

Call yourself a professional?

There is a lot more to behaving professionally than passing exams

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I cannot perform surgery because I am not a professional surgeon.

I cannot pass judgement on anyone in a court of law as I not a legally qualified professional.

I can set myself up as for instance an HR Consultant even though I am neither 'qualified' nor a member of a professional body.

Or, I may be a member of for instance the CIPD, but have done precisely nothing in support of my professional updating, I may have ignored monitoring of CPD once or more, and just want to pay my subs begrudgingly, and moan about it not being worth it when I make no use of facilities or services.

I may see passive membership of my professional body as nothing more than a club I joined decades ago when I passed some exams I would fail now, and despite codes of practice that 'require' me to undertake CPD to maintain professional standards I just can't be asked, and feel safe as fee income is perceived as being more important than enforcing professional levels of practice.

Or, I may, in contrast, be a true professional, diligently maintaining a tangible record of my professional learning, and creating a feeling amongst all with whom I work that I am indeed an accomplished, ethical and model professional...only I have chosen to avoid formal study, exams, fees to follow, initials after my name, because it never really did it for me – and I have seen many 'qualified' people who are very poor examples of real 'professional' practice.

In summary, being paper 'qualified' doesn't make us professional and a lot of professionalism exists outside of professional bodies, and seen in clearly in the work of lapsed or never-have-been members.

So just what is a profession, and what does a professional do that differentiates from the rest?

The role of professional bodies

Some professional bodies have got it made. These are the lucky few that operate in effect a licence to practice, requiring that a member first qualifies then subsequently if brave and powerful enough, make impressive post-qualification effort to maintain personal and collective standards. These professional bodies are serious about CPD and really do strike people off their register for non compliance with reasonable demands to maintain competence and for breaches of professional codes.

Others are stuck between the financial rock and the professional standards hard place. What to do – lean hard on the membership to genuinely drive up post-qualification standards and risk pushing out the lazy and the 'nose thumbers' or take the more accommodating line that keeps the Financial Director happy but lessens the quality of membership by focusing on quantity?

I feel the latter option above is too often taken, and insufficient effort or even consideration of a strategy to enhance post-qualification standards is made by what I call 'discretionary' – I don't have to be a member – professional bodies, and that this will ultimately put them in a position where many members will question just what they get for their fees, and why their professional association tolerates the legions of inactive, poor-quality fellow members. The real professionals deserve differentiation from the lazy and inactive.

I have considerable sympathy with professional bodies, many membership managers within which I know well, my concern is that they may well find themselves dealing with dissatisfaction amongst the ranks of the highest quality, who want more recognition for seriously surpassing the efforts of most members at driving professional practice upward, and would welcome heat put on the less motivated members, very many of whom undeservedly enjoy the higher grades of membership.

It's really down to us as individuals

Although I personally would like to see professional bodies bite the 'member's club' brigades harder, and kick out those who are not prepared to do the minimum that deserves being called a 'professional' I don't blame them for the problem of practitioners behaving non professionally, that's entirely down to us.

Too little will to make any effort to genuinely reflect upon and of all things record our learning is a key indication of what I mean. I have had to put up with Chartered Fellows of my own and of other professional bodies, spending many more minutes telling me they haven't the time to type up any sort of CPD record than it would have taken to actually do this terrible, painful, so very difficult task.

Unless and until we make efforts to update, and by our competence prove ourselves to be true professionals we are no better than anyone without the benefit of dim and distantly recalled evenings at a local college, and for whom professionalism is a conscious, continuous and deliberate reality central to the way they conduct themselves and the standards by which they are judged.

Paying fees and doing nothing to develop your professional practice is not enough.