#15 The single factor which distinguishes professions from other highly skilled occupations

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There is a lot of different perspectives and opinions about what it means to be a professional. There are many discussion about the differences between professionals and amateurs, or between professionals and experts. There is also a difference between being professional (adjective) and being a professional (noun). Think of any highly skilled occupation—CEO, marketing professional, rocket scientist, entrepreneur—then think of any of the professions—physicians, lawyers, engineers, accountants—what differentiates the two?

It is not necessarily education as members of highly skilled occupations may well have as much education as many professions.

It is not necessarily competence as most members of highly skilled occupations are highly competent at what they do and quite possibly as competent at what they do as professionals are at what they do.

It is not necessarily behaviour as many members of highly skilled occupations ascribe to professional values and are utterly professional in their behaviour whereas, unfortunately, there are some professionals who are not.

It isn’t even the claim to be professional—there are many occupations that claim to be professional. In fact, the term professional has become so overused that some will use the adjective ‘true’ to distinguish between the ‘true professions’ and other occupations that just claim to be professional.
So what is it that distinguishes professionals from other highly skilled occupations?

What distinguishes professions from other highly skilled occupations is the existence of a professional regulatory body which is dedicated to protecting the public and which keeps professionals accountable to the commitment they made to competent and ethical practice. It is the accountability to a professional regulatory body that is the difference.

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Professionals establish and support professional regulatory bodies which, in turn, hold their members of accountable to standards of competence and conduct. It is more than saying that one is accountable that distinguishes professionals, it is the willingness to belong to a professional regulatory body and to be held accountable by this professional regulatory body.

So it is not necessarily education, or competence, or behaviour, or values, or even the claim of being professional that distinguish professionals from other highly skilled occupations, it is the self-imposed accountability to a professional regulatory body for all these things that is the difference.

Professionals take the claim of professionalism to the next level—they establish and maintain professional regulatory bodies which in turn hold them accountable to the standards they profess to uphold. Of course, for this to work the professional regulatory body must be focused and diligent in keeping the professionals under their care accountable—otherwise, the whole idea of accountability can backfire in the eyes of the public.

Some professionals do not like the idea of being accountable to a professional regulatory body. These professionals believe that their say-so in regards to their professionalism is all that should be needed or expected or that their only accountability is to their employers and clients. But it doesn’t quite work that way. Simply, it is the willingness to be held accountable by a trustworthy professional regulatory body that engenders trust in the profession and its members.