

HRPA Series on Professionalization, Professionalism, and Ethics
for Human Resources Professionals

Professionalism: More than just agreeing to a EULA

Upon initial registration and then upon yearly renewal after that, HRPAs requires all registrants to indicate their agreement with specific terms and conditions of registration. Specifically, all applicants and registrants are required to state that they have read, understood, and agreed to abide by the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013*, the HRPAs By-laws, and the HRPAs Rules of Professional Conduct, and any other professional guidance issued by the Association. This is done by checking off boxes on an online form and sometimes on a paper-based form. Some might think of this as something similar to the End User License Agreements (EULAs) that one must agree to when downloading software applications. The idea being that these forms are just something to get out of the way. But treating these registration form questions as if they were EULAs would be unfortunate. This brief article intends to explain the purpose for including such questions in the HRPAs membership application and renewal forms—but first, some facts about EULAs.

Now, we have all done it, clicked on the button which says something like *‘I have read the terms of the agreement above and agree to its terms and conditions’* without having actually read the agreement—but as it turns out this is very much the norm rather than the exception. One study¹ based on the log data of 2500 users found that the median time users spent on the license page was only six seconds. They worked out that no more than eight per cent of users read the EULA in full. Another study² went even further suggesting that users have been trained to click on “accept” whenever they face a request that reminds them of a EULA.

Of course, this might suit those who really don’t want users to actually read the agreement, but it isn’t good news for those who really do want users to understand what they have agreed to. Indeed, the impact appears to be paradoxical. HRPAs really does want its registrants to understand what it is they are agreeing to by applying for registration with HRPAs. In this case, that individuals seem to have been conditioned to click on “accept” whenever they face a request that reminds them of a EULA, works against the purpose of asking applicants and registrants to sign off on their professional commitments.

¹Sauro, J. (January 11, 2011). *Do Users Read License Agreements?* Measuring Usability, <http://www.measuringu.com/blog/eula.php>

² Rainer Böhme & Stefan Köpsell (2010). *Trained to Accept? A Field Experiment on Consent Dialogs*. CHI 2010: 1001 Users Conference Proceedings, April 10–15, 2010, Atlanta, GA, USA.

In HRPAs case, it is not necessary for applicants and registrants to agree to the terms and conditions of membership for these to apply. This is because these terms and conditions are embedded in legislation or established pursuant to powers delegated to HRPAs by means of the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013*. In other words, not agreeing to the terms and conditions of membership does not mean that such terms and conditions do not apply or are unenforceable. So if it is not necessary for applicants and registrants to agree to the terms and conditions of membership for these to apply, and if there is a good chance that many will just tick boxes without much thought, why do it?

Here are a few reasons:

The first is that it follows from our mandate to protect the public interest. One element of HRPAs strategy is to attract as many HR professionals to membership in the Association. The idea is that this serves the public interest because registrants must agree to abide by the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013*, the HRPAs By-laws, and the *HRPA Rules of Professional Conduct*, and any other professional guidance issued by the Association, whereas unregulated HR professionals are just that—*unregulated*. Although, some of the protection of the public comes simply from being subject to these professional standards, it makes sense that the full protection of the public can only happen if registrants read and understand what it is they have agreed to abide by. Individuals who have agreed to abide by the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013*, the HRPAs By-laws, and the HRPAs Rules of Professional Conduct, should know what they have agreed to because this makes them more likely to act accordingly.

The main reason for adding these statements in registration application and renewal forms, however, is that they remind members of their commitment to professionalism. Becoming and continuing to be a professional is not like taking out a magazine subscription or joining a club, and it is not like downloading and using software—it is a commitment to adopting a specific attitude and approach towards one’s work.

Zubin Austin, PhD., a professor, at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Pharmacy coined the phrase ‘competency drift’ to refer to what sometimes happens to professionals. He starts by defining competency not so much as what we know and are able to do, but as what we actually do in everyday professional practice.

“What if we were to define competency not as ‘the quality of being adequately or well-qualified physically or intellectually’ but instead defined it as ‘demonstration that you are firing on all pistons, giving it your all?’³”

Austin’s main idea is that there are many professionals who are “adequately or well-qualified physically or intellectually” but who are not “firing on all pistons, and giving it their all” on a day-in, day-out basis. There are many things that may be going on. Professionals with experience may begin to lose their edge, they may become a bit lazy or complacent about their practice, and they may suffer from burnout, or become jaded and cynical.

Part of being a professional is taking the steps necessary not to become complacent about one’s professionalism. Once we take our professionalism for granted, we enter a danger zone. This means

³ Austin, Z. (2015). Competency Drift: What’s the link between competency and disengagement? Presentation at the Touchstone Institute Perspectives in Assessment Symposium, February 5, 2015

that professionals should be continuously open to reflecting on their professional practice. The questions on HRPAs membership application and renewal are really just reminders to reflect on one's commitment to professionalism and some basic duties such as keeping up to date on changes that may impact one's practice as a professional.

So the next time you are asked to indicate that you have read, understood, and agreed to abide by the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013*, the HRPAs By-laws, and the HRPAs Rules of Professional Conduct, and any other professional guidance issued by the Association, it is hoped that you will pause and give some consideration to professionalism and your professional practice.