

Eight attributes that characterise professional behaviour

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Over the past year I've been involved in many discussions about 'professionalism' in the broader communications industry. It's a term that's widely used but there seem to be many interpretations of what it might mean to be an industry professional.

For some, being professional might mean dressing smartly at work, or doing a good job. For others, being professional means having advanced degrees or other certifications, framed and hung on the office wall. Professionalism encompasses all of these definitions. But, it also covers much more.

Defining professionalism

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines professionalism as *"the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person"*; and it defines a profession as *"a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation."*

These definitions imply that professionalism encompasses a number of different attributes, and, together, these attributes identify and define a professional. I've identified eight attributes that characterize professionals within our industry sector.

1. Proven knowledge

Professionals are known for their specialised knowledge. They've made a deep personal commitment to develop their skills, and, where appropriate, they have the degrees and certifications that serve as the foundation of this knowledge. In our industry there are very few professional qualifications that relate directly to our field of work. What matters, though, is that individuals should have worked in a serious, thoughtful and sustained way to master the specialised knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen field.

2. Relevant work experience

Defining yourself as an industry professional is not a characterisation that's applied overnight. The French chef, Jacques Pepin once described how "you have no choice as a professional chef: you have to repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat until it becomes part of yourself. I certainly don't cook the same way I did 40 years ago, but the technique remains. And that's what the student needs to learn: the technique." Exactly the same commitment is required in the audio-visual market. A professional needs to be able to demonstrate consistency in the way they've applied their knowledge in different environments, for different shows and for different employers. In order to apply for SACIA's CertAV Prof designation, individuals holding a relevant NQF level 6 qualification (diploma or advanced certificate) need to be able to demonstrate at least five year's work experience in the audio-visual sector, while individuals who don't hold a diploma or advanced certificate can earn the designation by demonstrating at least 10 year's work experience.



3. Commitment to a code of conduct

Professionals get the job done. They're reliable, and they keep their promises. If circumstances arise that prevent them from delivering on their promises, they manage expectations up front, and they do their best to make the situation right. All SACIA members are required to sign a Code of Professional Conduct that is underpinned by a number of values: honour, integrity, reliability, honesty and accuracy. Adherence to these values ensures they can be trusted to get the job done. Professionals do the right thing, even when it means taking a harder road.

4. Willingness to be held accountable

SACIA members are held to a higher standard of conduct and professional ethics. Our Code of Professional Conduct is not a coat of convenience that can be removed when it becomes uncomfortable. It's a binding commitment that each individual makes to his colleagues, and in instances where an individual fails to honour their commitment to these values, a charge of professional misconduct can be levelled against them. A disciplinary committee made up of industry peers will consider any allegations of misconduct and individuals found to have transgressed the Code can be expelled from the Association and have their professional designation withdrawn. The consequences of this expulsion can be severe. For example, many venues only provide access to technical crew who maintain membership of a relevant professional body. Any AV technician expelled from their Association for professional misconduct is then barred from working in that venue.

Professionals hold themselves accountable for their thoughts, words, and actions, especially when they've made a mistake. This personal accountability is closely tied to honesty and integrity, and it's a vital element in professionalism. They also stay professional under pressure. For instance, imagine a customer service employee who's faced with an irate customer. Instead of getting upset or angry in return, the employee exhibits true professionalism by maintaining a calm, business-like demeanour, and by doing everything that she can to make the situation right.

Genuine professionals show respect for the people around them, no matter what their role or situation. They consider the needs of others, and they don't let a bad day impact how they interact with colleagues or clients.

5. Industry recognition

Industry professionals are recognised by their peers and colleagues for their competence and skillset but true professionals are also recognised by government and regulatory bodies through their membership of a professional body. In South Africa, professional bodies are registered with the SA Qualification

Authority (SAQA) and professional designations are listed on the National Qualifications Framework. Every individual awarded a professional designation is listed on the National Learner's Records Database.

Recently, a number of government tenders have specified that anyone wanting to tender for the provision of audio-visual technology or services to government or state-owned enterprises should be able to prove their membership of SACIA. They've also specified that staff working on the project should hold a SAQA-recognised professional designation related to the activity undertaken.

6. Continuing professional development

Continuing professional development (CPD) is the means by which people maintain their knowledge and skills related to their professional lives. CPD obligations are common to most professions, and individuals holding the any of the SACIA designations for theatre, live-event and audio-visual technology are required to participate in 70 hours of CPD activity over a three year period.

These hours could represent formal learning but individuals are also awarded CPD credit for participating in industry workshops and seminars, attending conferences, and mentoring colleagues who are working toward the award of a professional designation. In an industry that sees new technologies emerging almost daily, CPD recognises that in order for any individual to remain relevant they need to participate in a programme of lifelong learning – keeping themselves up to date with the techniques and technologies that are shaping our future.

7. Professionals look the part

There's a dress code for professionals that's not based on wearing a suit and tie. It's about dressing appropriately for the situation. Professionals don't show up to work sloppily dressed, with unkempt hair. Appropriate dress, along with basic etiquette, is one of the most common associations made to professionalism. We form first impressions and overall judgments about people by the way they present themselves so if we want to be taken seriously, we need to take ourselves seriously and look the part.

8. Principle of etiquette

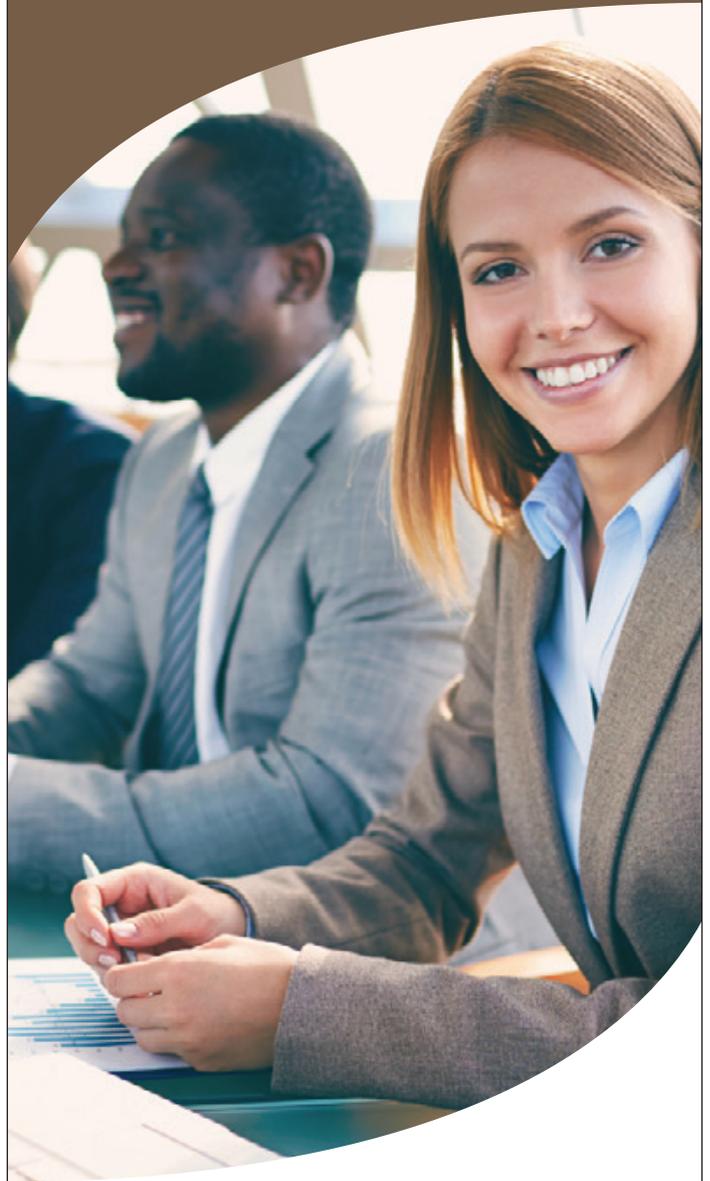
In addition to the prior attributes that characterize professional behaviour there's a strong correlation between the traits that embody professionalism and the principles of etiquette: consideration, respect and honesty.

Writing in the Boston Post on 17 August 2014, Peter Post described how "a professional person is able to look at a situation objectively, recognize what is going on, and understand how it affects everybody involved. It means being aware of the bigger picture." He goes on to describe how professional people show respect toward those with whom they interact. "They think about the impact of their actions on others. Perhaps most important, they act in ways that not only deal with the situation at hand but also positively affect the other people involved. The professional person is truthful. Deception, even a white lie, is not part of his or her make-up. A core trait of the professional person is that he or she exhibits sincerity in their interactions."

When you look at these eight attributes that characterize professional behaviour it's obvious that there's no 'one size fits all' depiction that we can cut and paste into our industry sector. Despite this, it's important to strive toward the embodiment of these attributes. Let's take ourselves and our industry seriously as we work together in a common commitment to professional standards and ethical business practices. 📍

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