The Role of Trustworthiness in Defining Professionalism

In today’s society, the term “professional” is used to describe a wide variety of pursuits; some of them true occupations, some of them merely hobbies or pastimes. From the professional athlete to the professional student to the professional gardener, the term is often used with the hope of enhancing the societal status and privileges of the incumbent. There are, in addition, a class of occupations whose objectives generally include the betterment of society. This type of occupation is considered by society to be “professional” even though they seldom include the term in their title.

Engineering is generally considered a “professional” occupation, but the many uses of the term in modern society only confuse those trying to understand the implications of applying the term to their chosen occupation. In this discussion, we examine the role that trust plays in differentiating occupations generally considered "professional" by society versus those that have adopted the term for one of its many other connotations.

We start with some discussion of the definition of a professional similar to that offered by Martin and Schinzinger and then expand the concept by asking the question: "What differentiates the interaction of the public with a ‘professional’ occupation compared to a non-professional occupation?". We attempt to answer that question, in part, by investigating the role of trust in such interactions and relating this to other considerations. In this way, we provide a framework for understanding both the role that a profession such as engineering plays in society, and the implied responsibilities that accompany such a position.

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**L E A R N I N G O B J E C T I V E S**

*After reading this chapter you will be able to:*
- understand why the public trusts professionals
- define a “learned professional”
- relate the implications to your own career
A Discussion of Definitions:  

Many dictionary definitions of "professional" typically include the common meaning of "somebody who is engaged in an occupation as a paid job rather than as a hobby" (Encarta), or "One who earns a living in a given or implied occupation" (Dictionary.com). For the purpose of this discussion, we choose to dismiss this common interpretation and will refer to the term "professional" as synonymous with the definition often qualified as learned professional which may be described as "somebody whose occupation requires extensive education or specialized training" (Encarta), or "Vocation or calling, especially one that involves some branch of advanced learning or science; the learned professions" (Oxford). Finally, we offered the following definition of a learned profession: "An occupation, the execution of which requires specialized education, knowledge or training such that persons without such specialized preparation are not practically able to practice in this capacity, nor adequately able to assess such performance". For the remainder of this discussion we will generally refer to those "...without such specialized preparation..." as "the public", while acknowledging that a specific member of the public may posses some or all of this requisite knowledge in a particular circumstance. It should also be noted that while this definition will suffice for the purpose of this discussion, it is not necessarily complete and may not be adequate in all other situations.

In simpler terms, a professional is one who can make decisions, in their area of expertise, necessary to perform a task that could not be made by a member of the public based on an explanation over dinner of the principles involved. The question that immediately arises when trying to determine who qualifies as a professional by this definition is "How long is dinner?". It is clear that all of the definitions offered depend critically on "How much knowledge is enough?". This is, at best, a very difficult question to answer. To try and understand why this has been so difficult, consider the following points:

1. Knowledge is increasing! As society has evolved, the level of education and knowledge in the general public has increased, which has led to an improved ability to understand complex subjects. This would imply that "How much is enough?" is a constantly moving (and increasing) target. For example, today many more of us are become directly involved in our own financial planning decisions because of the information available, and because the general level of understanding has improved significantly from when all such decisions were left to a professional banker or investment advisor.

2. Not every problem requires all of a professional's expertise. In any particular circumstance, a person with some subject knowledge may be able to duplicate professional performance by applying the same (or a very similar) solution to a common problem. Consider an experienced nurse observing a patient with all the classic symptoms of appendicitis. Would their decision on treatment be any different than that of a Doctor? The risk in such cases is that one might miss some differentiating factor that is rare or not immediately obvious. Another way of looking at this is to ask "What portion of a professional's normal work could be done by an experienced 'para-professional'?". Indeed, it is common practice for assistants to do a
grew portion of the “routine” work under the supervision of a professional (remembering that the professional in charge bears ultimate responsibility). This adds to the difficulty in defining what constitutes a "professional" level of knowledge.

These questions, and others, have led to the common practice among professional organizations of defining tangible qualifications instead of trying to measure levels of knowledge or skill. An example is "... a bachelor level university program of study in engineering recognized by the council" (Engineering and Geoscience Professions Act, Regulatory Bylaws 20(1),(d),(i)). The premise in such a case is that education and training obtained through a prescribed curriculum will prepare an individual to make the decisions and perform the functions that will be required to meet a targeted level of competence in a certain field. The ongoing accreditation process (CCPE) is the engineering profession's way of updating the requirements to meet changing times and circumstances. Continuing professional development, an increasing concern amongst professional organizations today, is one method of ensuring practicing professionals are also keeping up with advancements in their fields as well as the changing expectations of society. In all cases, however, the intent is to ensure that persons practicing in a particular field have the ability to meet at least the minimum standards for professional performance that will be accepted by society.

**PROFESSIONAL TRUST:**

If we accept the premise that the public is not in a position to understand or judge the quality of work produced by a professional, then it follows that the public must necessarily "trust" that the professional has done an acceptable and competent job under the circumstances. (This is also the basic rationale for "self-regulating" professions: that only similarly capable persons are in a position to judge whether or not someone's performance was adequate given the circumstances.) Of course this condition of trust, while an integral part of the relationship between a professional and the public, is not in itself sufficient to define a learned professional.

Consider modern automobiles. The general public is probably not capable of fixing most problems by themselves; they must "trust" their mechanic and have little choice but to accept that they have fixed the right thing (and only the right thing) properly. The public's only form of reassurance is to seek a "second opinion", similar to the situation with "professional" work. In this sense an auto mechanic fits the definition of a professional. Do we generally consider auto mechanics professional? Probably not yet (due to the relatively short training period required to qualify), but with increasing complexity in transportation technology this may change in the future. Thus the length and complexity of a qualifying training program is a significant factor in the public’s perception of “how much is enough” and who earns the title “professional”.
**Basis of Trust:**

While trust is not the only element in the relationship between the public and the professional, it is certainly an important one. It is typically based on perceptions of ability, moral character and motivation.

Trustworthiness is generally considered a combination of honesty and reliability—will someone do what they promised. In the context of professionalism considered here, it should also include ability or competence. Thus, as the public, we are interested not only in whether a professional will do what they promised, but also whether they know how (i.e. have the ability) to do it in the first place. Our level of trust or assessment of trustworthiness can then be described as our expectation of future behavior (performance) based on our perception of past performance (reputation), competence and motivation of the individual or group in question.

*Note: As trust or trustworthiness is based on our personal perceptions, the assessment is certainly subjective. It is subject to our background knowledge, the circumstances, what we’ve heard and seen, and our expectations. Of course our perceptions may be inaccurate, but in this case, perception is our reality and will definitely influence our (i.e. the public’s) beliefs. Also, perceptions formed about an individual member of a group are often transferred to the group as a whole, and in turn to other members of the same group.*

**Reputation:**

Our willingness to trust is based partially on a person’s or group’s demonstrated attitude or mental commitment to complete what they have undertaken. In general, we expect people to perform in the future the way they have in the past. Our assessment of this component of past performance is based on input from a variety of sources: our personal experiences, others' personal experiences (including general beliefs handed down through culture), and the media (books, movies, stories, documentaries, advertisements and news, either factual or fictitious, positive or negative). All these factors contribute to the reputation of the individual and the group to which they belong. To a certain extent, we also read this as a reflection of the moral character of the person, and whether they are reliable.

**Competence:**

While our assessment of competence is also influenced by past performance, it is also affected by our perception of how well prepared someone might be to undertake the task at hand. This is greatly influenced by our knowledge of the individual or group in question. For instance, do we know how much formal education they have had and whether it was relevant to the field of interest? Was their formal education supplemented by an adequate period of supervised experience or internship? We may also be influenced by our perception of the difficulty or complexity of the decisions they typically make or the problems they solve. Other related factors may also have an influence: whether they keep current in their field, whether their performance is governed by any standards or laws, and how they are held accountable for their actions.
These considerations contribute to our opinion about whether or not someone has the ability to successfully complete a given task within their field.

**Motivation:**

Finally, our trust is influenced by our interpretation of the professional's motive. Society generally expects some expression of altruism from the learned professions. For instance, we expect our doctor’s advice to be based on what’s best for our health, not what’s best for them financially. We expect our lawyer’s advice to help provide a just resolution for us, not an easy case for them. However, unless we have some evidence (or faith) that this beneficence exists, we may certainly suspect ulterior motives in some circumstances. Our interpretation of “motive” may also be influenced by the remuneration process in a given situation. For example, we are typically less trusting of someone who is remunerated based on the sale of a product or service than one who’s salary depends only on solving our problem. Again, these perceptions need not be founded in fact to influence our assessment of trustworthiness.

**Additional Considerations:**

Our judgment may also be influenced (especially in face to face situations) by more subtle factors such as one’s demeanor or how confident they "appear". Again, we may be right or totally misinformed, but when a decision must be made, we tend to use whatever information and tools we have available. This human inclination to have an opinion in order to help us offer our trust leads to an important lesson for professionals.

We as humans will use whatever information we can obtain to assist with our assessment of trustworthiness. If we are unable to obtain or understand factual evidence, we will transfer our perceptions based on that information we can obtain or can understand. This often means that we will interpret a professional's behaviour outside their area of expertise as an indication of how competent they are within their field. For this reason, most professionals are conscious of the image they portray even when they are “off duty”.

As a closing thought, we observe that mistrust is merely one end of a continuum, and may be the result of bad experiences, bad publicity or suspect motivation. Where “neutral” is on this scale depends on our personality and our experiences in general. Thus, the same situation may lead to mistrust for one person and trust for another.

**Summary:**

Professional work or decisions require a level or expertise well beyond that normally found in "the public". Lacking sufficient background to fully understand, the public must necessarily trust the judgment and skill of the professional. For this reason, trust becomes an integral part of the relationship between a professional and the public. The assessment of trustworthiness by the public is based on several factors including their perception of the professional’s motivation. The professional's motivation must be seen as being to benefit mankind in general, and
the client in particular. Perceptions about a professional’s competence may be inferred from their personal behavior.

**STUDY QUESTIONS:**

Does the requirement for trust imply some duties for the professional that are not necessarily expected of others? Is it these duties or expectations that help define a professional rather than the element of trust itself?

If the professional is indeed duty-bound in their personal or professional life, do they deserve compensatory privileges? If so, what form should they take?

How do the actions of one professional reflect on the whole profession?

Think of an example from your personal experience where someone’s actions outside their area of expertise influenced your perception of their professional trustworthiness?

**EXERCISE:**

“Trustworthiness” is a combination of honesty and reliability (e.g. Can you believe what they tell you, and will they do what they say?). In addition, our perceptions of trustworthiness are also dependent on our impressions of the person’s “moral integrity” (i.e. do we trust them to do the “right thing”), and their ability to maintain confidentiality when appropriate.

Our perceptions of trustworthiness are formed by our experiences, either direct or indirect, and often includes anecdotal evidence from our friends and acquaintances or portrayals in the entertainment or news media.

Consider the following list of “occupations” or sources of information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lawyer</th>
<th>Doctor (MD)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Police</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCM Police</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Television news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister / Priest</td>
<td>Technical Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto mechanic</td>
<td>University Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car salesperson</td>
<td>Highschool Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Engineer</td>
<td>Your Mother (or equiv.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1) Rate these occupations/sources according to the overall level of trust you have in them, assuming you were seeking advice:

   i) on a topic related to their area of knowledge,

   ii) on an unrelated topic, say career advice (e.g. Should I take <this> job?).

   (Rating: use a scale of 1 (least trust) to 5 (most trust) with 3 being about as trustworthy as the “average person”.)

2) List the “reasons” why you rated each source as you did. (Consider factors discussed earlier in this section such as: length of preparation / training required, average earnings, scarcity of such people, results of personal encounters, portrayals in the media, responsibility to the public, responsibility to clients, your understanding of their field etc.). For each case, do you feel your rating was well founded or was it based in minimal factual evidence?

3) Develop a definition of a “Learned Professional”. What does it mean to be a “Professional”? How much trust do you think others should / will have in you as a Professional?

REFERENCES:

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