

HRPA Series on Professionalization, Professionalism, and Ethics
for Human Resources Professionals

What does it mean to be a professional?

It is interesting how words can acquire over time a meaning that is opposite to their original meaning, it is even more interesting when the original meaning of a word and its acquired opposite coexist at the same time. This is the situation for the word *professional*. Indeed, one can see the two meanings in the Wikipedia definition for *professional*—“*a professional is a member of a profession or any person who earns their living from a specified activity.*” Now at first glance these two meanings may not appear to be opposites in that members of a profession usually earn their living from the practice of their profession, but if we look beneath the surface we can see how the two meanings of the word *professional* are indeed opposites of each other.

The original meaning of *professional* derived from the Middle English *profes*, an adjective meaning having professed one's vows, which itself derived from Late Latin *professus*, past participle of *profitēri* which meant to profess, confess. The idea was that professionals were those who 'professed' their skill to others, and 'vowed' to perform their profession to the highest standard.

In its original meaning, the essence of being a professional was to have made a public commitment to a high standard of performance, to integrity, and to public service. Although not always stated explicitly, there is an implied contrast between 'high standard of performance' and financial gain. Indeed, Friedson (2001)—a life-long scholar of the profession—included the following as one of his five characteristics which were characteristic of professions—“*an ideology that asserts greater commitment to doing good work than to economic gain and to the quality rather than the economic efficiency of work.*”¹

In its original meaning, being a professional meant putting “doing good work” and the “quality” of the work ahead of economic gain and the economic efficiency of work—it was not about the money, it was

¹ Friedson's (2001) other four criteria of professionalism were (1) specialized work in the officially recognized economy that is believed to be grounded in a body of theoretically based, discretionary knowledge and skill and that is accordingly given special status in the labor force; (2) exclusive jurisdiction in a particular division of labor created and controlled by occupational negotiation; (3) a sheltered position in both external and internal labour markets that is based on qualifying credentials created by the occupation; and (4) a formal training program lying outside the labor market that produces the qualifying credentials, which is controlled by the occupation and associated with higher education.

about the quality and integrity of work. This doesn't mean that professionals can't be paid for the work they do, it is just that being paid for doing this work is not a defining characteristic of being a professional. For greater clarity, let's call members of recognized professions *professionals*¹.

Somehow, a second meaning of professional appeared which ironically turned things around and put economic gain first as the defining characteristic of professionalism.

There is more to the second meaning of *professional* than just earning a living from a specified activity—If this were the case, any individual gainfully employed could claim to be a professional, and this is clearly not the case. In this second meaning, the word *professional* is used in the context where many carry out the same activity without being paid for doing so. For example, we refer to professional musicians, professional athletes, professional poker players, and so on. Because most individuals carry out these activities without being paid to do so, those individuals who are paid to carry out these activities stand out because they are the exception and not the rule. Of all those who play guitar, few make their living at it, of all those who play golf, few make their living at it, and of all those who play poker, few make their living at it.

Most individuals who are paid to do something that most do as a hobby are good at what they do—who would pay to see a professional musician, a professional athlete, or a professional poker player unless they were good at it?—who would pay to see someone who is no better than the average duffer? Although there may be amateurs who perform better than some professionals, on the whole the professionals will have an advantage because they can devote all their efforts to the activity. Let's call individuals who earn a living doing something that is usually done by individuals who are not paid to do so *professionals*².

*Professionals*¹ and *professionals*² are very different. Members of professions are expected to exhibit high levels of integrity and trustworthiness, whereas many who earn their living doing something that is usually a hobby for others do not always exhibit high levels of integrity and trustworthiness. For example, many professional musicians and professional athletes are known for behaviour that would not be tolerated of physicians, dentists, and lawyers (which is not to say that some physicians, dentists, and lawyers do not misbehave at times). In fact, in terms of attracting an audience, notoriety from bad behaviour is not always a bad thing.

It is also worth noting that *professionals*² are paid for their entertainment value, be they musicians, athletes, or poker players. By way of contrast, *professionals*¹ are not paid for their entertainment value.

So we have two meanings of what it means to be a professional: the original meaning which focuses on integrity, trustworthiness, and putting doing good work above monetary gain, and the acquired meaning which focuses on making money for doing what one does—both focus on opposing aspects but both coexist as is demonstrated in the Wikipedia definition. Although the two definitions appear to be distinct enough to avoid confusion, there may be situations where it is important to restate which definition applies.

For instance, when we say that an individual is an ‘HR professional,’ do we mean that (1) this individual belongs to a profession, or (2) this individual earns his or her livelihood practicing Human Resources management? It is very important for Human Resources professionals to be clear about which of the two meanings apply.

A complicating factor is that *Human Resources professional* is not a protected title—anyone can call himself or herself a *Human Resources professional* (but then again anyone can call themselves an *engineer* or an *accountant*). This means that some individuals who call themselves Human Resources professionals are members of a profession and some are not, although likely both are paid to do what they do. The public may not always be clear about the difference between the two.

As with these other professions such as engineering or an accountancy, the key may well be to create a differentiation in the mind of the public between those who call themselves Human Resources professionals and those who are members of the Human Resources profession. Unfortunately, it is a distinction that may take some time to crystalize in the mind of the public, but that does not mean that this is not an important difference to make.

Being a [real] Human Resources professional does not mean earning a living doing Human Resources; being a [real] Human Resources professional means being a member of the Human Resources profession—with all the obligations this entails.

One important difference between ‘real’ professionals and those who simply claim to be professionals is membership in a professional regulatory body. The reason is that membership in a professional regulatory body means that the professional has accepted to be held accountable for their behaviour, something that is not the case for non-professionals (using the original definition of what it means to be a professional). Registered HR professionals are not like Keith Richards, Tiger Woods, or Jason Mercier, they are accountable to a professional regulatory body for their behaviour.

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August 2015