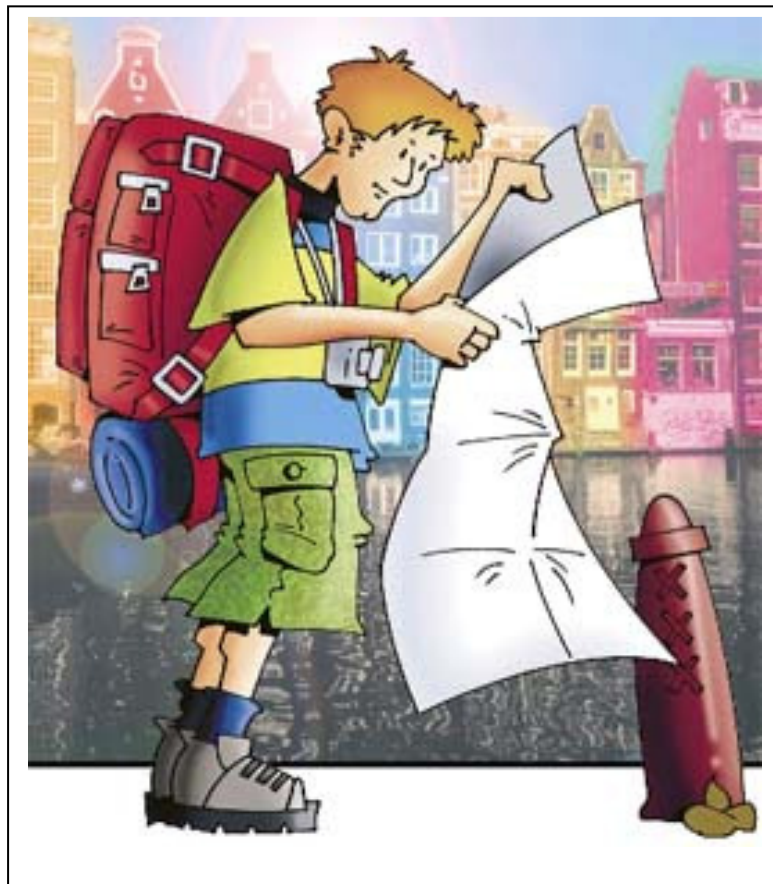


Student Guide to Personal Professionalism

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Introduction

The University of Surrey is proud of the education and training opportunities it provides which aim to help students develop the attitudes, capabilities and qualities necessary to become an effective professional in whatever field they choose. This leaflet is based on an analysis of 22 short stories/essays submitted to SCEPTRe for a competition, to answer the question: *Personal Professionalism: my perspectives on what being an effective professional means*. Students shared experiences, meaning and understanding based on a range of work experiences including part-time work, work previous to university, on placement and ongoing work. The leaflet is intended as a guide to students to help them think about, and perhaps begin to conceptualise what personal professionalism means to them. All the information in this leaflet has come from students themselves and brings together the emerging ideas of personal professionalism from the stories. You cannot become professional from reading the Guide but you can become more aware of what it involves.

An Overview

There is a difference between a professional and being professional. Professionalism is difficult to conceptualise, it is a way of being rather than a checklist of things. This way of being is made up of appearance, manner, communication, interacting, attitudes, approach, skills and openness to grow. Professionalism is a combination of taught aspects, like knowledge and skills, and learning gained through experience, such as experiential knowledge and the way to behave with particular people in particular situations. Professionalism can be learnt through observing others and through personal experience.

Other people or organisations require professionalism but there is also a self-perception element to it and personal professionalism goes beyond professionalism as defined by a role or organisation. Levels of professionalism can be defined by the context, such as a managerial position which requires a different type of professionalism to that of a more junior employee. Different contexts require different conceptions of professionalism, but underlying mechanisms are the same. Students tended to agree that dictionary definitions do not cover the true nature of professionalism. Various skills are important to professionalism, but a key aspect is interpersonal skills. Achieving and succeeding in the requirements of the role, in a certain way, to a certain standard and within a specific time frame, characterises professionalism.

Personal professionalism goes beyond being a specialist, it is not just about knowledge but also about attitudes, values and conduct. Professionalism is made easier if passion and enjoyment is found in the work. Professional appearances, manner and etiquette are all important facets of personal professionalism. Professionalism is how you interact as well as what you produce. Interacting with others appropriately and respectfully, communicating clearly and directly and interpersonal skills are all essential to being professional.

Learning from others is important. Students often conceptualise professionalism from seeing examples of people being unprofessional. Students feel you can't be told how to be professional, it is something you learn from experience, and the conception of it changes with more experience, so becoming professional is a continuous learning and development process. The net result of this process is that you become more confident in your ability to deal with the situations required of the role and more willing to take on new responsibilities and more difficult situations.

Professionalism must become intrinsic and internalised. It is about a certain outlook and approach to working. If professionalism is internalised, it leads to achieving self-efficacy, self-worth,

achievement, accomplishment and a sense of deep satisfaction and most of all embodying confidence. Being professional is about bringing yourself and your personality into the role, enhancing not only yourself, but also the role and the organisation.

Professionalism in context

Professionalism is performed in a context. This is usually an organisational context or it may be the context of a single handed business.

A professional takes pride in himself and in his organisation. He identifies with the organisation and displays passion, enthusiasm, dedication and enjoyment for and in his role. The willingness to represent the company and what it stands for is important.

Professionalism requires the ability to identify what is important to the role and what is required. There is an ethos to professionalism, which is related to the ethos of the role, and in the wider context the ethos of the organisation.

How to act in the way the role requires is important, which is a learning process, often understood through the example of others. You are representing not only yourself but more importantly you are a representative of the organisation. Helping the organisation to create an image, and you are a representative of that image.

In organisations you are often working with different people (different personalities, background, levels of knowledge) at different levels of status and hierarchy. Professionalism is to treat your colleagues respectfully and equally. A professional sees himself and his role in the wider contexts of team, department and organisation. This requires respect for the organisation's structures and hierarchy.

A professional demonstrates commitment to the organisation's values and ethics, policies and codes of conduct, so you need to be able to adhere to these when at work, remaining objective if they conflict with your personal values. There may be times when there is a conflict between what you believe is right and the organisation believes is the right thing to do: a good professional is able to manage this conflict.

Values

There is an identity to personal professionalism. Professionalism is about not only doing it because you are told to, but doing it because of internalised professional values and doing it for self, out of intrinsic motivation. Some of the important values and characteristics that make up this identity are:

- *Respect, trust, equality, justice and discretion.* Professionalism entails embodying these characteristics and also having them in relation to colleagues and clients. Trust and respect is important both internally in the organisation, in relation to colleagues, supervisors, employees, and also externally, such as with clients.
- *Sincerity, honesty, integrity, patience.*
- *A good work ethic,* characterised by commitment, dedication, perseverance, hard work.
- *Balance.*
- *Finding a way to fit your skills and attributes to the expectations of the organisation,* through developing self but also bringing yourself into work to enhance the role and the organisation.

- *Structure and discipline.*
- *Ability to identify what is required, how to achieve it, and reflect and evaluate.*

Importance of willingness

An appropriate set of dispositions is essential to fulfilling the professional role in the right way. The *willingness* to be a certain sort of person behaving in a certain sort of way is paramount. Here are some of the dimensions of willingness

- Willing to try to perform at a high standard
- Openness and willingness to learn and develop for the role
- Willingness to present yourself in a confident but not arrogant manner
- Willingness to do that bit extra, which is necessitated by taking the initiative and an aspect of creativity.
- A willingness to learn from mistakes and be open to constructive criticism, seeing criticism as positive chances for change.
- Awareness of different perspectives and willingness to see alternative perspectives to your own
- Ability and willingness to both learn from others and teach others. Ability to lead and to be led.
- Willingness to take an active role in being a professional, in the work and a commitment to growth and self-development.
- Willingness to accept and use feedback from colleagues in order to improve

Behaviour

Professionalism entails a willingness to ask for help and guidance, and listen to the advice. It is important to work individually, demonstrating autonomy, but also as a team. Responsibility is vital, both demonstrating you are responsible and accountable but also willing to take on new responsibilities. Students felt being given additional responsibilities was a direct result of demonstrating their professionalism. Responsibility can be demonstrated through behaviour such as time keeping, punctuality, organisation skills and being well-prepared. Here are some important aspects of behaviour required of a professional.

- The ability to maintain professional boundaries. This is demonstrated through behaviour and conduct, which is different to the way you would relate to friends. It also means keeping personal problems outside of work.
- The ability to make good decisions and how to deal with situations and problems is important. So problem-solving is key, but also being calm and developing coping capabilities. Decision-making is also important and is the willingness to explain your decisions.
- Maintaining professional standards and conduct regardless of how other people may be behaving.
- Being effective in your work, leading to productivity and meeting deadlines.
- Collaborate rather than compete.
- Encourage and help others.
- Provide a positive example.
- Model the behaviour of what you believe is good professional behaviour.
- Being flexible, versatile and able to adapt and deal with complexity.

- Able to transfer skills and generalise what has been learnt to other contexts.
- Enthusiasm which infects other people.

Self-management

A professional is expected to manage himself and regulate his own behaviour. Knowing your own limits, taking responsibility for your own decisions and actions and knowing when to seek help are all important aspects of self-management. In addition the following are important.

- Willingness to enhance self and the role, bringing something to the organisation.
- Being aware of the effects of your actions is important
- Being aware of your own emotions and how they affect what you do, and managing your emotions so that they do not interfere in a negative way with your work
- **Communication** – being able to conduct professional conversations, knowing what/what not to say and how to say it. Having the appropriate language is essential.
- Speaking well, concisely and clearly – being comprehensible
- Being polite and respectful – addressing people with their titles is important
- Being able to express opinions appropriately.
- Being approachable.
- Not being patronising.
- Willing to share your ideas, knowledge, opinions. Having your own voice, ideas, and therefore confidence is important to facilitate the sharing of these ideas.
- Being able to write appropriately in ways that meet the needs and interests of the audience
- When resolving issues, remain objective rather than being personal.
- Managing expectations, being clear, direct and concise

Appearance & presence

First appearances matter! Different organisations have different views on dress, important to consider it in the particular environment. Adhere to the practices of the organisation.

Dress appropriately, not only for yourself to help get into the role but also to create a good impression to others and to be taken seriously. Presence comes from combining appearance with the behaviours and self-management characteristics outlined above.

Why is it important to develop professionalism?

A commitment to developing personal professionalism means: a commitment to continuous self-development; willingness to involve yourself in and deal with complexity; seeking to improve knowledge and competence; always trying to gain deeper understanding and insight ; maturing; knowing your own limits; the more-rounded, holistic and effective professional comes with experience; learning to overcome difficulties, and trying out things to know if it is for you; increasing understanding of the place of work and role within that; awareness and acceptance of both strengths and weaknesses; career/work progression as a result of an openness to new things, and a willingness to grow and change with the evolving role.

Professionalism involves various capabilities and abilities, such as ability to:

- create and implement, not just to be aware
- explain and demonstrate

- meet deadlines consistently
- achieve good standards within time constraints
- accept responsibility for mistakes
- separate personal life and problems from professional life
- be open to feedback and advice and support from others and use the advice
- adapt and adjust to different situations and demands.

University is a useful arena to develop some of these necessary skills, providing opportunities for exploring and developing some of these abilities.

Importance of internalising what being professional means

Students recognised that professionalism is an identity and something that is embodied in you. This internalisation meant intrinsic motivation and work approach was for themselves and their standards, not for other people. Professionalism involves being personally motivated and regulated, doing and behaving because you want to not because you have to. Not just doing what the context requires, but committed to improving self, practice and conduct. You are judged by actions and behaviour, which is a representation of, and underpinned by, your values and attitudes. You work to high standards, rather than the minimum required, and are prepared to do that extra bit because you want to not because someone tells you to. One student spoke of getting to work a few minutes early every day, so as to start on time. This is about being prepared and ready to do the job and demonstrating commitment.

What to remember!

Being professional is all about your representation of what being professional means. Professionalism is not about doing the role, it is about your approach to the role. It is not about how important or prestigious the role is, but how you fulfil the role and what you make of it. Different people have different ways of being an effective professional, depending on context and personality. It is ok to develop your own representation of professionalism. Try to internalise this. Do your best, be ambitious and competent, take pride in your role and your work. It is about qualities not qualifications. The way you carry yourself is a representation of what you are capable of. **It is about you as a person and how you as a person fulfil and shape a particular role.** How you perceive yourself and how others perceive you is important. Appearances and conduct are important, but these are underpinned by a sense of values, attitudes and behaviour displayed by your approach to work and the way you relate to and work with others manifest in your interpersonal and communication skills.

The wisdom is that you bring yourself to the role, the appropriate bits. Not just doing what you are told, or being who you are told to be, but bringing yourself into the role, so maintaining and moulding self within the organisation.

Embodying and demonstrating professionalism

“Outward appearance and inward values”

“Experiences changed my stereotypes of professionalism”

“It is a choice to be a professional, and to maintain good relationships through professional boundaries.”

“Work as a team, as organisational cohesiveness is important.”



Learning to be professional Patrick Saunders