

Research Brief

From Practice to Profession First Findings from a Study on the Nature and Process of Professionalization

The ASAE Foundation study *Practice to Profession: Current Status, Perceptions, and Future Pathways* examines the identity of professions and how they evolve. Taking into account traditional methods of defining a profession, and recognizing the limitations of such set parameters, this research delves into the concept of how an occupation evolves into a profession—and what it takes for both members of the profession and external influences to recognize a practice as a profession.

Associations, as representative bodies for occupational fields and networks, have no small role in this evolution. Many of the qualities that distinguish a profession are the responsibilities of associations, including the creation of codes of ethics, credentialing of qualified individuals, and advocacy on behalf of the industry.

Researchers from the Professional Services Research and Innovation Hub of the University of Leeds and the Centre for Professions Work and Organization at the University of Newcastle will complete the study in partnership with the ASAE Foundation. Specifically, they are looking at how particular fields have evolved into professions and the roles the government, society, and members of the public play in the path to professionalism. The path to professionalism is recognized as a continuum,

which opens a line of inquiry that will give a broad and fulsome view of the current and future nature of professionalism.

The first phase of research looked at definitions of a profession, both historically and currently, and examined the current body of work on the evolution to professional status that various occupations have undertaken. The investigation was framed by five questions:

1. What are the common requirements of a profession?
2. What are the responsibilities of professions?
3. What is required to evolve, grow and maintain continuous designation as a profession?
4. How is professional status recognized by society?
5. How are gaps between minimum requirements and full-fledged certifications bridged?

The researchers found that associations are at the heart of how professions are established and perceived. The concept of a profession is fluid, with a variety of indicators contributing to a perception of a field as a profession, including affiliation with an association. Many of the responsibilities of professions are managed through an association for that profession. Indeed, a number of the hallmarks of a profession are functions typically provided or maintained by associations. The findings are discussed in more detail below.

What are the common requirements of a profession?

Pinpointing exactly what constitutes a profession can be a bit of moving target. Establishing an identity as a profession includes both internal and external recognition. To achieve a position of perceived value to individuals and an industry or

trade as a whole, professions have to first understand themselves as a collective entity with common goals and standards, and then acquire and maintain status as trusted practitioners to policy makers and the public.

The idea of what a profession is has transformed over time. Historically, the archetypes for professions were areas such as medicine and the law, fields typically pursued by men of wealth. Requiring specialized and advanced academic study, these professions held a societal image of high status and trust. In the 20th century, the concept of professionalism evolved to encompass growing fields that relied on more complex technologies and specialized knowledge. Now the idea of professionalism has expanded further still, to the point where establishing a simple and specific mode of separating professionals from other occupational categories is more challenging.

According to 2008 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics findings, professional and related occupations comprise 20.8 percent of the job market—the largest percentage of any field. Professional jobs are expected to grow at a rate of 16.8 percent, which is 5.7 percent higher than the overall job growth rate predicted, creating approximately 5 million new jobs this decade. Professional occupations in this context include jobs requiring technical acumen, such as engineers, a multitude of roles in the health care field, educators, managerial jobs, social service, the law, and others.

What exactly defines a profession? A tie to a particular association or other collective entity is a marker of professionalism, though some professions have less formal alliances. Standards of entry and specialized knowledge are also used to deem an area a professional one. This study proposes defining a profession as a moving process that passes through various stages rather than a

static collection of traits. However, it is still useful to outline the elements that have been commonly used to define professions as a baseline for discussion:

- **Professions provide a service.** As in the example of health care or accounting, professionals offer a service to clients based on specialized knowledge.
- **Professionals draw from an academic, often theoretical, body of knowledge.** Professional jobs are often defined as requiring a specific level of academic training (though other forms of training are acknowledged). Practitioners of professions can be defined as those who take theoretical, academic knowledge, and apply it to real-world issues. The engineering profession is a good example of this.
- **Professions have an advocacy group.** Professionals are usually represented by a group that advocates for them at a national level for a favorable regulatory environment, work conditions, and public image.
- **Professions have a code of ethics.** Professions can be defined as a group that abides by a specific ethical code. The Hippocratic Oath of physicians is among the most widely known of these codes. Ethics are a cornerstone of the concept that professions serve the public interest.
- **Professions self-regulate.** Through establishing certification processes and controlling means of entry, professions are able to establish a standard of performance for their practitioners.

These concepts for discerning what is and is not a profession continue to be relevant and can be used in the exploration of not only what defines a profession, but how it comes to be.

What are the responsibilities of

professions?

The responsibilities of a profession are embedded in how their representative bodies operate, so it bears discussing the different types of professional associations and how they influence their members. Professional associations at the most basic conceptual level are entities that aim to gather and represent members who have a collective identity based around their work. Types of associations and the focus of their activities vary. Overall, associations fall into four categories:

- **Prestige associations** seek to attract members based on public distinction or reputation. They can range from an exclusive club to a networking or referral group with an open invitation policy.
- **Study associations** are focused on advancing a body of knowledge in a particular field. The members of a study association are typically research and academically oriented. They may serve to advance their field through their discoveries, or add legitimacy through impartial research.
- **Occupational associations** represent a particular field in areas such as public policy advocacy and employment terms and conditions. Occupational associations overlap with trade unions in some of their missions.
- **Qualifying associations** are arguably the most advanced of the different forms, having greater scope and responsibility, and frequently offering a larger associational structure. They have a focus on education, training, and qualification. By establishing this type of oversight, qualifying associations take on the role of “production of producers,” a pivotal way a profession gains credibility and influence. The degree of regulatory autonomy that a professional body exercises has significant bearing in its standing with the relevant state authorities and its perception in the public arena.

Professional associations can have both primary, or more inward-looking, functions and secondary, or external, functions. Primary functions work on establishing and growing a membership base. They provide avenues for knowledge exchange as well as qualifying and certification, and promote the ethics of the profession.

Secondary functions include elevating the profile of the profession's status in the public eye (particularly important when an association has a regulatory role), raising the status of a profession, and safeguarding the interests of both the public and the profession. Secondary functions can also include member services, supporting networking opportunities, and raising the standards of membership by controlling entry to the profession.

Professions have responsibilities to both their members and the public, and the degree to which a professional association prioritizes these various elements of mission will be different depending on how established the profession is, what type of function its members serve, and what the public profile is to them.

What is required to evolve, grow, and maintain continuous designation as a profession?

Looking at the designation of a profession as an evolutionary process requires an examination not just of what makes a profession, but also what it takes to maintain that designation through keeping up with the shifting needs of members, the priorities of the population served, and changes to economic, social, and regulatory climate.

Understanding **professional closure** is an important element of knowing how professions evolve. The concept of closure in a professional context goes

back to the idea of controlling the production of those acting as producers. An established profession can regulate entry by establishing academic and certification requirements. The public and political view of professional closure can vacillate—sometimes it will be seen as a necessary and beneficial stewardship, other times unfairly exclusionary and restrictive. The degree of professional closure in a particular field varies from little or no regulation to highly sanctioned (by federal, state, and/or professional bodies).

A key element in the evolution of a profession is professional strategy: how a profession grows and advocates for its membership; interaction with other actors that influence its field; and the wider context of societal trends.

Professional strategies vary by profession, but center around building and representing membership. A certification process, whether voluntary or compulsory, can elevate the image of a profession by providing a level of exclusivity and legitimacy. Certifications range from the rigorously regimented realm of medicine or law to the minimal internal regulation that exists for business analysts. Most professions newer to the arena will follow a professional strategy of inclusion, where they try to bring in as many new members as possible. Once they have reached a level of maturity, the process generally evolves to one that is more restrictive, cultivating the prestige that accompanies selectivity.

Another element that professions use to define themselves is their **interaction with other actors**, such as higher education, users, and the state. Higher education contributes to professional identity by establishing a knowledge base and playing a role in the process of qualifying and socializing future professionals. Interaction with users is also an influencer. The nature of interactions with users will vary, but the experience of consumers creates a

perception of the product or service the profession provides, and those that deliver it. The state has wide-ranging impact in the pathway to professionalism, especially as issues such as anti-trust, monopolies, and regulatory approval are subject to cyclical change depending on the political climate. An ideal position for professions is to have the trust of the state to self-regulate, as well as its protection from competition. Other professions, competitive or not, can be additional actors as well.

In a **wider context**, professions are influenced by society at large. Political and socio-economic trends influence how and to what extent professions evolve, as does the involvement of government officials and other influential stakeholders. Shifting perspectives on self-regulation, demographic changes, the economic climate, and the expanding role of technology can all affect the perception of professions. Even established entities find themselves having to adjust to new realities, and emerging professions face these overarching fluctuations as they pursue the path toward actualization.

How is professional status recognized in society?

Professional recognition has a few forms. First is the identity of the profession itself—do its members see themselves as a cohesive group with shared traits? Client and government recognition are also significant. But beyond that, public recognition matters, too, and the image and status conferred on a certain profession don't always correlate to how it may be established elsewhere.

Public perception is a difficult element to codify. Why do people perceive professions the way they do? What influences them? More established professions tend to enjoy better recognition, but not

always. Awareness can be an influencer—often the public may be simply uninformed about what a profession does, particularly one with a behind-the-scenes role. Status is another matter of interpretation influenced by public opinion. For example, in health care, higher status is conferred on doctors than on midwives or paramedics. A field that is associated with a negative impact on consumers, like many branches of the financial sector during the economic downturn, is often in jeopardy in the court of public opinion.

How are gaps between minimum requirements and full-fledged certifications bridged?

One of the barriers to recognition of a profession is public skepticism. If a field of work stringently adheres to a set of principles working toward the public interest but the concept of that profession lacks credence to policy makers and members of the public, the identification as a profession will be challenged. The United States is currently experiencing a collective shift away from approval of common establishing practices of many professions, including professional closure, which are perceived as restrictive. Risk perceptions are lower due to recent economic challenges. Demographic shifts, growing internationalism, and an aging population also create obstacles to the path to professionalism. These factors have become a part of the challenging landscape that a profession on that path now faces, and it is expected that they will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Any set of challenges presents an opportunity for innovation. In the face of these issues, professions can choose to focus on legitimacy, raising their internal standards and using that as a platform to establish a more positive brand. Making membership more appealing and customizable can

help grow a member base. A commitment to transparency can offset external distrust of self-regulation and professional closure practices. Growing recognition of the need for collaboration between professions can foster partnerships to better serve consumers.

Next Steps

The ASAE Foundation and its research partners are looking forward to bringing you the next round of research on the journey from practice to profession, and sharing how our findings can be practically applied to association executives and the industries they serve.

Building on initial background research on the concept of professionalism and how it has been viewed in different times and contexts, the researchers will work with the ASAE Foundation to conduct comprehensive case studies. The *Practice to Profession* study will culminate in the creation of a framework by which association leaders can conceptualize the steps on the pathway to professional designation.



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