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Professional Essence

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Consultant

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.[1] In particular, the guest editors pointed to James Steib's comment that "professionalism is competent creation."[2] 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."[1]

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.[3] 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

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it is in many other professional fields. In a world without licenses, IT professionals ultimately benefit when they're seen as offering trustworthy services. It has been my consistent experience as a consultant that trust is a critical element in all successful consulting engagements; its absence is almost guaranteed to doom an engagement.

This requisite trust between client and IT professional requires two key ingredients: the client must trust both the professional's intentions and competence. (Trust is also important in the relationship between employer and IT professional, but the employee's standing as a professional won't be as important in providing a basis for that trust. The employer will generally have additional information on which to base it.) Trusting an intention fundamentally comes down to a question of whether the client believes the IT professional is prepared to put the client's interests before his or her own. Too often, consultants look to their own short-term self-interest before they look to the client's interests.

Such behavior can lead to engagements that extend beyond the point at which the client receives any positive benefit. It can work in the consultant's short-term interest, at least the first time the consultant recommends such a step, but the ultimate effect is for clients to have a sharply reduced sense of trust in the consultant and his or her recommendations. It's critically important for IT professionals to commit to putting the interests of clients (and employers) above their own or their colleagues'. This commitment, in my mind, is the bedrock of a meaningful code of professional ethics.

That covers trustworthy intentions for the purposes of this discussion. (A fully nuanced presentation would also consider what is required for the professional to understand what is in the client's best interest. It's not just the professional deciding what's in the client's best interest, but understanding what the client would judge to be in his or her best interest.) The next critical element is providing trustworthy competence. Under common law, all professionals have a *duty of care*: a professional "must possess the skills that an ordinary prudent [professional] would have and must exercise the degree of care than an ordinarily prudent [professional] would exercise."[4] Accountants, for example, have generally accepted accounting principles to assess professional work. IT professionals, however, must fall back on an IT body of practices.

The IT body of practices might be only a small subset of an overall computing body of knowledge.[5] Too often, a computing body of knowledge is really a curriculum for some version of a computing degree, with little or no attention paid to established professional practices. The theory is adequately covered, but professional practices receive short shrift. The problem is that established professional practices are key to demonstrating trustworthy competence. The professional who carefully considers established professional practices will have demonstrated a duty of care that takes him or her some distance toward demonstrating trustworthy competence. (Let me illustrate with the *CIPS Risk Management Practice Guideline* [www.cips.ca/riskmanagement]. In my lay view, its existence means that CIPS IT professionals could be judged to have a duty of care to consider risk management in all of their professional assignments. There's no guarantee that all possible eventualities will be adequately considered, but the right questions will have been asked, which is a critical part of demonstrating trustworthy competence.)

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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.[6] 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.[7] 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.

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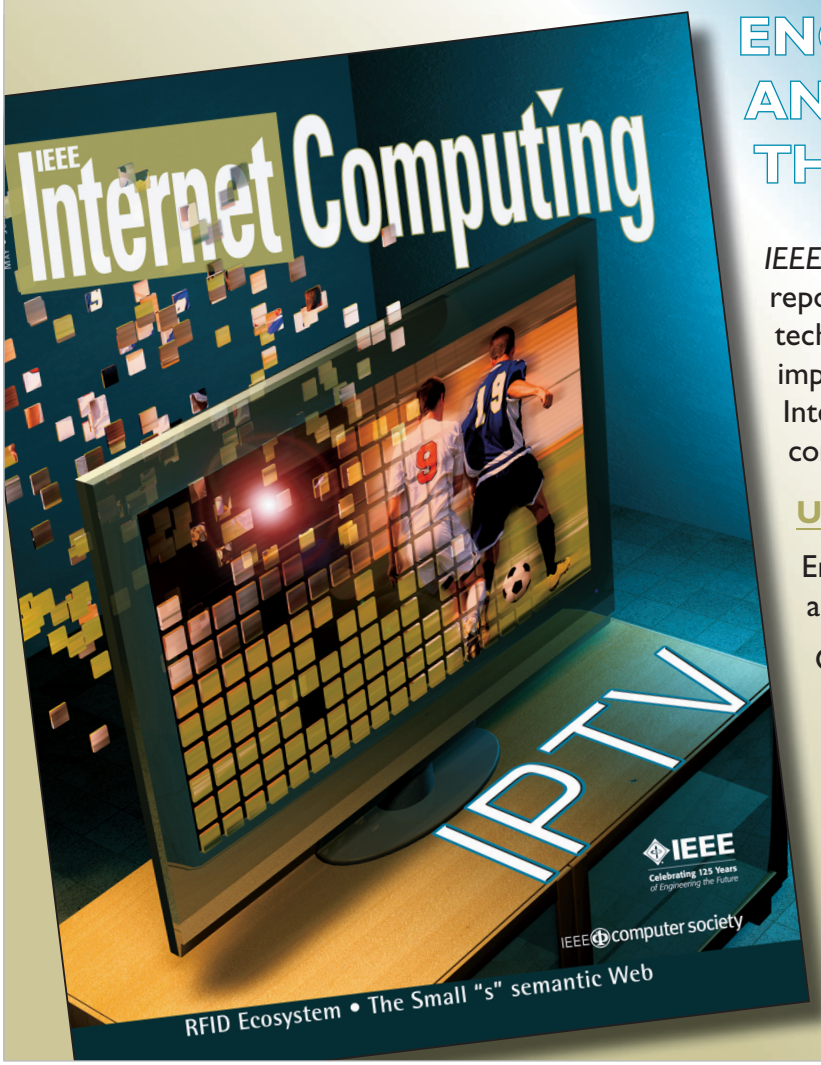

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