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Body building for professionals

What is a professional, and what makes a good professional body?

Professions and professional bodies have an important role to play and much to contribute. In an era in which great opportunities exist side by side with complex challenges – especially after the financial crisis of 2008 – professions can be major stabilising influences and support the maintenance of high standards in the economy and society.

But what is a profession? Academics have debated this question for many years, but the good news is that, whatever the chosen definition, accountancy makes it in, alongside the likes of the medics and the lawyers.

The words “professional” and “profession” have a variety of meanings in everyday life, but a true profession – such as accountancy – can be distinguished from other occupational groups (e.g. hairdressers, mechanics or “professional” footballers) by means of certain key characteristics. Various lists of these features exist, but the following is a fair summary:

1. It involves specialist skill underpinned by theoretical knowledge, which results in substantial expertise. It's not enough to be able to do something that others can't do (e.g. me repairing my car), or couldn't even do with training and practice (e.g. me becoming a decent footballer). The practice needs to have a foundation of abstract concepts and ideas that provide a basis for flexible application.
2. A long period of training is necessary to acquire this expertise, with formal certification of competence at the end. There may also be a licence to operate for certain activities (e.g. auditing). This permits clients and other parties to be able to rely on the professional concerned, to be confident in their ability to deliver.
3. The use of discretion and judgment will often be required to apply the expertise in complex or novel situations.
4. The occupational group will be permitted a degree of self-regulation of activities and members, supported by disciplinary procedures that could leave, ultimately, to exclusion. A professional is supposed to live up to certain standards, which provide a basis for trust by clients and other parties. Trustworthy behaviour is important to other members of the occupational group too, as they want to be assured that their own collective reputation is not tarnished.

5. There are also likely to be high levels of personal (e.g. status) and financial reward. Financial reward is an important feature of being a professional in all cultures, but in some cultures – including the UK – the social prestige that membership confers is highly valued too.
6. There is an obligation to serve the public interest, especially if a professional body is set up on that basis, such as UK bodies operating under a royal charter. This might be seen as the “price” that society charges for professionals’ social and financial rewards and the privilege of self-regulation.
7. Finally, in support of the public interest, there will be an ethical code that demands more than ordinary morality and the law. Thus, in the economic sphere, professionals are expected to behave according to standards of integrity higher than those that apply to “mere” business people. This implies making a contribution to helping markets and institutions operate better than they would otherwise do.

In the above list you can see two strands. One is around technical expertise and competence. The other is around integrity, or how that expertise is applied. After all, professionals are in a position of power when dealing with ordinary folk, so it is important that they don’t exploit knowledge asymmetry. For example, what would you think of a dentist who recommended, and charged you for, work that you didn’t need? After all, who are you to argue – especially when you’re in the dreaded chair?

Given this view of professions, what makes a good professional body? You’d expect to see education and examinations, CPD offerings and requirements, a code of ethics, services and support for members, and disciplinary procedures for those who don’t live up to the standards expected of them as professionals – supported by committed volunteer members and paid staff, helping to make it all happen. Yet at a deeper level it’s something more than that. A professional body is more than a club or organisation providing services, however worthy those services might be. To my mind, it’s no coincidence that we speak of professional “bodies” and their “members”. “Members” is a bit of body talk, as in “dismembered”. Ultimately a professional body is its members. Their engagement with what the professional body stands for is critical. It is they who represent it day by day, who “re-present” its policies and reputation to clients, employers and other audiences in their actions at work and beyond. If the members don’t do their bit – which is more than paying their annual subscription on time – it’s not a “professional body” in the full and proper sense at all. Members carry with them the reputation or “brand” of their professional body. It is a signal or badge that they possess a level of expertise that they can be relied upon to employ with diligence and integrity. Those who need access to that kind of expertise should be able to trust

someone who holds themselves out as a professional. And in granting rewards and privileges to professionals, society expects them to uphold the standards of competence and integrity that their professional qualification signals.

But do professional bodies live up to this billing? Some would argue not. George Bernard Shaw – or a character in one of his plays – described a profession as “a conspiracy against the laity”. Marxist critiques, fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, made a similar point, albeit less elegantly. For such critics, talk of “ethics” and the “public interest” is mere rhetoric, a smokescreen for self-serving behaviour. Mrs Thatcher was more Marks & Spencer than Marx & Engels, but Thatcherism’s critique – applied to trade unions and professions alike – also tended to see them as bastions of restrictive practices and an obstacle to freely functioning markets.

Do I agree with the critics? Are professions and professional bodies a damaging conspiracy, to be tightly controlled or, even better, eradicated? At one level, I can see what the critics are saying. However, I prefer to see the alleged negative features of professional bodies as unpleasant possibilities to be avoided, rather than as inevitabilities. Like all human institutions, professional bodies are subject to potential shortcomings. They are exposed to risks that have to be managed. Blanket condemnation, though, is unhelpful, especially if it means giving up on professional bodies’ potential for good.

The economy and society face many challenges, so it makes sense to support something that offers, in principle, the potential to contribute positively. Professional advisers or professionals working in a business are supposed to march to a different beat, to act according to standards that are higher than ordinary morality and the law. If they do so, they will make a difference. It won’t always be easy. Conflict between professional standards and surrounding values, e.g. in an amoral business, can be painful for the individual in the middle of it all. Such conflict is a good sign though, an indication that the profession is providing appropriate challenge. It is at such times that members not only need to know what they should do (as a result of good training and appropriate advice) but have the courage and support to do it. When a professional body is working well, it’s much more than a club or “trade union” simply looking after its members’ interests. It is a positive feature of society.

How’s the IFA doing?

Chris Cowton is Professor of Accounting and Dean of the Business School at the University of Huddersfield – the current Times Higher Education University of the Year