The November/December 2008 issue of IT Professional focused on “IT as a Profession,” with the guest editors’ introduction considering several of its potentially distinguishing characteristics. In particular, the guest editors pointed to James Steib’s comment that “professionalism is competent creation.” They viewed this as not broad enough to cover the work done in such professional activities as acquiring and operating computing services and went on to consider the role of a body of knowledge. The editors recognized this as important, but “a true professional must always consider the public good.”

These are good and valuable insights into a profession and into professionalism, but I have a somewhat different view. In my opinion, a professional must demonstrate his or her trustworthiness. (I view “trust” and “trustworthy” as closely related. Bob is trustworthy if Alice is prepared to trust Bob. Actually, Bob will only be trustworthy for a purpose and in a context if Alice is prepared to trust Bob for that purpose and in that context. Bob demonstrates his trustworthiness by a commitment to being trustworthy and by a history of trustworthy actions. And, perhaps, by membership in a professional organization that holds him to a standard of trustworthiness.) Beyond that, to distinguish an IT professional from someone else who performs other computer-related work, the IT professional must provide services based on an IT professional body of practice. This IT body of practice must require a considerable period of study and significant working experience in order to master.

It’s in the nature of the services that we provide as professionals that the public finds it difficult or impossible to evaluate those services. In economic (and marketing) terms, we provide a credence service, which means a measure of belief is required. Economists initially introduced a distinction between search and experience goods (and services): consumers would know when they found a search good (or service), but they would need to actually experience it to determine if an experience good (or service) meets their needs.

Experiencing a restaurant meal should be sufficient to determine if it meets your needs, but something more is required to determine if a medical treatment meets your needs. Even after obtaining such a treatment, you might not be able to determine if you received no more and no less than you needed—satisfaction with the service will depend on the treatment provider’s credence. Much of the work done by IT professionals falls into this credence category.

But why focus on trust and trustworthiness? I contend it’s what the public expects of professionals—our services must be trustworthy. We offer credence services, so the public isn’t in a position to properly evaluate them, even after experiencing them. Indeed, a public-restricted right to practice—a license requirement—can be viewed as a quid pro quo for an assurance that the profession will stand behind the trustworthiness of the services its members provide.

Although licensing isn’t in place for most of the services that IT professionals provide, the social need for trustworthy IT professional services is no less than
In a world without licenses, IT professionals ultimately benefit when they’re seen as offering trustworthy services.

What of all the other clauses typically found in codes of ethics, such as http://ethics.iit.edu/codes/coe.html? We should view many of them as ethical aspirations rather than ethical obligations. But even among the ethical obligations, some are really obligations to the profession and not to clients or employers. One ethical obligation stands out as requiring special consideration—namely, the obligation to put public interest before that of clients, employers, colleagues, or self.

There are two possible responses to the ethical obligation to put the public interest first. One is to so circumscribe “the public” so that this really becomes an obligation to protect the health, safety, and well being of those whom we can reasonably expect to be affected by the professional’s work. This seems to be nearly equivalent to the duty of care that some common law courts have imposed on professionals. Another approach is to open it up to consider all of those whose interests might be
affected, however indirectly, by the professional’s actions. This would have the practical effect of turning the public interest into an ethical aspiration—desirable, but not an essential professional characteristic.

The profession might need to commit itself to protecting the public interest, and members of the profession might need to accept this ethical obligation as a requirement of belonging to the profession. But the key to being accepted as a professional by the public is to consistently demonstrate your trustworthy nature, and that requires a commitment to acting with trustworthy intentions and working with trustworthy competence.

References

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