#23 A different take on the value of designations

Claude Balthazard, Ph.D., C.Psych., CHRL
Posted on LinkedIn August 1, 2017

There are many articles and discussion threads that focus on the value of Human Resources designations for those who hold them, and whether the returns of having a Human Resources designation are worth the costs¹. On a deeper level, however, this way of looking at designations is troubling.

First, we need to differentiate designations and professions. All professions have a protected title, but having a designation and initials does not make a profession. There are many designations out there, there are relatively few true professions. One of the most insightful discussions of the difference between designations and professions is to be found in an article by Forsyth and Danisiewicz². These authors coined the term “mimic professions” to refer to occupations that ‘have taken on the coloration but not the substance of profession.’

By ‘coloration,’ Forsyth and Danisiewicz meant what they called the ‘trappings of professions’ such as designations, codes of ethics, and so on; by ‘substance’ they meant the respect and authority that comes from true professionalism. The essence of professionalism is a specific attitude or set of values. It includes a dedication to one’s profession, a service orientation, and the use of knowledge for the good of society. This is not to say that being a profession does not have its financial rewards, but the pursuit

---

¹ McQuillan, L. (June 26, 2017). *Is a CHRP designation worth the cost?* Human Resources Director Canada.
of financial gain is not the essence of profession. Needless to say that Forsyth and Danisiewicz did not see being a mimic profession as a good thing.

The basic process of professionalization is one of imitation. Professionalization refers the process by which the members of an occupation collectively strive to achieve the recognition and status that is accorded to the established professions by emulating or adopting the defining characteristics of these established professions. But this imitation can be understood at a deep level or superficial level.

“Focusing exclusively on designations at the expense of the substance of profession is something that mimic professions do—it is focusing on the trappings of profession rather than substance of profession.”

Designations are among the ‘trappings of professions’ but they are not ‘the substance of profession’—as noted above there are many more designations than there are professions. There is more to ‘emulating or adopting the defining characteristics of these established professions’ than having a designation. This is true at both the individual and collective level. Focusing exclusively on designations at the expense of the substance of profession is something that mimic professions do—it is focusing on the trappings of profession rather than substance of profession. By focusing on the coloration rather than the essence of professions, all that can be achieved is to become a mimic profession.

It is not the letters that matter, but what behind the letters. By the time it has all come down to a financial return on investment, the substance of profession has truly been lost. In fact, it encourages what Ashish Nanda called ‘rent seeking’. Rent-seeking is used in economics and in public-choice theory to describe practices which seek to increase one’s share of existing wealth without creating new wealth. Professional rent seekers are concerned more about what they will get from being a member of a profession than what they give back.

As a profession we need to focus on imitating the substance rather than the coloration of professions; we need to focus more on what we give than what we get. This is not to say that being a true profession does not have financial rewards. But when financial rewards become the main reason for pursuing a designation, we have lost sight of what it is all about.

---