

Is IT a Profession?

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It is common for people to cavalierly describe themselves as professional. Most often, they can be seen to be correct because they earn an income performing some vocation. Consequently, we have professional newsreaders, professional athletes and professional taxi drivers. However, when we consider the idea of professionalism and the classical professions (e.g. medicine, law, theology, the profession of arms) we might hesitate to classify those three occupations as 'professional'. Unfortunately, into this category too fall the IT occupations.

Typically, when one considers what might define a profession, at least four characteristics arise consistently: an occupation that draws on a specialised body of knowledge, formal requirements for entry to the occupation (i.e. to be allowed to practice that occupation), certain obligations of being a member (e.g. adherence to a code of ethics), and, perhaps less obviously, an expectation to support and improve the profession. It seems that these characteristics are blended from two major historical sources: ancient 'professions' and trade or mercantile guilds.

The classical professions can usually trace their antecedents far back into civilisation's history. For example, there were designated (professional) architects for the pyramids. The ancient Egyptian architect was appointed by the Pharaoh, who was a God. Therefore, the architect's authority and ability were, consequently, unquestionable. Similar, in pre-history witch doctors and shamans were seen to have been touched by a god or gods because of their ability to heal; and ancient priests and mystics claimed to have been chosen by (their) god(s). In short, ancient 'professions' were seen to be separate and more important because of the need to be 'appointed' by some ultimate authority; the equivalent of a modern-day barrier to entry.

Starting in about the Middle Ages, merchants in towns formed guilds to manage and protect their trade in their marketplace. If you were not a member of the town's mercantile guild, you could not sell goods in the market. Importantly, the guilds prescribed responsibilities on their members, including contributing some of their income for superannuation for widows and performing regular town guarding duties. The mercantile guilds spawned trade guilds that added another aspect to our current ideas of professions. In trade guilds there was the idea that one learned a body of knowledge, progressing from an apprentice, through being a journeyman, to being a master. Achievement of the latter status was through the production of a masterpiece, judged by the other masters in the guild and usually representing a new or improved means of achieving something; a contribution to the guild's body of knowledge.

So why is IT, or computing, not a profession? It can be seen to have specialised field of knowledge. Most people would acknowledge that the various subjects within IT are specialised, some very much so. As time is progressing, however, there are some areas of IT that 'everyone' feels they can master; for example, building and maintaining a web site. And while few people would agree that HTML is at the core of IT, most of the uninitiated have difficulty drawing a distinction between people who can 'use computers' and those who, say, actually build computers and systems.

IT does not have formal entry requirements to practice in the discipline. In spite of the efforts of the ACS and other 'professional associations', there are few employers or specialist jobs that actually require formal qualifications in IT, or membership of a 'professional association', or a licence, or that maintain some other form of a restrictive barrier to practicing. There are some jobs that 'require' vendor certification (often called 'licences'), and most jobs will have as a selection criterion some evidence of education in the field. But, in truth, anyone can claim to be able to work in computing, and probably secure paid work doing so.

One estimate says that less than 10% of the individuals employed in the IT industry are members of a 'professional association'. Clearly, the organisations that establish themselves as the guardians of the profession are not gate-keepers to the occupation. Furthermore, although the ACS, as an example of a 'professional association', obliges their members to commit to a Code of Ethics, to this author's knowledge no one has ever been brought before a disciplinary committee for a breach of the Code, let alone been forced from membership of the ACS because of a breach. Leaving aside the merits of the Code itself, the commitment here is clearly nominal. And even if it was enforced, what penalty is applied by not having to pay subscription dues every year?

Finally, in the IT discipline, the body of knowledge certainly continues to expand; however, there is a commonly accepted divergence between those that are pushing back the boundaries of what we know in IT (primarily academics in universities or research organisations) and those that are applying the knowledge in the workplace. And there is no specific guardian of that knowledge, although the international 'academy of scholars' may disagree. Consequently, the pace of such knowledge advancement is irregular and, more importantly, not available to all 'professionals.'

A further important distinction between the IT 'profession' and other classical professions is the status and role of the peak association(s) for the profession. Classical professions such as medicine, law, theology, engineering, and more modern professions such as accountancy and nursing, must be members of a professional association to practice in the discipline. Furthermore, those organisations are customarily provided the authority through the law to enforce the industrial monopoly of that profession through registration or some other licensing arrangement and the ability to discipline those who contravene the practices or ethics of the profession, including de-registration. There are no such privileges afforded the IT profession or its representative bodies.

One argument about why IT is not a profession is that it is a (relatively) young field. Few people would trace the IT discipline back much past the Second World War. (Yes, Babbage created the Differential Engine in the 19th Century and Ada Lovelace wrote programs for it, but it was hardly an

occupation!) This argument is certainly powerful; however, there is a crucial element of that argument that calls for IT to have been made a profession before now. Few disciplines have the reach and scope that IT demonstrates today. Few technologies are applied at such a fundamental level in virtually all other disciplines as IT. And that reach and scope is expanding at a huge and increasing rate. A modern field like accounting became a profession so that modern financial reporting could be relied upon when stock exchanges and other public trading became popular. Surely, now is already the time for IT to be a profession to reinforce in everyone's mind that it is being developed, implemented and managed in a professional manner.

The most difficult argument is, however, where does one draw the line about what is IT and what is not? What requires the involvement of a professional, and what does not? Few people would suggest that the development of a website required a professional. Similarly, most people would agree that a professional standard was critical for, say, embedded software in a medical instrument. But if those two examples are opposite extremes (and that presupposes that IT can be described on a simple two-dimensional continuum), where does one draw the lines for where skilled practice ends and professionalism starts? And even if one could do that with general agreement, how does the profession attain the necessary legal and moral rights to manage the industrial monopoly so described? The ACS is to be applauded for the work it is supporting towards answering these questions (e.g. re-vamping the description of the IT body of knowledge, the National Statement to the Governments of Australia). It is time more IT 'professionals' joined the discussion.

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