THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALS IN ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

This paper presented explores the role played by professionals in an organisational and the contribution made by professional education in moulding the professional in meeting that expectation. In unfolding the above, the author has explored literature in understanding the meaning of a profession, the expectations from a professional and the learning theories related to developing professional behaviour among adults. The paper also unveils the findings of a research study carried out among several professional organisations in encapsulating the expectations of corporates in terms of professional behaviour and then attempts to present the experience gaps in terms of performance expectations and experiences of professionals among the organisations that employ them.

The author attempts to present a model for professional educational organisations to follow in reducing the gaps presented in changing the professional educational practices in preparing professionals to carry out a professional job as expected by them within the corporate world.

1. Introduction

The role played by a professional in an organisation as well as the society at large will determine the extent to which a country could progress in achieving economic and social prosperity. While such high expectations are placed on professionals, the society has a bigger role to play in nurturing and harnessing the development of such professionals in reaping the benefits back to society at large in serving organisations which would bring economic prosperity to the land. This paper attempts to unfold the understanding and the expectations of a professional and how professional education could contribute in achieving the above role.

2. Literature Review

This literature review is presented in several sections. The first section attempts to understand the meaning of the term “profession” and then it would attempt to unfold the required
expectations of a “professional” in an organisational setting. The potential pitfalls a professional could encounter are also discussed.

The second section of the review would attempt to understand different theories related to learning and skills development which would support the development of a professional.

2.1 Profession and a Professional

The word profession has been defined in many sources as follows.

- **Profession** often refers specifically to fields that require extensive study and mastery of specialized knowledge and skill. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.)

- **Profession** relates to a vocation which requires a unique set of skills. (Cambridge paperback dictionary 2002)

As per the above definitions, a profession essentially relates to an extensive field of study that requires a unique set of skills and competencies in order to carry out an effective job.

Having explored what a profession is, the following set of definitions will highlight the meaning of the word professional.

- Having or showing great skill, a skilled practitioner; an expert, a person with a high degree of knowledge or skill in a particular field (Houghton Mifflin, 2003)

- Belong to, or connected with a profession, a skilful, competent, and engaged in a specific activity as one’s main paid occupation. (Oxford Pocket Directory, 2000)

As the above definitions profess, a professional is a skilful, competent person with a high degree of specialised knowledge in relation to a given field. Thus, professionals are expected to be disseminators of skills and competencies.

a) Expectations from a Professional

Other than the dissemination of skills and competencies there are other expectations that organizations and society expects from a professional. The preceding paragraphs would attempt to unfold some of them.

Professions are required to aspire to altruism, accountability, excellence, duty service, honor, integrity and respect for others. Let us unfold the nuances of the above expectations in a little more detail.

- **Altruism** - the essence of professionalism. The best interest of the stakeholder in an organisation, not self interest, is the rule.
• Accountability - required to be practised at many levels in the organisation such as with stakeholders, society and to the profession itself. Professionals are accountable to society to uphold the level of professional conduct in taking organisations to the next level.

• Excellence - this entails a conscientious effort to exceed ordinary expectations and to make a commitment to life-long learning. Commitment to excellence is an acknowledged goal for all professionals.

• Duty is the acceptance of commitment to service. This entails being available and responsive when “on call,” accepting inconvenience and risk to meet the needs of the organisation.

• Honour and Integrity - highest standard of behaviour and a refusal to violate one’s own personal and professional code. These imply being fair, truthful, and meeting commitments. These also require the recognition of conflicts of interest and avoiding relationships that allow personal gain to supercede the best interest of the organisation and society.

• Respect - A professional must respect employees of the organisations, members of other professions, customers, suppliers, intermediaries, other important stakeholders and the views of the society at large. This is the essence of humanism which in turn is central to professionalism and fundamental to enhancing collegiality among any professional conduct.

You may note that the above expectations relate to the skills set of an individual which would demonstrate his or her leadership, practical thinking, people and emotional intelligence skills in relating to the above expectations.

b) Possible Pitfalls of Professionalism

There are many challenges posed to professionals which may divert their attention from the expectations identified above. These needs to be addressed in order to be aware how to avoid such temptations and pitfalls a professional may engage during his career. Some of these challenges are as follows.

• Abuse of power – wrongful interactions with stakeholders, colleagues, biasness and sexual harassment, breach of confidentiality are some pertinent abuses of power that a professional may be exposed to.

• Arrogance - offensive display of superiority fostered by the gain of expert knowledge and competencies destroys professionalism. This may lead to losing empathy for the stakeholders in the organisation and society.
• Greed - Money or power become the driving force which would lead to losing understanding, compassion and personal integrity. One must always ask “is this in the best interest of the organisation or my own financial interest.”

• Misrepresentation - consists of lying and fraud where both are conscious efforts.

• Lack of Conscientiousness - failure to fulfil responsibilities. This is a professional who is committed to doing the bare minimum, carries the least amount of research, not evaluating possible options, and making decisions based on emotions rather than facts.

• Conflict of Interest - avoid situations in which the interest of the professional is placed above that of the organisation. Examples of such conflicts of interests would entail self referral, acceptance of gifts and utilization of services

It is paramount that a professional understands the essences of what one is expected to carry out in an organisational as well as in a social setting. The above review tends to lead to the conclusion that the primary expectations would be to be skilful in getting some act done while the other list of expectations also seems to add value to the paradigm of being professional. The review also highlighted some of the possible pitfalls that a professional could get involved with thus needs to avoid such pitfalls to remain as a professional in one’s profession.

2.2. Learning Theories to Support Professional Development

The second part of this literature review presents a discussion related to learning theories. It briefly attempts to explore the main forms of learning paradigms as suggested in learning theory which suits adults who are groomed to be professionals in organisations.

Education literature suggests that individuals who are actively involved in the learning process are more likely to achieve success (Dewar 1995). Much research has been carried out on adult learning theories which have highlighted remarkable differences in styles in comparison to kids learning patterns.

Knowles theory of andragogy (adult learning theory) attempts to highlight adult learning techniques from that of children. Cantor and Cranton (1992) highlights the following to be key differences

• Adults to be autonomous and self directed
• Adults are goal oriented
• Adults are relevancy oriented: meaning they need to know why they are learning some thing
• Adults are practical and problem solving
• Adults have accumulated life experiences
As Kearsley (1996) highlights, adults need to focus more on the process and less on the content which requires case studies, role playing, simulations, internships and self evaluations which is very different from child learning techniques which uses more directional, lectures, examination orientated forms of styles for internalisation.

Also, Kolb’s learning styles theory suggests four learning dimensions which would be relevant for adult learning in more skill development rather than accumulation of knowledge.

He highlights the stage of concrete experience where adults learn through specific experiences relating to people, the stage of reflective observation where careful observation before making judgements, abstract conceptualisation which relates to logical analysis of ideas, systematic planning and the active experimentation stage which allows adults to get things done, risk taking and influencing people through action.

As the above suggest, adult learning theories tend to highlight a high involvement, experience oriented learning styles in imparting knowledge and skills to adult learners.

3. The Reality

In highlighting the role that professional education is expected to play in developing professionals, a research study was carried out to find out the present status of affairs among professional practice and behaviour related to skills. Since the main source of recruiters of professionals are organisations, this research study was directed towards the corporate sector in finding out the levels of expectations and the experiences the corporate sector had in dealing with professionals. The following paragraphs would highlight the methodology and the findings of the study.

3.1 Research Study Objective

The objective of this study was to identify the expectations of the corporate world from a professional in terms of a set of skills that they were expected to have and the real experience of them having such skills as expected. The gaps were identified for each skill.

3.2 Methodology

The gap technique was used to capture the expectations and the experience from the corporate sector in terms of professional skills.

A focus group study among 10 members who are involved in the corporate sector was carried out to frame the skills expected from a professional.
The captured skills were

- To understand and apply technical knowledge to a given situation;
- Ability to think practically and find a realistic solution;
- Ability to relate how the given specialised skills affect other functions of the organisations;
- Ability to relate to people;
- Ability to motivate and inspire people involved in the process;
- Ability to understand emotions of others as well as yourself;
- Communication skills;
- Confidence and courage to take risks in taking ideas and convictions forward;
- Planning skills to carry out a given task.

Based on this a questionnaire was prepared which would capture the expectations and the experiences on a likert scale. For each skill both the expectation and the experience was captured which presented a gap with the analysis of data.

For each of these skills, expectations were captured in a seven-point scale ranging from “Not important at all” to “Extremely important”. On the same question on skills, the employer’s perception on how the professional performed on those skills was also captured on another seven-point scale as “Extremely poor” to “Extremely good”.

The sample size was restricted to 25 respondents for manageability. The respondents were middle level managers who had recruited a graduate of a professional qualification from marketing, information technology, and quality and finance functions within the last six to nine months. The organisational mix ranged from multinational to local blue chips to other medium size organisations.

3.3 Limitations of the study

The research findings presented are subjected to the following limitations;

- The size of the sample which was limited to 25 organisations may limit the outcome of the findings;
- The fact that expectations and perceptions were not directed to one profession may give a very general picture rather than being specific;
- The individual perceptions of the middle level managers could influence the outcome of the study and the findings.
3.4 Findings

Source: Survey Study

You may note that for every identified skill, the perception of the employee in terms of performance of the professional graduate is lesser than the expectations of the employer. This essentially indicates that the acquired skills through the professional programme may not be in line with employer expectations.

The following table will summarise the skills with low negative and high negative gaps as identified from the research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills with Low Negative Gaps</th>
<th>Skills with High Negative Gaps</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td>Practical thinking skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding of other functional areas</td>
<td>People related skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Skills</td>
<td>Emotional intelligence skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigative Skills</td>
<td>Confidence skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Time management skills</td>
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Based on the summary presented above, you may note that the variations in these gaps between different types of skills are different. Some of the skills which have lesser gaps (in other words the performance has come close to the expectations) would be technical skills,
understanding of other functional areas, communication skills, planning and investigative skills.

The skills which has the highest level of gaps (in other words the performance has been very poor in terms of expectations) are practical thinking skills, people related skills, leadership skills, understanding emotions of others (Emotional Intelligence), confidence, and time management skills.

3.5 Conclusions and Application to the Present Education System

The findings give us reason to conclude that professional graduates are reasonably competent with their technical, communication, planning and investigative skills which are usually tested in our present education curriculum through methods of teaching and assessment. However, the lack of more hands-on or application skills such as being practical, ability to relate to people, leadership, emotional intelligence, confidence and time management skills are essential manifestation that our present educational programmes conducted by our professional organisations may not be addressing adequately.

Professionals are expected to be skilful and competent in carrying out particular tasks in achieving a given organisational objective. As the authority in our profession, our organisations and institutes have been given a decree by our profession, our membership in developing professionals through education and continuous professional development. Thus we have a responsibility in developing individuals who patronise and also aspire to be a part of our profession in truly living up to being professionals who are expected to disseminate skills and competencies critical for business performance.

4. Recommendations

In correcting the deficiencies as presented above, the educators in professional institutes need to re-align the methodology of teaching from a mere technical skill dissemination process to a more hands-on skills development process. The reader is requested to refer illustration 4.1 for the model suggested by the author in changing the emphasis from a more taught learning approach to a more experience learning based approach.

4.1 Reduced Taught Learning Methods

The author attempts to discourage the excessive use of class rooms monologue teaching sessions which would not allow the professional to gain practical learning experience in terms of concepts that are presented in class. This one-way teaching process will deprive active participation thus will not allow any internalisation. It is also suggested to reduce over reliance on teacher tutor assisted learning which would in turn increase one way learning thoughts.
Another suggestion would be to reduce the emphasis on close book examinations. Writing for a close book examination will require a different set of skills than skills required to learn and relate to a concept in a practical dimension. While close book examinations may be important for retention development the sole use of such techniques will deprive the development of other skills that were identified to be important in the study.

The professional educators are advised to reduce the number of pre-prepared lecture notes given before the session which will restrict the student of unleashing the boundaries of professional skill learning.

**Illustration 1 - Changing Paradigm of Learning Approaches**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class room monologue teaching</th>
<th>Use of Reduced Taught Based Learning Methods</th>
<th>Teacher/Tutor assisted lecturers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close book examinations</td>
<td>Use of Increased Experience Based Learning Tools</td>
<td>Pre-pared lecture notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical assignments</td>
<td>Internship learning Participative teaching and learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>carrying out organisational projects</td>
<td>Research based learning and Investigative studies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More weight to open book examinations</td>
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**POST GRADUATION & WHILE IN EMPLOYEMENT – Continuous Professional Development (CPD)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Skill upgrading assignments</th>
<th>Organisational mentoring</th>
<th>Self development programmes</th>
<th>Codes of Conduct</th>
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4.2 Use of Increased Experience Based Learning Tools

The author attempts to suggest a set of learning tools that professional organisations should use in developing professionals in meeting the expectations of the organisations in terms of performance and other expectations as identified in the above reviews.

a) Practical assignments carrying out organisational projects.

These learning techniques will give the professional students practical thinking ability which was identified to be poor in the research study. Carrying out an assignment related to results in an organisational setting will allow students to experiment their ideas without a loss of real time organisational profits. These should be presented in a minor scale in the beginning and then the intensity could be increased eventually. Also, allowing group assignments/projects would develop leadership and people skills before setting foot into a real organisational work experience thus making the student with a professional qualification ahead of the others.

b) Internship learning and participative teaching

The application skills of students and their confidence levels could be immensely developed by placing students on internship programmes with identified organisations. This would be a valuable experience for the student and the institute could provide assessment criteria for the internship period.

Organisations would benefit from the free or relatively cheaper labour components thus will also have a source of future prospective employees through these programmes. For manageability and practicality, the internship programmes could be carried out for relatively a shorter period.

Participative teaching would be that students could learn by teaching in class room sessions which would allow a more effective form of internalisation. These could be guided by lecturers and would lead to the confidence and communication skills development of the student.

c) Open book examinations

Assessment in terms of open book examinations would allow students to master the ability to develop time management skills and investigative skills of seeking facts. It is not suggested that close book examinations to be completely removed which would meet academic requirements but an effective ratio would yield a better development of the student. After all a professional would be required to seek information and apply it rather than put it across through memory.
d) Research based learning and investigative studies

The final stages of professional learning should be supported with research based studies where the student will test his or her own conviction thus internalise the findings. This would culminate the rigor of carrying out a responsible task inculcating all the skills as identified above in making the candidate different from the rest. In terms of developing investigative skills the students should be exposed to different forms of investigative methodologies which would lead the individual to make decision based on facts rather than opinion.

The author continues to suggest techniques to be deployed to members of the professional bodies to maintain their professional status as continuous professional development. The professional member should be assessed for periodical skill upgrading assignments which would allow the individual to keep in touch with industry changes.

Another technique suggested is the introduction of organisational mentoring programmes which would allow professionals not only to practice skills but also to disseminate them to the organisations and to the society. Mentoring is beyond teaching or lecturing but deals with transformation of human lives related to the profession under practised.

The author also suggests the introduction of self development programmes such as reading, knowledge upgrading, career moves, contribution to self worth, work life balance techniques to develop the professional in his or her own accord.

Also, the development, review and the practice of a code of conduct which relates to best practice to ensure that points of professional misconduct are not tempted at the expense of one’s professional career.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the author would like to iterate that in developing professionals in societies and in organisations as well as getting the professionals to contribute to the development of same, professional education has a bigger role to play than any other source. The author has illustrated the expectations from professionals and the presented experiences among some corporates along with different learning techniques as suggested in literature. The model presented by the author highlights the importance of professional education institutes roles in developing the expected skills of professionals for that the real benefit of professionals could be harnessed by organisations, by society making the world we live a better and an effective place.
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