

Professionalism

Profess: to make known in strong terms, usually because of a belief based on knowledge in the subject being professed. [Latin *professus*. –*pro* (publicly), *fateri* (to confess)].

Professor: someone who professes and is considered to be a teacher of highest standing in the subject.

Profession: an activity requiring the need to know and apply knowledge, skill and bearing towards others of a high standard.

Professional: someone acting within a profession and usually charging for it.

From this you may easily conclude that professionalism is not for the likes of a trader in the street market, or a road sweeper, or perhaps any manual worker; well, you would be wrong – they can all behave professionally if they wish to.

You may also have concluded that professionals wear suits and shirts with ties, dress in smart clothes and have clean hands; well, you would be wrong – professionalism is not about what's on the outside of a person, which you can see, but about that invisible quality which comes from inside a person.

So what is it that makes a professional?

Knowledge is an obvious requirement; the person has to have a knowledge of the subject that is clearly better than that which might be known by general knowledge and common sense. A plumber, a roofer, a nurse, a doctor, a surgeon, an accountant and so on are all using specialist knowledge that has usually taken years to acquire and involved special education. But knowledge isn't everything; it is also how that knowledge is used which comes into an understanding of "professionalism". Skilled computer hackers and crooks are spoken of as being "professionals" in that they are so skilled they can operate in this way for a living but that is a very limited definition of the status. Professionalism is about more than that.

Behaviour is something that obviously separates the clever dishonest accountant from the clever honest accountant, and likewise for other trades and disciplines. A professional is someone you expect to be able to ask for help in the expectation that they will help you – i.e. they will look after you; in short that *they will exercise a duty of care towards you*. So, interfacing with a professional should leave you better than before and certainly no worse. It is for this reason that those engaged in certain tasks found value in grouping together to form professional associations which could advertise basic standards of behaviour. This grouping resulted in what we now identify as the "professions" – doctors, dentists, pilots, plumbers, accountants, bankers, chemists, physicists and so on. They have established institutions and associations with self-regulating Codes of Standard to reassure users seeking their help. Some of these organisations have special grades of membership to distinguish those of their members who satisfy their standards of professionalism and these are called Chartered, as in Chartered Engineer, Chartered Scientist or Chartered Geologist.

These people are prepared to have their behaviour judged by the senior members of their organisation.

So to be a “professional” you would be expected to be knowledgeable in your subject, to be up to date with that knowledge and keep up to date with it, to treat your clients and your employer with respect (which means being polite – see “etiquette” (on this website), honest and putting their needs before yours) and to have their best interests at heart. It’s all about the sort of person you are. Professionals should be “nice people” (and “nice” is not the same as “charming” – many rouges are charming and so fool their clients into believing their untruthful proposals). Professionals are people whom you are comfortable to work with. If the person you are working with, seeking advice from or provided a service to you is not “nice” the chances are they are not behaving professionally and do not have your best interests at heart. Walk away if you can and proceed with caution if you cannot.