 2006) and has typically been ahead of the curve in regard to Gratton's (2011) prediction of a future need for workers to individually *'slide and morph'* across different areas of mastery. As such if an IT career is to be considered as a 'professional' career it is one that does not have a limited choice of pathways (like the traditional professions) but rather one whereby the traveller finds their own pathway in a complex environment: fighting their way through

the jungle rather than walking along a well-trodden track. Whilst the BCS might promote the SFIA framework that theorises alternative rational career pathways, the vast range of IT qualifications within the educational/training marketplace (as illustrated by the variety of generic and proprietary qualifications gained by the subjects of this study) and the even vaster range of complex technology to potentially work with (again illustrated in this study), marks the long-term IT career as being largely resistant to a rationality-aggrandised form of 'professionalisation'. Rather, beyond Type 1 service desk work which (because of time pressures and work escalation procedures) restricts deep-level learning, an individual worker's 'professional' reputation follows from the development of skills and knowledge as opportunities and technical challenges arise, typically as unanticipated events during technical practice. This fragmented environment allows for a more nuanced recognition of individuals' experiences, speciality knowledge and proven capabilities than in occupational spheres where there may be a narrower range of respected professional qualifications (e.g. architecture and accountancy).

To identify IT service support workers (as an identifiable group) as being 'professional' has very little meaning. To identify an individual IT service support worker as being 'professional' *vis-à-vis* another identified as being 'non-professional' may offer greater scope for meaningfulness if it points to their greater practical expertise, founded upon theoretical knowledge, and the greater respect accorded to them. But one might also identify IT service support work as having been subjected to a managerial professionalisation agenda that has had the effect of detracting from the knowledge-accumulating capabilities and respect of workers. In this regard the work is regarded by management as becoming increasingly 'professionalised' whilst the worker can be seen to become, through the same process, increasingly 'de-professionalised'.

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