Professionalism in data processing management

by DELBERT W. ATWOOD, JR.
Utah State Board of Education
Salt Lake City, Utah

INTRODUCTION

Where do you stand as a member of the information processing community when the discussion turns to defining data processing as a "profession?" (Webster says, "One that engages in a pursuit or activity professionally." Webster also says, "Characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession.") Professionalism is, "The conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person." Black's Law Dictionary defines profession as:

A vocation, calling, occupation or employment involving labor, skill, education, special knowledge and compensation or profit, but the labor and skill involved is predominantly mental or intellectual, rather than physical or manual. The method or means pursued by persons of technical or scientific training.

Black includes the following clarifying paragraph for the definition of a profession.

The term originally contemplated only theology, law and medicine, but as application of science and learning are extended to other departments of affairs, other vocations also receive the name, which implies professed attainments in a special knowledge as distinguished from mere skill.

Occupational sociology literature suggests that modern technologically oriented societies indicate that the distinction once made between "Professional" and "Non-Professional" is blurred or vague.

ATTRIBUTES OF A PROFESSIONAL

In my opinion, the attributes of a professional are many. The qualities exhibited by a data processing professional place him/her above the "run of the mill" person. The professional:

• is knowledgeable, yet not overbearing
• listens, but does not always comment
• offers advice, but does not dictate
• works with people
• constantly strives to maintain technical competency
• is respected by his/her actions
• has extensive training in a specialized discipline supported by a body or research and theory
• supports a "code of ethics" developed by an association of colleagues
• performs a unique and essential service recognized by the community
• exhibits strong personal responsibility for his/her judgments and actions.

Individuals who score high on a professionalism measure exhibit a strong desire for implementing professional values among their peers.

One of the largest obstacles of any attempt in defining professionalism in data processing management is the lack of definite criteria as to what makes up a "professional" computer person. Some of these criteria might be:

• Education
• Knowledge
• Ethics
• Communication Abilities
• Public Relations Abilities

As we look back on Webster's definitions and characterize them as to our own particular situation, can we say that we are truly a professional, or merely standing on the outside looking in. Do we belong just for the sake of belonging, or do we belong so that we can be recognized as an individual who is knowledgeable about the profession and can be helpful to our management and companies as a result.

Leonard I. Krauss, in his book, Administering and Controlling the Company Data Processing Function, has a section on professionalism in the field. He states, "There are a number of factors which are characteristic of a profession. Rather than undertake a debate on whether data processing is a profession, the time could be better spent by discussing professionalism as it pertains to data processing. The aims and standards of data processing have been the concern of several data processing organizations, and also the USA Standards Institute."
HOW TO ACHIEVE PROFESSIONALISM

A manager achieves a professional status from the actions of his peers and those who work for him. He is respected for his decisions. He is highly regarded by those who work for him and also those for whom he works. When a man is looked to for advice and counsel, and has gained the respect of others regarding the many aspects of the business he is engaged in, he is on the way to achieving the professional qualities described above. An individual can enhance his professional appearance through his training, education, association with others, his actions on the job as well as his personal life, and the activities to help others.

We, as managers of the information services areas of our companies or shops, have an obligation to our company, our management, our fellow employees, our staff, and also to ourselves to help make people understand our methods and procedures of operation, to advise our management so that sound, honest decisions can be made regarding our realm of responsibility. We must educate ourselves to be knowledgeable in the area of our pursuit or activity. We must work together to disseminate our knowledge to fellow workers and management, to realize the maximum benefit from our education. We must be loyal to our companies or firms, respecting the trust vested in us by them. We must conduct ourselves in an ethical manner at all times regarding the information processing profession and to any professional organization to which we belong. Your attitudes and actions mold for you the things that you are and the way other people see you.1

Are you a professional? Do you belong to a professional organization? George R. Terry, in his book Principles of Management, states “Active membership in a truly professional group can assist management development through attendance at meetings, informal discussions with other members, and the reading of the association’s journal or official publication. Some associations stress individual self-development; others promote workshops, seminars and study groups. These experiences help to promote the important “develop yourself philosophy.” Generally, most companies or employers wish to have their employees the most knowledgeable individuals in regard to their expertise. In order to accomplish this, they send them to schools and allow them to belong to groups that enable them to meet, share ideas, experiences and needs. They, in most cases, pay for the memberships and expenses. Companies and employers provide these additional fringe benefits to encourage professional development. This professional development should enable them to do a job better, quicker, and generally at a lesser cost. When you are knowledgeable about a subject, your specialty, and you discuss and share this knowledge with your management, your peers and others, you become a professional. This recognition comes from others and can be helped by your membership in a professional group and your participation in all of the activities the professional group can provide.

Professionalism is sometimes associated with an honor society, or a certification of one type or another. This could also be in the form of an examination to license, to allow the individual to practice their specialty. This is characterized by the state boards to allow an M.D. to practice; the Bar to allow an attorney to hang out his shingle; the C.P.A. examination to permit the accountant who passes it to certify that his examination of a set of books is appropriate according to standards and acceptable.

Data processing, through DPMA, has constructed the certificate in Data Processing (CDP) as a test of knowledge in management, systems quantitative and qualitative analysis, programming, and other areas. Many professional groups joined together to form the Institute for Certification of Computer Professionals (ICCP). These groups recognized the need for a professional certificate to assist the individual in his personal development, recognition by his peers, his company or employer, and his development as a professional.

Many of the organizations have by-laws, codes of ethics, guidelines for professional conduct in information processing, and other written vehicles for the individual to follow to assist him in becoming a professional. Adherence to these precepts certainly would help us to be recognized as following a professional path.

Where do you stand in your own professional development and standing in your company, and within the organization to which you belong?

Are you going to classes to get your degree? Are you getting an advanced degree? Are you attending seminars to further your knowledge in your specialty subject matter? In our ever expanding field where specialized knowledge is mandatory, those individuals who demonstrate superior competence in the application of that specialized knowledge reap the rewards of progression.

The individuals who are looking for management recognition and who are looking for a greater professional posture in their work, may be selfishly motivated, but in the long run, they are on the road to becoming a professional. The knowledge and association developed in the process generally stimulates the individual to be more reflective about his work, and approach problems with a greater understanding and to bring to bear the new techniques and concepts learned to satisfy those problems.

Do you do your part? Are you becoming the professional your management would like you to become? Do you belong to a professional group, but never go to the meetings? You read they have excellent seminars and workshops, but when was the last time you attended one of them? Do you get a publication from the association? When was the last time you read it from cover to cover, or even selected articles? Can you quote from any of the articles about a particular subject matter that is coming up in a management committee meeting tomorrow? Can you refer to other publications, books, seminars, workshops, etc. to assist in helping to make management decisions?

Professionalism in data processing is beginning to emerge. It still may take a while to accomplish, but the tools are there, and if the right person or persons come along to guide the tools, the guidelines, ethics standards, methods of control and other details will be pulled together and be recog-
nized by all information processing personnel and organi­
zations, and will be thus enforced by them or their peers
who make up the organizations. The profession is growing
by leaps and bounds, and some restraint or control is needed
before it gets out of hand.

CONCLUSION

I believe that professionalism makes a difference, because
an individual who is looked up to, respected by his associ­
ates and others, who exhibits the traits that place him a bit
above, has a better chance for success and overall happiness
in his life. A doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer work very
hard to become educated and licensed to practice their spe­
cialty; likewise, data processing managers work very hard
to become educated and knowledgeable in their specialty.
Licensing is a way off, but maybe it will become a necessity
before professionalism is a reality, certification is here now
and is a step toward achieving the recognition and respect
of our employers, our employees, and our peers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2. Black, Henry Campbell, Black's Law Dictionary, St. Paul: West Publish­
ing, 1951.
3. Krauss, Leonard 1., Administrating and Controlling the Company Data
5. Weinthal, Donald S. and Garrett J. O'Keefe, Jr., Professional Orientation