

What is professionalism?

It is sometimes said there are only two professions, the law and medicine. By this people have meant that these two skills or arts require long study of the past corpus of knowledge, stiff professional exams, continuous professional development once qualified, and supervision by a professional regulatory body.

In practice today many other skills have come to be seen in the same light as these professions. Accountants, Investment experts, property specialists, opticians, architects, structural engineers and many others have a similar pattern to their lives. They too need to learn, pass exams and then accept some continuous professional training and supervision. You could widen the definition further to include gas heating engineers, plumbers and other important skilled trades where there is now a system of learning, exams, and regulatory expectations.

There is a general trend to add professions to the list under this definition, and to upgrade the level of qualifications people need to practice. Investment specialists now, for example, typically have a degree level qualification where a decade ago they may have held an A level equivalent, and thirty years ago may have been unqualified or have just passed the Stock Exchange exam.

There should, however, be something more to a profession than passing some exams and ticking boxes for the regulator as the individual seeks to keep up with any requirements for Continuous Professional development or regulatory checks on his or her actions. A true professional is someone who has genuine skill or knowledge that he or she takes pride in. They keep it up to date not because they have to but because it is part of being professional and doing the job well. A professional does not work a 9 to 5 day, but does the hours necessary to meet the demands of his patients or clients. If the person is employed they will be on a good salary and expected to work longer hours or at week-ends when needed. Military officers, for example, have to be available for duty as needed. Investment bankers pursuing deals may work all week-end to see it through to time. A professional goes the extra distance, strives for continuous improvement, and upholds high standards of integrity and honesty. A bent lawyer or a dangerous doctor should be struck off.

Today there is a bit of reappraisal underway over these ideals or standards. At the same time as the Regulators and law makers trust the professionals less, there is a danger the professionals respond by being less professional in some ways. If the Regulator checks up on how much professional development someone undertakes, some so called professionals respond by gaming the Continuous Professional Development system. If the regulator sets minimum hours for such additional study there is the danger the minimum becomes the maximum. As the professional standards become more and more codified, so more and more professionals just implement the protocols or standards whether they are optimal or not, as it is the safe thing from the career point of view to do. It can cramp challenge and reform of the standards which may be needed

for overall improvement. As the concept of work life balance becomes more entrenched, so more professionals want to go part time or limit their commitment to their discipline. How big a limit can you place on your profession before you are no longer sufficiently professional?

I would be interested in your thoughts. Do you think the tightening of requirements on professionals mean modern professionals are better than before these changes? Or are the professions becoming too bureaucratic, gripped by group think, to the detriment of their clients and patients?