

## Professionalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century: symbol or substance?

### Introduction

'Professional' is a label given to a wide variety of things in modern life, usually whenever a cachet of virtue and trust is required. Ask yourself why a cleaning company might advertise itself as offering a professional service? Is this simply an example of what Hayes and Abernathy (1980) call 'pseudo professionalism'?

We all tend to have different interpretations of what professional means and those meanings have changed over the years. Typically, the term is used to infer dependability, trustworthiness, credibility, technical competence, up-to-date expertise, a caring approach, ethical standards and so on. A cleaning company would argue that it does indeed represent all of these things.

This article explores the present state of professional status and behaviour in the context of business support services such as finance, human resources, purchasing and IT. At a time when there are trends towards these functions becoming either relocated into the new white-collar factories, or alternatively, becoming cottage industries of remote tele-workers, we ask to what extent these changes in the form and location of work impact on what has traditionally been understood as the 'professional' role.

Ian Herbert will argue that the term professional is a hollow, outmoded, concept in a world of process re-engineering, division of labour, workflow management, and service commodisation. Stephanie Lambert will counter with reasons why, in the context of the virtual knowledge-based economy, that belief common skills and behaviours, together with the core values of trust, reliability and ethics, provide points of anchorage for individual workers and teams. Andrew Rothwell will ensure fair 'professional' play and suggest what the implications might be for organisations and the professions .

### Ian Herbert – Liquid modernity: all motion no matter!

If you ever want a reality check, go to [www.guru.com](http://www.guru.com) where you'll likely see that there's someone, somewhere, offering to do **your** job at a fraction of **your** (full) cost. It may be best not to tell your boss! Why is this instant market in skilled 'professional' jobs possible? The obvious answer is that the internet enables a world-wide market in labour. If you don't physically have to be in the room, then the job can be done by anyone, anytime, anywhere (See Rothwell and Herbert, 2011). Labour sites like [guru.com](http://guru.com) are the latest manifestation of

the ebay culture in which individual sellers and buyers come together in cyberspace. For white-collar workers it is the latest phase in a trend that has seen many people abandon notions of a traditional career within just one or two companies. So called 'portfolio' careers are more likely to comprise a constant series of short term assignments across a range of employers. (See also [www.fivesquids.co.uk](http://www.fivesquids.co.uk) for the next 'lower' level).

In the workplace, hierarchies are getting flatter. When you're hired to do a job, that job has standards and performance measures, your work rate is likely monitored by a supervisor sitting at the head of a large factory-style department – or just as likely sitting in a cubicle on the other side of the world. You may, for example, be a qualified accountant but the workflow software will know how long you've been active on your terminal, how many ledger accounts you have reconciled and how many you've still to do. Your work team will also be watching as your performance is put up on the signal board at the end of the section. You may be skilled, you may be earning a salary of five times the minimum wage, but you are also a production unit that can be measured, monitored, and ultimately replaced. In these circumstances does anyone care whether you have professional training and a professional outlook? If your skills become outdated there will be someone to replace you who will probably work more cheaply than you.

Traditionally, professional bodies such as CIMA (or CIM, CIPD, CIPS...) have been guardians of their respective training and examination regimes. There are well established alternative qualifications in advanced knowledge such as the MBA and MSc. Besides, ideals of trust and fidelity are not just the preserve of professionals and neither are they guaranteed. Indeed, there are always exceptions in trust-based relationships, such as the ENRON accounting scandal and cases of medical malpractice.

Despite age-old concerns about individual probity, at a more societal level Bauman (2000) argues that in this present 'liquid age' social forms and institutions no longer provide a solid basis for individuals to reference either their actions or career plans. Rather they are having to make sense of and manage their own learning and employability. Indeed, as the life span of knowledge reduces, professions built on privileged knowledge will lose their clarity. As long ago as 1973 Haug's deprofessionalization hypothesis painted a bleak picture of the new era of knowledge workers and their talents in the relentless drive towards competitive advantage. Working practices rooted more directly in the workplace such as, Total Quality Management, Lean, Six-Sigma, continuous improvement (Kaizen) together with real-time work-flow monitoring generating countless performance checks and measures win-out over more subjective notions of 'doing a good job' (see Cunningham, 2008).

## Stephanie Lambert: Being professional is the key to survival

While technological advances in the way that business works are indeed resulting in many 'skilled' jobs becoming commoditised and fragmented, the professional 'coin' has two sides. An alternative picture suggests that whilst the absolute number of professional roles in support services might reduce, there is also likely to be an increase in the value placed on professional traits, if not traditional professional affiliations. The fact that people can be hired from a website, by managers they might never meet, suggests that some notion of a person working in a self-motivated and professional manner must be alive and well. A more detailed look at business support services suggests that in terms of professional traits and behaviours the keyword is 'change' rather than decline as follows.

1. Professional skills are not just technical, the experience *becoming* a professional is important. In other words, actually doing the mundane routine tasks of a vocation instils a deep understanding of the 'nuts and bolts' of a discipline. Analysts on Wall Street analysed ENRON's balance sheet for years, but they did not understand how the figures might have been put together and thus were blinded to the possibilities of what they might represent.

2. *Being* a professional involves enacting certain behaviours that are important in the way that the job is done and *how* communication with others is handled. The lessons from a period of articles/apprenticeship working with and being tutored by senior professionals cannot be learnt in business schools. Whilst work processes may become increasingly standardised, those processes have been designed by professional people who have a certain view of the world and a certain way of working. Workers with similar professional backgrounds can readily fit into process teams because they have similar standardised skill-set and behaviours from prior training and experience. Bauman (2000) notes that this is advantageous in short term contracts

3. The argument that a series of short term assignments with multiple employers is somehow less worthy than life-long employment with just one or two companies is not proven. Instead, it is suggested that a positive experience that contributes substantially to the individual capability and that organisations are now seeking professionals with a more holistic sense of commercial acumen and experience (Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008).

4. Just because there is constant surveillance by technological systems and software does not mean that those that do the work are somehow less skilled, unmotivated or

untrustworthy. Perhaps the reverse is true. In the old days, many mistakes could be hidden, in bureaucratic structures, paper communication provided the space for those that chose to procrastinate and avoid responsibility. Nowadays, the greater transparency and immediacy of real-time systems generates a level of visibility that increases rather than reduces the demands on professionals. The electronic audit trail within organisations is now comparable with those professions such as law where traditionally every word is recorded and available for peer and public scrutiny.

5. Whilst many ‘professional’ jobs will indeed be automated and routinised, the flipside is that there will be a greater premium placed on the contribution of the new professionals; the designers of the new work systems and the business partners who, freed from the tedium of transaction work will now have time to apply their specialised skills and attributes to the strategic side of business support (CIPD, 2009).

*Making sense and staying grounded: career anchors*

The work of Edgar Schein (1974) is still useful in determining how the emerging ‘strategic’ professional might be ‘anchored’ to their work and their career. Table 1 depicts how the notion of the traditional professional in business support services is being reorient towards a more ‘strategic’ outlook both at work and in career management.

| <b>‘Traditional’ Professional</b>          |  |   | <b>The Strategic Professional</b>    |  |
|--|--|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Technical Focused Role                     | An employee with a technical expertise using their specific skills to meet challenges, complete tasks diligently and to a high standard. | → | Managerial Focused Role              | Concerned with problem-solving on a broad scale. A major part of their role will require successful people management and communication skills. Assigned and thrive on responsibility. |
| ‘Security / Stability’ Guiding Career Path | Stability and continuity is the primary driver in their career choices; avoid risk.  | → | ‘Pure Challenge’ Guiding Career Path | Individuals driven by new challenges and difficult problems; may move to different jobs when satisfied and therefore their career may be varied.                                       |
| Autonomy / Independence in Role            | Manage their own <i>workload</i> with their own rules within an organisation.  | → | Autonomy / Independence in Career    | Managing their <i>career</i> as an individual agent.   |

Table 1

Stephanie, I can't edit this – please send the original diagram

In this way, professionals are frequently defined by their traits and behaviours which are instilled early on within a professional career through specialised training and education from peers, teachers and professional bodies (see Millerson, 1964). *Being* professional, in many cases, is the key to survival and is being reflected by the business partnering roles integral to the success and business case for shared service centres. In our company research we put the question 'what happens when you are successful?' The usual answer is 'I get more work!'

### **Conclusion and suggestions: Andrew Rothwell**

Considering the changes that have been described in relation to professional work in an organizational context at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is the outlook for CIMA members? The organisations that employ them? For management accounting as a profession and arguably for other organisationally-embedded professional occupations such as Human Resources or Logistics? In respect of individuals, we have explored the impact the changes described are having on professional workers embedded within organisations and particularly within Shared Service Centres. Transformations are occurring that are not only changing the shape of professional work and roles but, in some cases, largely affecting career paths of professional workers which could hold implications for future professionals and the market in which they function. In line with these changes, one may ask whether the very traits that define the professional (and therefore the professional and client relationship) are dissolving and/or evolving into something new. Our field research (see Rothwell, Herbert and Seal, 2011) has suggested that while SSCs provide entry to the profession for relatively large numbers of individuals through transactional roles in the new 'office factories', career development opportunities may be limited for these same individuals due to the narrow focus of the roles they occupy. The close prescription of tasks can inhibit the development of the broad 'professional' skill-set necessary for developing the individual experience to underpin professional progression and the overall career. This in turn becomes a problem for organisations in that they may find they are not growing a supply of future talent to the extent that organisational growth may demand it.

In a wider arena, this may also be an issue for the professions themselves as transactionally-defined roles need not necessarily be filled by entry-level professionals, but by administratively or technically competent individuals working with expert systems and in turn managed by 'professional' managers rather than senior, discipline-based professionals.

We suggest it is the attitudes and behaviours adopted by individuals and promoted by organisations that define the professional role. The ability and authority to use discretion, to apply problem solving strategies to non-routine situations, to be authoritative in one's field, to identify with professional networks and be recognised by one's peers, to have one's professional role as a defining personal characteristic rather than merely a job, to sustain one's engagement through continuing professional development (CPD), and to have this as a requirement of credibility in the role: we suggest these remain the defining attributes of as professional in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We do however acknowledge that in the new organisational context these may be difficult to sustain.

At the start of this article we considered how the term 'professional' has been attached to a wide variety of job roles. We have to acknowledge that professional work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed, almost certainly for ever, and that traditional notions of security and progression have disappeared for many professionals, again perhaps for ever. The widespread adoption of shared services and outsourcing allied to the transfer of jobs overseas to lower cost labour markets is changing the occupational structure in an unprecedented way. We suggest that there are positive ways forward for individuals, organisations and for the professions, but a proactive approach is needed.

First, at an individual level, CPD becomes an essential part of personal career management rather than an annual chore to secure the 'points' to keep one's professional membership alive. Individuals will seek to gain knowledge in order to provide their own career path with a stable foundation in order to secure work in a competitive, global, job market; such knowledge will act as a bargaining tool. The second priority is that organisations must extend their talent management strategies to all levels of the professional workforce, if they are to sustain and develop the professional knowledge assets. They must put efforts into maintaining their knowledge through their employees to prevent losses of both training time, commitment and an employee taking their knowledge to a competing organisation. Third, the professions themselves need to provide development opportunities that simulate and replicate work experience because individuals may not have access to the experiential learning that underpinned traditional progression. Ultimately professionalism and professional status are not merely a 'nice-to-have' attributes for selected individuals, but a business imperative that impacts on sustainability and prosperity which we neglect at our peril.

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### **Further Reading**

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The big issue is how we support the professional in their endeavours in a career landscape involving short term roles; understanding the changes outlined within this article in line with anchors may help industry to support the professional.

Professional education, those organisations employing professional workers and professional bodies must seek to develop and adapt to changing professional issues (such as where the professionals' career is anchored) in order to maintain important traits that add value to a business.

If organisations can fulfil the vocational and developmental requirements of the professional, then the professional can build and enhance their résumé and thrive within a highly fluid and dynamic working landscape (Bauman, 2000).