#50 What is the difference between joining an association and registering with a professional regulatory body?

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Professional associations and professional regulatory bodies are very different organizations, with different missions and mandates and many other important differences. Joining an association and registering with a professional regulatory body are also very different.

Professional associations exist primarily to provide products and services to the members of a profession. These products and services are provided on a subscription basis. There is an annual subscription fee that gives access to a basic package of products and services with the option to purchase additional products and services at a reduced price. Professional regulatory bodies exist mainly to promote and protect the public interest ensuring that the professional they register practice their profession in a safe and effective manner.

The relationship between members and an association is relatively straightforward, one pays one’s dues and one gets benefits. The relationship between members and a regulatory body is something quite different, however.

At the core of the relationship between members and their professional regulatory body is a legally binding covenant. As a condition of registration, members of professional regulatory bodies agree to abide by the regulatory body’s enabling legislation, regulations, and by-laws. Members of the agree to practice their profession in accordance with the code of ethics, rules of professional conduct, and any
other professional guidance issues by their regulatory body. What is important to note is that these are not just agreements but legally binding covenants which are enforceable by the courts if need be.

Members of professional regulatory bodies accept to be subject to the authority of their professional regulatory body. They must cooperate with their professional regulatory body in the investigation of any complaint made against them, and accept any order made by their regulatory body made pursuant to any authority granted in the enabling legislation. Members of professional regulatory bodies accept certain limitations on their rights to privacy that come with registration with a professional regulatory body.

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Consider the public register, for example. Professional associations will have member directories, and professional regulatory bodies will have public registers—but these are very different things. The member directories of professional associations are a service provided to members to facilitate networking. Listing in the member directory is by choice. Public registers are maintained by professional regulatory bodies to serve the needs of the public to have relevant information about the professionals who serve them. Listing in the public register is mandatory, and members cannot choose to omit information that they would rather not see in the public domain. It is also the case that information on the public register will remain posted for some time, and in some cases indefinitely, even when the individual ceases to be a member of the professional regulatory body.

Members of professional regulatory bodies are also subject to a variety of requirements including continuing professional development, mandatory professional liability insurance requirements, self-reporting obligations, mandatory participation in quality assurance programs, and so on.

The relationship of a member to their professional regulatory body is entirely different from the relationship of a member to their professional association. The former is much more serious matter, one that impacts legal rights and privileges. It is important that professionals understand the difference and understand that this covenant is much more than just another click-through.