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# What is a Professional?

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## ABSTRACT

Calling one's self a professional in any field brings with it many benefits, rights, and responsibilities. This article explores the difference between an occupation and a profession, and defines what it means to be a professional. The importance of membership in a professional organization is discussed, including the benefits of active participation. Various ways to engage within a professional organization are explained. The win-win nature of professionalism is emphasized.

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you are a student in the throes of learning about your chosen career, or maybe you have already expended the time and money it takes to become educated in your chosen field, completed an internship or other on-the-job training program, and are ready to begin working in the field. Possibly you have been practicing for many years but still relish the experience of the work you do each day. Whatever career phase you are in, your heart soars with the pride of being able to call yourself a professional. But what does it actually mean to be a professional?

## OCCUPATION VS. PROFESSION

People who participate in an occupational group deliver important goods or services, are committed to serving their clientele, and claim a specific association to the marketplace (Weil, 2008). In many instances, tutors might be considered an occupational group. Beyond these three important criteria, additional codification factors must occur before an occupation can be considered a profession. Educational standards must be developed and protocols for carrying out the work in an ethical manner must be created and agreed upon. To ensure quality, these standards must inform professional conduct and should go beyond the expectations of the law, the marketplace, and the public (Weil, 2008). Educational and ethical standards are binding to those who assert themselves as members of the profession (Weil, 2008). According to these criteria, educational therapy, as defined by AET, is a profession, and those who meet the standards may proudly call themselves professionals.

## BEING A PROFESSIONAL

Being a professional brings with it both benefits and responsibilities. Professionals assert themselves as members of a specialized group. They consider other members of the group as colleagues, without regard to where they conduct business or whether they are active or retired. By calling themselves members of a profession, individuals voluntarily imply that they

will practice in accordance with the standards and ethical codes of the group when making judgements in the performance of professional tasks (Weil, 2008) and will represent the profession positively through their actions. They make a tacit agreement to support the profession and to contribute to its development in positive and meaningful ways. In turn, the professionals receive inherent benefits from the history, reputation, and solidarity of the profession. The more cohesive and established the profession, the greater the potential tangible and intangible benefits. Tangible benefits include financial remuneration and daily participation in meaningful activities. Collegial support, mentorship, respect, and positive public opinion are among the intangible benefits of being a part of a profession. Many professionals report gaining greater benefit from their status when they belong to a professional organization, such as AET (Spalding, 2017).

## BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP IN A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION

Membership in a professional organization is one important thing a person can do to increase the tangible and intangible benefits of being a professional (Scholnik, 2013). Association membership also provides opportunities to impact the direction and positive development of the profession.

Professional organizations are typically nonprofit organizations whose focus is to support members as they develop and enforce standards, promote research, and provide continuing education and certification (Shethna, 2017). They also further the growth, public understanding and visibility of the profession, and seek to influence related public policy and law (Shethna, 2017). Perhaps, the most obvious benefits of membership in a professional organization are prospects for networking and opportunities to learn about your chosen career from leaders in the field, but there are many more benefits inherent in membership (Scholnik, 2013). Professional organizations frequently offer internships, job opportunities, or referrals. Membership can be an excellent addition to your resume, particularly if you take on an active role in the organization through committee work, volunteering, or holding office. Some graduate programs and career coaches suggest that active participation in your professional organization can be the thing that makes you stand out from other job candidates. Employers are frequently impressed by people who are knowledgeable about current trends in the field. Many professional organizations offer benefits, including low cost insurance and support with building or growing your business. Continuing education, such as conferences, workshops, webinars, study groups, and publications, are a major benefit of membership in a professional organization. Professional organizations create and set the standards for their profession; they monitor ethical behavior and work to increase the visibility and respectability

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of the profession. Many professional organizations provide a career track to additional levels of professional achievement, certification, and recognition. Earning additional certifications can contribute to an increase in business and community respect. Professional organizations also influence public policies that have the potential to impact the field. They disseminate information to members and encourage active involvement in the community. Finally, professional organizations provide an opportunity for civic participation. Many organizations rely heavily on volunteers. The amount and structure of volunteer opportunities within an organization will vary depending, in part, on the resources and capacity of the organization, the nature of the leadership, culture, and communication within the organization, and the needs and abilities of the volunteers (Nesbitt et al., 2018). Membership provides opportunities for personal and professional growth as well as a chance to give back to the field that provides you with financial remuneration, career development, and personal growth and satisfaction (Fox, 2017). In fact, Fox (2017) suggests that professionals should consider giving back a duty rather than an option.

### **BENEFITS OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION**

Membership in a professional organization is crucial to fully accessing the rights and responsibilities of participation in a profession, but is simple membership optimal for garnering the full benefit of affiliation? There are many ways for a professional to participate in the win-win relationship of membership in a professional organization. Each professional will need to assess the level at which he or she is comfortable participating as well as his or her personal capacity for participation. The simple act of paying membership fees is one important way to support your professional organization. The organization receives much needed funds, and the member receives all the tangible and intangible benefits of association. However, there are many other ways to participate. Financial support in the form of a tax-deductible donation ensures that the organization has the capacity to provide high-quality services. Many grant organizations require a high percentage of membership philanthropy, so even \$1.00 helps add to your organization's ability to seek outside funding for beneficial programs. Some members include their professional organization in their yearly giving plan or opt for a small monthly donation to ensure that the organization thrives. Active participation in local meetings or chapters, such as regular attendance at study group meetings, provides mutual support, education, and growth for all who attend as well as important feedback for the organization. In addition, volunteering is an excellent way to give back to your professional community. It also provides the opportunity for networking, mentoring, and the potential to influence the policies of the organization and direction of the profession. Anything from a few hours of assistance at an event, to committee participation, board membership, or holding office can benefit both the professional and the organization. Many research studies report the mental and physical health benefits of volunteering. This research shows that people who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression than people

who do not volunteer (Grimm et al., 2007). In addition to the inherent health benefits, volunteering is shown to have a positive cumulative impact on life satisfaction, social well-being, and depression (Yueng et al., 2018). Additionally, volunteer work has become a critical component that many employers seek in a well-rounded resume (Leyland, 2011). The more you are able to put into your organization, the more you are likely to benefit from participation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Calling yourself a professional in any field is an honor and a privilege. One important way to enhance your professionalism and develop your business is membership in a professional organization. Membership provides, among other things, opportunities for professional development, networking, mentoring, referrals, a framework for ethical practice, and respect by association. Being a part of a profession brings with it both rights, such as the right to practice your craft or use the titles associated with your level of professional achievement, and responsibilities, such as a tacit agreement to support and give back to the professional community. Active participation in your professional organization through financial support, volunteering, or holding office is an excellent way give back to the professional community while influencing the direction of the profession.

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