Topic 1

Professionalism

Contents

Learning Objectives

- **Awareness of the role of a professional in society**
- **Appreciation of the importance of competence, responsibility and trust**
- **Awareness of the role of a professional body**
- **Familiarity with the codes of conduct and practice governing the IT profession**

1.1   Introduction to the Unit

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes - and ships - and sealing wax -
Of cabbages - and kings -
And why the sea is boiling hot -
And whether pigs have wings."
(Lewis Carroll, 1872)

In this unit we shall investigate many issues – ranging from the technological, to the sociological. We shall discover that modern society is heavily dependent on Information Technology and that it lays down laws and regulations to constrain and control that dependence. Some of these rules can only be complied with through the introduction of further technological solutions, such as the security measures necessary to protect the privacy of personal data.

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One of the most important outcomes of these investigations is to ensure that you know how to adopt a professional attitude towards the application of information technology. In order to assist you in this we shall first examine what it means to be a professional and what constitutes a "profession". We shall look at the kinds of codes, standards and laws that are likely to guide and govern your actions and we shall cover methods you might find useful when making ethical decisions.

The risks and threats that arise from the use of information technology are not always easily foreseen. You will discover, however, that society expects its information technology professionals not only to be more aware of these risks and threats than anybody else but also to have solutions ready to hand when they manifest themselves. This is a pretty tall order and sometimes the best you will be able to do is to provide an acceptable explanation for why you couldn't foresee, or cannot deal with, a particular event. In this unit we shall help you to distinguish those explanations which are likely to be acceptable from those which would definitely be unacceptable. We shall look at the kinds of crime which can be perpetrated by and on computers and some of the security measures which can be used to combat them and maintain the integrity and confidentiality of data.

The growing use of computers in safety-critical systems is perhaps the most obvious example of society's dependence on information technology but there are many, seemingly less important dependencies, which can have profound effects on our lives when things go wrong. We shall look at some of these and also at the way in which societal attitudes can influence the speed and direction in which technology develops, for the better but also for the worse.

Finally, we shall look to the future and, whilst not being so foolish as to try to make predictions, we shall look at current trends in computing and communications technology and consider where they might be leading us.

There is no single book which covers all of the material in this unit but "Ethics for the Information Age" by Michael Quinn comes closest. It is recommended that you read a computing industry newspaper or magazine on a regular basis. At the end of each topic references to supporting material will be provided and you should dip into these as and when a particular subject attracts your interest.

1.2 What is a professional?

This seems like a pretty straight-forward question, doesn't it? We've all met professionals - doctors, lawyers, etc. But what is it that makes them professionals? Is it their standing in the community? The fact that we tend to hold them in high regard? Surely, that is a consequence of their being professionals rather than the reason for it? Their expertise plays a large part in it of course but that cannot be the whole story for there are many people with highly specialist expertise who are not regarded as professionals.

1.2.1 Competence-Responsibility-Trust

We expect technical competence from a professional. They should be well trained and experienced in their art. Being a professional means knowing what to do and keeping up to date

with the latest developments and methods. This is referred to as Continuing Professional Development and generally runs throughout a professional's career.

We also expect a certain level of responsibility from professionals. Responsibility for their work and their actions. Responsibility to, and for, their patients and clients. They should also be responsible enough to know their own limitations and not attempt tasks which they know they cannot undertake successfully. Being a professional means knowing when to refer a matter to others, just as a general practitioner in medicine knows when to call in a specialist consultant. We expect professionals to act in our best interests even, indeed especially, when we don't know what they are ourselves.

Possibly more than anything else we expect trustworthiness from a professional. When a lay person consults a professional, they are doing so because they know they do not have the knowledge or understanding to solve their problem themselves. By definition then, they do not have the knowledge or understanding to assess the wisdom or correctness of the advice or actions of the professional. They must trust the professional. They have no choice but to do this. Furthermore, in making use of the services of a professional, it is often necessary to disclose confidential information and the relationship of trust is therefore critical in the relationship between a professional and their patient or client.

Perhaps you can think of other factors which play a part in defining those whom we regard as professionals. Feel free to add them to the list but Competence, Responsibility and Trust (CRT) must surely remain at the top.

1.2.2   When do you become a professional?

The simple answer to this question is that you become a professional when people treat you as if you are one and you respond professionally. Perhaps you already are a professional. When a friend or relative asks you for advice on a computing matter, if you act responsibly and only give advice on matters which you know you are competent to handle and if you refer people to appropriate sources or services on matters which you aren't competent to handle and if, in any event, you respect any confidences that might have been imparted to you, then you are a professional.

You cannot provide any certificates or guarantees of your professionalism though. So how can somebody who doesn't know you decide whether they can trust you? Wouldn't it be better if there was some certificate or other document which you could show people through which they could be assured that you have been checked out and your competence, responsibility and trust can be vouched for.

1.3   What is a profession?

A profession is, quite simply, an occupation in which the practitioners are overseen by a professional body. Membership of professional bodies is often voluntary but in some cases it can be against the law to practise if you aren't a member of the relevant professional body. This is nearly always the case in the legal and medical professions and not uncommon in particularly

critical types of engineering. Professional bodies can impose sanctions on members who do not abide by their guidelines or who behave improperly. Doctors can be "struck off" if their governing professional body decides that their poor performance or behaviour means it is not in their patients' interests for them to continue to practise.

1.3.1   Guarantor of C-R-T

A professional body is the guarantor of a practitioner's competence, responsibility and trust. In the final analysis, it is the existence of a professional body that turns an occupation into a profession and its practitioners into professionals. Membership of a professional body is the proof that a particular practitioner abides by certain codes of conduct and practice, that they are suitably qualified and experienced and that they can be trusted. The certificate that assures the general public that a person is a professional is their membership certificate of the appropriate professional body.

1.3.2   The British Computer Society

The British Computer Society (BCS), founded in 1957, is the professional body for Information Technology professionals in the UK. With over 47,000 members in over 100 countries around the world, the BCS claims to be the leading professional and learned society in the field of computers and information systems. In addition to their own professional examinations of competence in the various branches of computing, the BCS also accredit courses run by others as meeting the BCS academic requirements for membership. The BCS runs a Continuing Professional Development programme through which it seeks to ensure that its members remain in touch with the latest developments and ideas throughout their careers.

Student membership of the BCS is relatively inexpensive and can offer many benefits. You should visit the BCS website to see what it has to offer. Amongst other things on the site, you will find their "Code of Conduct" and "Code of Good Practice".

1.4   Assigned task

Familiarise yourself with the British Computer Society's "Code of Conduct" and "Code of Good Practice".

The BCS Code of Conduct can be found at -
http://www.bcs.org/BCS/AboutBCS/codes/conduct/

The BCS Code of Good Practice can be found at -
http://www.bcs.org/BCS/AboutBCS/codes/cop/

1.5   End of topic test

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Please insert a multiple choice test here. The correct answers to each question are <u>underlined</u>. Can I have more than one correct answer nowadays? -->

Q1.   Which of the following should not guide a professional's actions –
    a). Codes
    b). Laws
    <u>c). Publicity</u>
    d). Standards

Q2.   Which of the following was not recommended as supporting material for the Unit –
    a). "Ethics for the Information Age"
    <u>b). Industry advertisements</u>
    c). Industry magazines
    d). Industry newspapers

Q3.   Which of the following would you not regard as a professional –
    a). Doctor
    b). Engineer
    c). Lawyer
    <u>d). Plumber</u>

Q4.   C-R-T stands for –
    a). Cathode Ray Tube
    b). Competence-Reliability-Trust
    <u>c). Competence-Responsibility-Trust</u>
    d). Cuticle Replacement Therapy

Q5.   Which of the following is not required of a member of a professional body –
    a). Abiding by a code of conduct
    <u>b). Earning lots of money</u>
    c). Qualifications
    d). Trustworthiness

Q6.   Which of the following was not cited as an indication that you are a professional –
    a). Behaving as if you are
    b). Being treated as if you are
    <u>c). Believing you are</u>
    d). Respecting confidences

Q7.   In which year was the British Computer Society founded –
    a). 1956
    <u>b). 1957</u>
    c). 1970
    d). 1984

Q8.   In which UK city are the headquarters of the British Computer Society –
    a). Birmingham
    b). Edinburgh

c). London
d). Swindon

Q9.   Which of the following is not a section in the BCS Code of Good Practice –
        a). Practices common to all disciplines
        b). Key IT practices
        c). Practices specific to industrial functions
        d). Practices specific to business functions

Q10.   Which of the following is not a section in the BCS Code of Conduct –
        a). Giving value for money
        b). Duty to the profession
        c). The public interest
        d). Professional competence and integrity

References

British Computer Society, 2005, *Welcome to the British Computer Society* [online]. 2005 [cited 10th July 2005]. HTML. Available from http://www.bcs.org/bcs

Carroll, L., 1872, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, in *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll*. Harmondsworth, 1982.

Quinn, M.J., 2005, *Ethics for the Information Age*. Addison Wesley.