

Why Would You Want to Be a Professional?

by Albert Trostel

It is quite likely that most students who elect to study business administration in college do not sense that they are entering a profession, unless simply getting paid for work makes working in business a profession. The pre-law or the pre-med student is clearly headed for a professional career, but it's not so clear for the business student. A decently paid job, not the attainment of professional status, is the more common goal. Maybe the accountant might see professional status in the work, but most of the other jobs that our graduates take are just that: a job. It may sound nice to call them professions, but the substance of what it means to be a professional does not at first glance seem to be present.

On the other hand, there may be more to being professional that could apply to business management. What would it mean to act as though business were a profession? Would it make some difference to the graduate's life? The argument of this essay is that taking a professional attitude toward work in organizations not only is becoming increasingly possible because more of that work is knowledge work, but that a professional attitude has the potential for personal happiness that may be even more important than its contribution to success in the profession. But how, in the absence of success, could a professional attitude lead to happiness? That seems a rather strange assertion.

Allow me to trace the path of the argument of this essay.

1. Work is becoming increasingly knowledge work as opposed to work that requires mere physical strength, skill, or dexterity. Consequently, people down to the lowest level within organizations have the privilege of contributing their piece of knowledge to the final product or service. Business graduates, along with many other people in the same organization, some even without college education, will be doing knowledge work.
2. Knowledge work requires specialization simply to enable the worker to keep up. The product of a specialist's work usually requires organizations to be effective. The product of knowledge work has no value without organized, coordinated application to a broader goal of producing the product or service. Those organizations might be invisible; they might be virtual organizations. Despite the fact that the increase in knowledge work allows all sorts of people to make their living working as individuals out of their homes, even they require organizations to practice their trade. They become part of a meta organization consisting of these independent contractors and their common client. Consequently, where knowledge work is ubiquitous, so are organizations, and knowledge workers will have to understand organizations.
3. If you are doing knowledge work, chances are that from early on you will have some management content to your work, long before someone calls you a

manager. Coordinating knowledge work into a coherent product or service requires some sort of process of management. Since the knowledge worker is often privy to information not available to anyone else, that worker must play a role in management, even if it may seem quite minor. That need for worker management of knowledge work is turning our management theories upside down, and we have yet to have satisfactory resolution to many of the dilemmas of the management of knowledge work, but we do know that it cannot be managed simply from “on high.”

4. Since you will be doing management work from early on, even though you will not be called a manager, you might as well think and act like a professional manager. If you do, the issues raised in the study of business (and management) ethics will apply to you, and you will need some of the professional’s concern for a duty to the common good. That concern would manifest itself in the development of your character, in ethics talk, your ability to act virtuously.
5. If you can accept the notion that true happiness is the consequence of the life well lived, and if the demands of being a professional require a concern for the moral consequences of your practice, there surely is a connection between what you learn in the systematic study of business ethics over your lifetime and your happiness.

Knowledge Work

Knowledge work is everywhere, and in some very unexpected places. The husband of one of my colleagues, a director of an “alternative school,” was encouraged to prepare his students as knowledge workers. An “alternative school” is a non-pejorative name for a school whose students dropped out of high school for one reason or another and are pursuing a high school degree in an alternative setting. Many come from backgrounds that we euphemistically call “at risk.” Lester Thurow, ex Dean of the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, spoke to a meeting of directors and encouraged them to elevate their sights to prepare their students for knowledge work. If these students likely to be at the more unskilled end of the labor spectrum are doing some knowledge work, what is he talking about? What is this thing called knowledge work?

Contemplate the manufacture and assembly of automobiles. Exhibit 1 describes some of the many areas where knowledge is applied. You can see the shift toward knowledge when you consider the following facts:

- In real dollars the cost of an automobile has remained roughly the same over the past twenty years.
- The cost of raw materials (steel, rubber, plastics) has actually declined.
- The weight of the automobile has declined significantly.

- The direct labor cost as a per cent of the total has declined.
- The profit as a per cent of sales has remained of the same order of magnitude.

Something significant has changed in what it takes to build an automobile. Much of the difference is an increase in various kinds of knowledge that goes into the car, such things as computer controlled fuel injection, adaptive braking systems in addition to more frequent, substantial changes in the design.

And even the labor costs often require knowledge. Alongside the assembly lines in the NUMMI² plant are meeting rooms where production workers meet on company time to work on solving problems of production. The walls of these rooms are filled with all sorts of graphs and analyses of the current projects. Fifty five year old production workers at the Navistar (truck) plant in Illinois have been trained in statistical design of experiments for problem solving. These workers, who once contributed only their strength and manual dexterity, are now contributing their knowledge to problem solving. Machines contribute much of the strength and dexterity, and they attend and monitor the machines.

Knowledge Work and Management

All this knowledge work requires organizations to make it effective. We knowledge workers are not self sufficient. Even the free lance writer depends on the elaborate infrastructure of publishing and printing and distribution in order to make that work useful. The accountant, the market researcher, the engineer, the professor, none of us can ply our trade without organizations.

Knowledge work leads to a radical decentralization of authority, a flattening of organizations. Management has always been involved with the coordination of work in organizations, as Peter Drucker said, making “the work productive and the worker achieving,”³ and that function of management remains, even if its position has moved. To coordinate my knowledge work with your knowledge work usually requires that both of us participate in its management. That coordination provides some very special challenges for managing because so much of what makes the application of knowledge effective happens right at the place that it is produced. We, the people on “front line” of the organization have to be brought into the management process.

Professional organizations such as law offices and universities have always dealt with these management problems, but often with the luxury of being able to pass on increased costs in higher prices. Each of those professionals has a high level of control as to how the work is done. Historically they have had a great deal of autonomy, and we have been willing to pay the high costs of that autonomy. Recently in health care, however, society has started resisting the constantly rising costs of unrestrained professional autonomy. The HMO movement provides a fascinating laboratory for working out the problems of the issues swirling around knowledge work, professional attitudes, professional autonomy, and cost control.

We have only begun to solve these significant problems of making knowledge work both professional and cost effective. There are companies in very cost competitive industries that are spending as much as five to ten per cent of their payroll costs on education and training so that workers at the lowest levels within the organization both have the knowledge and act professionally with it. Presumably these companies have found such investment cost effective, but such companies are still rare. The popularity of the cartoon characters in Dilbert, all of them knowledge workers, attests to the work that we still have to do in managing knowledge work.

The Professional

If the nature of work is becoming more knowledge intensive, and if that means that there is opportunity to take a professional attitude toward that work, what makes work professional and therefore what might that professional attitude entail? The popular notion of professionalism as it applies to sports is only partially satisfactory, the idea that you are professional when you get paid for playing. The tennis player “turns professional” when she accepts a pay check for playing her sport. In one very important aspect of being a professional, this sense conforms to the professionalism of this essay. The professional must be competent. No one remains a professional without competence. The top professionals in all fields, especially in athletics, are very, very good at what they do, and they work very hard to keep their competitive edge. The popular characterization that he or she is a “real pro” is indicative.

You can see that the definition of a true professional goes beyond competence by listening to the vocabulary of the discourse on professional management. We have come to see the importance of professional management, but there are times when those professionals have overstepped what we believe to be true professionalism. Through the early part of the twentieth century there was a massive shift from owner/managers managing our business enterprise to men (and now women) who were considered professional managers. It used to be enough to be related to the boss, but we now disparagingly refer to that as nepotism, and no one wants to be known as a nepot. Nepotism implies incompetence supported by favoritism. On the other hand, not all notions of professional management have a favorable ring either. We have come to see many of our so-called professional managers as “hired guns” or “corporate bureaucrats,” unable to look beyond the next quarter’s earnings as managers who are not up to our standards. In our minds the true professional manager must avoid being what these terms imply. What more than competence makes a professional?

Police work may provide a useful illustration of professionalism. A recent public radio commentary on the police brutality incidents in the New York police department included a hundred fifty year summary of the history of the department, concluding that while things were not good, things were better than they used to be, and that there was still hope that some day the citizens of New York would have “a real professional police department.” Try to identify what professionalism of cops might mean as I describe the characteristics of a professional.

Generally there is a body of knowledge that the professional must master which he or she then applies to a specific range of human problems. In some definitions of professional that knowledge must be theoretical and/or complex. Often those who define what it means to be a professional specify that that specialized knowledge be acquired in a university setting. But in the end, the professional makes the connection between a body of knowledge and the people who benefit from the practical application of it. Consequently, the true professional looks not only to mastery of that body of knowledge, but also to its application. The professional has an interest in the practical outcome, and not merely knowledge for the sake of knowledge. For example, the accountant is not interested in accounting theory for its intrinsic elegance, but rather for how his client and the public uses the information the practice generates. By the same token, a professional policeman must not only know the law, but he must have a command of a number of social sciences such as psychology and sociology, and he or she must apply that knowledge to enforcing the public's obedience to the law. There are very few police chiefs today who are not college graduates, and many of them have advanced degrees. Furthermore, all participate in some form of continuing education.

Social Impact of the Professional

The knowledge with which a professional works is supposed to be in the service of human need. We say that the professional has a duty to apply his/her knowledge for the common good. For the medical professional that human need is the health of the patient, and the Hippocratic oath that a doctor takes as he or she enters the profession makes clear the primacy of the patient's health. Ideally a doctor will constantly acquire the knowledge necessary to serve the patients' needs. We look askance at the doctor whose mastery of some particular routine allows him to simply charge a high fee for doing the same procedure again and again, whether or not we need it. The professional had a duty to apply the best knowledge to the patient or client's need and not simply to sell as much as the market will bear. In a world in which there is great wealth of knowledge, the professional is the conduit by which society acquires benefit from that knowledge. As one imagines professional police work, it is easy to see that there is a profound need for the enforcement of law and order in any society that becomes the calling of the professional cop. As our understanding of society changes and as laws are revised or reinterpreted, the professional policeman must constantly learn new knowledge. And as one considers the socially dysfunctional milieu in which most of police work takes place, the application of knowledge of all sorts becomes essential to its effectiveness.

A professional is concerned about the impact of her practice on the patient or client or customer, but that concern goes beyond the notion that the "customer is always right." There are times when the special knowledge of the professional leads her to conclude that what the served wants is not good either for the served himself or for the common good of society. A lawyer acting professionally will not carry out an illegal act at client's request. The issue becomes much more problematical when the lawyer discovers her client is acting illegally, but in some limited circumstances she even has an obligation to society to report those actions, despite the concept of attorney/client privilege.

Additionally, the professional has a responsibility to educate the client, to take the time to teach. The doctor who is carrying out this responsibility will not merely prescribe the proper medications for my illness, but he will take the time to teach me about what is happening in my body and how I can take responsibility for its care. William May calls this the transformational aspect of the professional's responsibility.⁴ Once again, with a little imagination you can describe a police officer's duty in this regard. Modern professional police officers take their teaching mandate seriously.

Members of a profession usually assume a responsibility for bringing along the next generation of professionals, for being a mentor and teacher to the future members of the profession, and for supervising this process of formation. In addition, they devote significant energy to discussing what proper behavior for the practitioners might be and to disciplining misbehaving members of the practice. Often professional associations establish codes of ethics which prove valuable not merely for the guidelines they supply, but for the educational power of the ongoing debate that is necessary to keep those guidelines current. The accounting profession goes even beyond codes of ethics to the establishment of standards. The renowned FASB (Financial Accounting Standards Board) establishes in great detail countless rules for accounting treatment for various kinds of transactions in the interest of producing a generally accepted set of accounting standards.

Frequently a profession controls the entrance and certification standards of a profession. While those standards are often viewed as job protection rules for the professionals themselves, they do provide an important social function of accrediting those who wish to practice to a wider society that may not understand the intricacies of the profession.

The Professional Attitude in Business Organizations

Is the professional attitude a reasonable expectation for members throughout a business organization? Clearly, for an organization designed to deliver a professional service such as a public accounting or legal firm there is no question that a professional attitude is required. It would make no sense to be any different. But as the purpose of the organization becomes producing a product such as an automobile or a computer; or a service such as hotel accommodations or a telephone call, it is not clear whether there is room for the distracting interests of the professional for any but the staff people hired to provide internal professional services, such as accountants and lawyers. A professional within an organization always has to deal with divided loyalties to the organization and to the profession. Imagine yourself as the night manager of a hotel or a supervisor on a part of the assembly line at the Ford plant, or even a project coordinator for a construction company. You may see that there is a need for a professional attitude on your part, but it is easy to see that such an attitude may, at times, come in conflict with the organizational imperatives of getting the work out.

If you want to have some idea of what a professional attitude might mean, imagine yourself in any of the jobs mentioned in the last paragraph and think what it might mean to concern yourself with the elements of the professionalism.

1. Competence is an obvious contributor to organizational performance and therefore to someone who wants to be a “real pro.” To the degree that you are constantly doing what is necessary to keep your knowledge and skills current, you are taking a professional attitude.
2. The existence of a formal body of knowledge seems a bit elusive. There does not seem to be a formal body of knowledge for each of those jobs, although there do seem to be all kinds of trade associations and there is a trade press that serve the function of information exchange, and taking a professional attitude would mean that you take on a duty to keep up. It may take some imagination to abstract from the challenges you face on the job what knowledge areas might be helpful. For example, the night manager might find that a good understanding of psychology and organizational behavior might be quite helpful and an understanding of economics and accounting might be helpful for understanding what makes the hotel tick. From a broad reading of literature in the social sciences you could obtain a better appreciation of humankind, which might be useful for understanding the hotel guests and the lives they lead. Let your imagination roam, but the basic question concerns the application of knowledge to practical outcomes. In my own experience my realization that I could take a professional attitude to management led me to start reading the major books of the time on organizational behavior and management.
3. When it comes to social impact, it is sometimes not all that clear what greater good is being served by your job. So much of that depends on the organization itself. Some organizations just don't pay the kind of attention they should to what their employees know about the company and its greater purpose, but often companies do pay attention to these kind of details to good effect. Both Federal Express and UPS have fine reputations for the quality of service their delivery people provide. The Wall Street Journal recently carried stories on the attitudes of lower-level employees in gigantic organizations such as GM and Wal-Mart. Both of them had a clear notion how their job fit into the greater scheme of things, and were proud of their contributions. The opportunities are there for lower level employees, especially those who are applying knowledge to their work, to explain to the people around them the significance of what is going on in terms more uplifting than Dilbertian cynicism. The real rub comes when a lower level employee is asked to do something that is either illegal or immoral, and there seems to be so little support for the person doing what she or he believes is right, to take a moral point of view. Whistleblowing takes great courage in most organizations.
4. Bringing along the future “professionals” is widespread. People in lower levels of organizations often have the responsibility for bringing new employees into the organization, for providing the basic training, for explaining the ropes. We give this behavior the fancy term of “mentoring.”

Consequently, while we don't call many jobs professional, there are numerous opportunities to adopt a professional attitude toward carrying them out. Furthermore, it seems that adopting such an attitude would have a positive impact on the organization's performance. That result is especially easy to see in the case of the New York Police Department.

The Professional Attitude and Happiness

I now come to the great leap of this essay. What does having a professional attitude have to do with happiness? It might help advance me in my career, and if that's happiness, so be it. But isn't that a bit crass?

At this point I must confess to leading you on. I am saying that you will achieve happiness by a more archaic definition of the word, the result of a life well led rather than by the popular definition of happiness. Today happiness refers to good luck, good fortune, cheerfulness, pleasurable, and contentment. I am talking about the more elusive result of the virtuous life, the kind of life Thomas Jefferson was referring to when, in the Declaration of Independence, he claimed the pursuit of happiness along with life and liberty as inalienable rights. I was always puzzled by this elevation of happiness to an inalienable right until I read a comment that we have come to a wrong definition of happiness. Mortimer Adler pointed out to me something that a better education in philosophers such as Aristotle should have taught me.

It {mistake number six} consists in the identification of happiness - a word we all use for something that everyone seeks for its own sake- with the purely psychological state of contentment, which we experience when we have the satisfaction of getting what we want. Modern thought and people (including Webster's Collegiate Dictionary) generally in our time have totally ignored the other meaning of happiness as the moral quality of a whole life well lived.⁵

What I am asking you to consider is whether you will be a happier person if you enter your business career with the attitude of the professional, striving to be competent, searching for the knowledge that might enhance your contribution to the organization, concerned for the social impacts of your practice and your organization, and interested in educating others to make similarly positive impacts. I suspect that you will find yourself a much happier person, happier in this philosophical sense, not carefree and maybe at times less than cheerful for the problems that you encounter, than if you simply put in your time. With the increase in the ability to do knowledge work, the opportunities are there.

References

1. Since the early 1960's when Peter Drucker coined the term "knowledge work" theorists have recognized that the management of knowledge work has to be different in

some ways. It is only within the last twenty years as knowledge work has become so ubiquitous that we have had widespread struggles with its challenges.

2. NUMMI or New United Motor Manufacturing is a joint venture between General Motors and Toyota which operates an automobile assembly plant in Fremont, California. It has served as a means for General Motors to learn about Japanese management methods.

3. Drucker, Peter, Management, Its Tasks, Duties, and Responsibilities, Harper & Row, New York, 1974 and in numerous other books and articles to this day, the most recent being in the September-October 1997 issue of the Harvard Business Review.

4. May, William, "The Beleaguered Rulers," Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1, 25-44.

5. Adler, Mortimer, Ten Philosophical Mistakes, Macmillan Publishing, New York, 1985, p. xviii. Comments in italics are mine.

Exhibit 1

Knowledge Work in the Design, Manufacture, and Marketing of an Automobile

DESIGN LEADING TO REGULAR REDESIGN FOR MARKET ADVANTAGE

Market knowledge
Computer aided design
Project management
Materials knowledge

PRODUCTION PROCESSES

Process engineering - Lean manufacturing
Logistics - Materials management
Worldwide sourcing
Assembly in all parts of the world
Industrial engineering
Quality management
Planning and scheduling

DISTRIBUTION AND MARKETING

Identification of customer desires - market research
Product concepts
Distribution planning
Advertising
Pricing decisions

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Cost analysis
Capital acquisition and management
Customer financing