Why would a professional in a voluntary profession want to become a member of a professional regulatory body dedicated to promoting and protecting the public interest?

Claude Balthazard, Ph.D., C.Psych., CHRL
Posted on LinkedIn October 25, 2017

Professional regulatory bodies exist to serve the public interest whereas professional associations exist to serve the interests of their members. The question is raised as to why, in the context of a voluntary profession where being a member of the professional regulatory body is not required to practice the profession, would anyone want to become a member of a professional regulatory body which exists to promote and protect the public interest.

Licensure would appear to make matters simpler—if one wanted to practice the profession, one would need to become a member of the professional regulatory body. In reality, licensure doesn’t always provide this absolute reason for belonging to a professional regulatory body. In many licensed professions, there are exceptions that allow professional who are not members of the professional regulatory body to practice (the ‘industrial exemption’ in engineering). In other professions, only a minority of professional perform controlled acts which require membership and authorization from the professional regulatory body. In other professions, licensure is limited to certain aspects of practice that are only relevant to a minority of members (for instance, accounting is not licensed but public accounting is). However, only about 5% of accountants possess a public accounting license). Licensure is not a black-and-white matter and does not always force professionals to belong to their professional regulatory body. Another way of putting it is that there are many members of licensed professions whose work wouldn’t actually require them to be a member of their professional regulatory body.
It should also be noted that voluntariness is relative. In some professions, even though voluntary, career opportunities are quite limited for those who are not registered with the professional regulatory body. One could say that these professions are de facto licensed.

It also needs to be acknowledged that value is different for different individuals. The reasons why someone would join a voluntary professional regulatory body may be different from one person to the next—some individuals are motivated by more intrinsic aspects, others by more aspects, and most by a combination of the two. For example, for some the sense of belonging to a community of professionals is important, but for others, it may be job opportunities.

An important facet of professional regulatory bodies is the professional title. Professional regulatory bodies control the professional titles. Anyone who wants to use the professional title must become members of the professional regulatory body. Again, having the right to use the professional title will mean different things to different people. For some, maintaining the professional title is just the right thing to do, for others, it’s just a matter of improving one’s marketability in the job market.

“Just because professional regulatory bodies exist primarily to promote and protect the public interest does not mean that there are no benefits for members to belong to these professional regulatory bodies.”

Another reason for individuals to join voluntary professional regulatory bodies is that the interests of the public and the interest of the members often coincide—serving the interests of the public also serves the interests of the members. For instance, public awareness campaigns designed to inform the public of the benefits of hiring or engaging regulated professionals as compared to unregulated professionals benefits both the public and the members of the professional regulatory body. Programs designed to increase knowledge, skill, and competence also benefit both the public and the members of the professional regulatory body.

Just because professional regulatory bodies exist primarily to promote and protect the public interest does not mean that there are no benefits for members to belong to these professional regulatory bodies. It has been shown that professional regulation brings with it benefits such as enhanced legitimacy, increased status, and increased remuneration. For emerging professions, however, the issue is that these benefits can take time to become tangible.

In a more immediate time frame, member benefits that come with membership in a voluntary professional regulatory body include:

- Belonging to an organization that is predicated on the professional ethos of service to society
- Belonging to a community of like-minded professionals
- Professional credibility that comes with registration with a statutory professional regulatory body
- Use of statutorily protected titles
- The right to hold oneself out as a professional registered with the professional regulatory body
- Educational and professional development opportunities
- Consultation with and guidance for ethical and practice-related questions
• The opportunity to give back to the profession by participating in the governance and regulation of the profession

Some of these benefits are not unique to professional regulatory bodies, but some are. Specifically, the increased legitimacy that the grant of self-regulation gives to a profession and its members is something that ‘associations’ which exists to serve the interests of their members can never match.

Having listed these benefits, there are some benefits that professional regulatory bodies cannot provide their members:

• Lobbying government to promote the interest of their members
• Providing member services where doing so provides no benefit to the public
• Providing any member service that would erode the confidence of the public in the ability and willingness of the professional regulatory body to fulfil its public protection mandate by suggesting a bias in favour of members
• Protecting or shielding members from their professional liabilities

The benefits that accrue to members of professional regulatory bodies are side-effects of the promotion and protection of the public interest, but this doesn’t make these benefits any less real. In the end, despite the fact that professional regulatory bodies exist to promote and protect the public interest, there is much in it for professionals to join voluntary professional bodies.

Nonetheless, the essence of professional regulatory bodies is to promote and protect the public interest, just like the essence of professions is to apply one’s skills, knowledge, and competence in the service of others and to the promotion of the public good. Forgetting that this is the essence of professional regulatory bodies and of professions.

Where matters break down is when members want their professional regulatory body to serve their immediate interests. Trying to make professional regulatory bodies into member service organizations is not a recipe for success. This attitude reflects a failure to appreciate the paradox of self-regulation. To get the benefits of true professionhood, professionals need to establish and support a professional regulatory body which places the interests of the public first and foremost. But when professionals get greedy or impatient and put our own self-interest first, or expect the return on investment to be direct and immediate, the social contract between the profession and society is broken and the profession loses the benefits of professionhood (and could eventually lose the privilege of self-regulation).