So you think you are a professional?

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INTRODUCTION

The human ego provides continuous opportunities to explore the richness and variety of human perception. It is capable of excruciating truth and insight as well as delusions of grandeur that obscure truth and reality. The maturity of an individual can be defined in relation to his ability to differentiate between these extremes.

The computing practitioner, being human, is no exception. His existence in a rampant technology substantially lacking established codes of standards, conduct, and practice accentuates his capability to delude himself and makes more difficult a clear understanding of the reality of his experience in a complex environment. He can to a large degree establish his own criteria of accomplishment, yet must feel some concern of exposure as he realizes the effects of the rapid change forced upon him by his technology.

This paper postulates two resulting classes of behavior observed in the industry, one which could provide considerable benefit to the individual in coping with his anxieties while the other appears to be counter productive.

The first category can be described as behavior reflecting a desire to be identified as a "professional" and as such be associated with practitioners characterized as possessing competence, integrity, contribution, and esteem.

The second category represents a potpourri of behaviors generally designed to avoid exposure of the anxieties experienced from the self-doubt engendered among those responsible for the implementation and control of rampant technological change.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the current level of maturity in the industry which has been defined as differentiating between reality and protective delusions, and to make recommendations upon the conclusions drawn.

One cannot but be impressed with the frequent and pervasive use of the objective "professional" in reference to the many authors and speakers represented in the trade press and at various computing conferences. It appears that the proverbial "Everyman" considers himself a professional although considerable debate exists as to exactly what is the meaning of the term. In fact, one might express curiosity at the apparent egotism evidenced in the employment of the term. While clearly proposing their own professional status,
great project of creating the world from chaos. To this the politician inquired, "And who do you think created the chaos in the first place?"

While data processors may not have a claim to old age for their profession, it might be observed that many feel we certainly have a legitimate claim for creating chaos.

Perhaps some light might be shed on this matter by looking at the definitions of a profession and a professional.

The simplest definition Webster offers is that a profession is one "following an occupation as a means of livelihood or for gain." Such a definition qualifies virtually anyone and everyone. Somehow, though, the lack of distinguishing criteria diminishes the concept and leaves it less than useful.

Hardly satisfied, definition two catches the eye. Professional is . . . "pertaining or appropriate to a profession." Further investigation reveals that a profession involves . . . "a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science." Here at least are some minimal criteria beyond merely holding a position in the industry (i.e., knowledge and learning). A professional is one "engaged in one of the learned professions," and is also one . . . "RESPECTED BY THE PROFESSION."

In this more lofty view of professionalism, one discerns other criteria pertaining to . . . "professional character, spirit, or methods," and again, the . . . "standing practice, or methods of a professional as distinguished from an amateur." 10

Clearly there is a world of difference between the perceptions of a professional conveyed by these later definitions from the extreme of mere employment.

One might conclude then that to be professional is merely a matter of definition and clearly that a definition could be devised to cover anyone desired. However, to do so seems hardly productive as it serves only to camouflage any real differences among practitioners. What is sad is that such a strategy appears to be effectively implemented in the computing industry. At best passive, yet more often active resistance to any attempt to differentiate significant variables among computer practitioners is prevalent in the industry. One must ask why?

A complete answer would have to consider many possibilities among which would be the desire to avoid exposure of the incompetent, insecure, paranoid, and even the amateur. However evident such motivations and the real need to address the problems of such people, the intent here is to investigate the competent practitioner to attempt to understand his apathy in such matters and his reluctance to identify the characteristics of his own competence. Such serious deficiencies betray an absence of maturity among such practitioners.

Maturity is a state of being; an expression of the full development of an individual's ability to differentiate reality and delusion. If one can demonstrate a serious deficiency in such development of a person or groups, then one has the basis to challenge its maturity.

This is precisely what is proposed here. Since the computing industry is seriously neglecting the critical need to differentiate professional development among its numbers in that it tolerates a simplistic blanket usage of the term professional that masks the incompetent and amateur in its midst, then in that respect it lacks maturity. It is guilty of ignoring the reality of differentiating criteria among practitioners and of deluding itself into believing no such discrimination is necessary.

Not all practitioners of the computing arts are guilty of such lack of maturity. Many have addressed the problems, have worked diligently to devise sound definitions, and have tried to accomplish the identification of professional characteristics, but unfortunately many more have chosen to negate or compromise any achievements obtained. For the most part such contributors have been ostracized for their efforts and bullied into silence by the masses whose comfortable but erroneous self-image would be shattered by a glimpse of the truth.

Frankly, there is no such thing as a data processing professional! At least, not in the sense most people in this industry seem to use the term. We have no clear example of a professional directly comparable to a doctor, lawyer, or CPA. It is suggested that the term is being misused and in reality twisted to meet the ego needs of an immature industry.

However, the potential of a profession exists and could easily be established through the efforts of significant support from practitioners. What then would be required to qualify as a profession?

Richard Canning, in the EDP Analyzer (December 1968) listed a number of criteria by which any group could judge if it would qualify as a profession. 9

1. A profession has a defined body of knowledge of high intellectual content acquired by training-in-depth.
2. A profession has defined standards of competence and certification that the professional meets those standards.
3. A profession has a code of ethical behavior.
4. A profession has at least one professional society aimed at advancing the welfare of its members.
5. A profession has responsibility to society to perform in a competent, ethical manner.
6. The members of a profession generally are not under the control of non-professional management (with regard to professional decisions).
7. The members of a profession have a loyalty to their profession which may transcend their loyalty to their employers.
8. The members of a profession may be licensed by the state to practice the profession if it affects such things as public health, public safety, property rights, or schooling of the young.
9. A profession has the right and ability to eject someone from the field for being incompetent or unethical.

Now the question is . . . Does the computer field qualify? Certainly a body of knowledge in the computer field is being defined. Academic programs, educational programs of professional societies and an increasing body of literature are continually refining our understanding of minimal knowledge requirements. However, the technological and infor-
Information explosion will require diligent attention to the maintenance of these knowledge requirements. Who is to fund and man these efforts?

We have a certification program through the Institute of Certification of Computer Professionals (ICCP) which is being seriously developed, expanded, and implemented. But still there are few if any clearly defined standards of competence, although efforts are under way to attempt their definition. Who should be responsible for such standards definition?

The ICCP has a published code of ethics as do most of the existing professional societies. However, most of these codes are “Mother and Apple Pie” documents with no enforcement capability. Who must take on the continuing and sensitive task of defining ethical behavior, and more critically, who will be responsible for the enforcement of such codes? Only ICCP has an enforcement mechanism in place but it has yet to be exercised.

Most data processors are not independent decision-makers, nor has there been much indication of a willingness to transcend their loyalty to the company and their paycheck. Furthermore, many argue that one ought not take responsibility for questioning the propriety of their management or employers. What reinforcement should and could be provided to encourage responsible professional behavior in the public interest regardless of potential company reprisal?

Notice the need for the recognition of a legitimate and perhaps necessary licensing role. In spite of such recognition by increasing numbers of responsible leaders in the industry as well as the private and public sectors of our society, an overwhelming majority of practitioners now reject the concept.

Finally, no one to my knowledge has ever been ejected nor disciplined by any society for being incompetent or unethical.

What all this means is that the computing profession, if there is one, is only an emerging profession and much needs to be done if in fact it is ever to achieve a legitimate status.

Many practitioners argue and act as though such a situation were desirable and that there is no need for concern. With many of the benefits of a profession emerging anyway, why be concerned with the legitimate recognition of the profession? Let things take a slow, natural course and all will come out in the end. In the meantime no one need be threatened and all can use the term “professional” as they please at no cost to anyone.

Here again is a manifestation of immaturity, for the satisfaction of the ego need to be regarded as a professional is accomplished through the delusion that such a choice is within the power of the computing industry alone. Ignored is the reality that the public, legislatures, the courts, employers, and other professions are expressing an entirely different point of view. While naively awaiting recognition of professional status, events are occurring that may well forever deny such status to computing personnel.

In December of 1971, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division decided that programmers were not exempt and should not be considered professionals.7 This precedent supported a January 1976 decision handed down by a U.S. District Court judge in Tennessee that again ruled programmers not exempt since they did not satisfy the provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, Section 213 which specify that “any employee employed in a bona fide executive, administrative, or professional capacity” is exempt from overtime pay.1

Seeking professional recognition, programmers have organized professional societies, sponsored professional activities, and encouraged professional development of the practitioner, but also all to no avail.

What happened? Where did they slip up? First of all, in their lack of attention to the necessary legal definitions and secondly, because of divergent motivations among their numbers.

Lacking a defined and recognized professional status sealed the fate of programmers who now face legal precedence in their struggle to achieve a profession. Are the rest of us likewise to be denied?

Close upon the heels of this bombshell has come the controversy in several states during 1976-77 concerning the tax status of computer software. The battle continues and the Data Processing Management Association (DMPA) as reflected in an August, 1977 position statement is arguing, “...whether data processors will receive equal treatment under tax laws as services by other professions.”8 This is an interesting argument considering the status of the so-called computer profession, and it certainly puts the industry on notice to its exposure unless its professional status is established.

But the question now becomes, how long will this process take? A corollary is how much time is available for completion?

The answer depends upon projections of current and future events now evident and believed to be inevitable. Among these are governmental intervention such as has occurred with legislation involving privacy and electronic funds transfer systems.

Concerns that the public interest must be protected is causing legislatures to become increasingly sensitive to the impact of computer technology. How long are they going to tolerate the technology without regulation?

If one accepts the inevitability of such regulation within limited time frames, the argument becomes compelling for accelerating formation of the profession and regulation within it. In fact, the passage of regulatory legislation could make all the prior concerns empty rhetoric.9

It is in the belief that such would happen, and especially that it would come in a relatively short time frame, that has prompted many of the need to address the controversy. However, such legislation is not without peril and inadequate preparation must be avoided if possible.

Such has been the appeal of this author in the past who has been concerned that the industry is faced with potential for the establishment of a profession, and that it would seem prudent to prepare for it.2-4 The argument has been made that certain things must be done to prepare. In particular, identification must be made of who would be a professional, what he would do that would differ from non-professionals, and how he would perform those activities.
Therefore, the real issue is the formation of a legitimate profession, regulated to protect the public interest, to insure the quality of the professional, and to provide him with the working tools with which he will perform.

If it maintains a head in the sand attitude, the industry is likely to find itself one day regulated by government established in desperation to control a technology the public perceives as much too powerful, self-serving, and threatening.

Such control may even exclude a DP profession and regulate it to the role of technicians employed by and regulated by some other profession such as accounting, or even worse, give rise to unionism. There are ample reasons to fear these eventualities.

If the computer industry is to participate in this regulation of computer related areas rather than perform as technicians under the guidance of other professions, then we must establish ourselves as acceptable professionals and in short order. Are we going to accept technician roles to other professionals? Or worse yet, unionization as technicians of the laboring class?

Let it be again perfectly clear that the use of the term professional in our industry is merely a dream or hope for the future. True, many are working for the reality but the vast majority are either apathetic or actively opposed to the concept. It is this apathy and opposition which must command our interest, for a lack of understanding of the motives of such opposition may well spell out doom to the efforts to legitimate a computing profession. What then might we do to create a legitimate professional in our society?

One formal effort to achieve such professional status is the certification movement. Here is attempted a clear and comprehensive articulation of peer evaluation and approval with attendant subscription to a continuing practice of ethical behavior. This, of course, is the realm of the Institute for Certification of Computer Professionals (ICCP). This effort is essential to the development of a professional group of people and represents the most significant industry effort to improve and regulate itself. At this level one finds most of the generally mentioned and accepted attributes of the definition of a profession.

Culminating the work of many these past years, the certification movement promises the industry its best potential of achieving a profession and the practitioner his best chance to aspire to a truly mature professional status.

Full definition and development of a computing profession under the umbrella support of most of the significant computing societies is possible through the Institute for Certification of Computer Professionals (ICCP). Charged with the task of identifying significant discriminating characteristics among practitioners and certifying against such gives rise to hope for a profession. Definition of and attention to the characteristics of such a profession in addition to programs directed toward their achievement remain the best hope of the industry. However, while these efforts are often spoken of and are of interest, such is again not the purpose of this presentation. What is critical here, is the serious lack of support for these efforts.

The trade press ranks with superficial and often foolish criticisms of the serious attempts to improve the situation of computer professionals. Rarely, however, rises a thoughtful defender to spoil such attacks.

Rarely do we call our employers attention to these credentials or encourage our colleagues to acquire them. Rarely are such credentials rewarded. Rarely do we volunteer the time or effort to assist those making the sacrifices in our behalf. How then can we truly consider ourselves mature professionals, if indeed we are professionals at all?

Finally, why do we continue to tolerate those who use the label of professionalism itself to attack any serious attempt to achieve such? These people become especially agitated by any hint of assessment, certification, licensing, or any other potential measure of their credentials, yet we tolerate their frequent attacks of those seriously attempting to establish legitimacy for that which these critics take for granted for themselves. Their arguments against an elite class of practitioners also appears weak. If being elite means being concerned, involved, improving ones knowledge and skills, and contributing to the profession, then hooray for the elites. The cry of “ego trip” is no more valid for the achiever than it is for the non-achiever. Is it not much more ego involved to attribute characteristics to oneself without the verification of peer group evaluation?

What is suggested is that the industry begin to show maturity in at least three ways: First, that all assist in obtaining credentials reflecting clear definitions of distinguishing professional characteristics. Second, participate in implementing and acquiring legitimacy for these credentials. Third, cease to tolerate the distracting and demeaning attacks upon efforts to develop and mature the profession by actively responding to those who would diminish or destroy the efforts to improve our industry and performance within it.

Surely, tradition, common sense, and responsible self-interest dictate the formation of such a recognized computing profession.

The decision rests with us in the industry. All are urged to become concerned, to get involved, and to make commitments such that many voices and talents will be engaged in finding solutions to the challenges of the future toward the profession.

In this spirit remember the visionary words of George Bernard Shaw as he wrote:

Some men see things as they are, and ask why?
I dream of things as they might be, and ask why not?

REFERENCES


