

A 'first person' look at being a professional
written by Vernon Moen
November 20, 2009

If asked what it means to be a 'professional', many professionals might stumble. It seems, at first, to be a lofty question requiring a lofty answer.

But if I ask myself what I routinely do as a professional that I might not do in other areas of my life, I have answers to that question that are clear and easy. So I am going to give you a 'first person' answer to that question that might just serve you well:

If I agree to solve a problem or produce a product, then I have made a contract that I am generally liable to complete. If I agree to solve a problem, then I commitment to this problem. I own it. It is mine. I am like the dog that won't give up the stick he has just 'fetched'. I won't let go until I am finished with it.

So now that I have a firm grip on the stick, what do I do about it? I take a deep breath, put myself in the right frame of mind, and begin examining the problem to find something in particular: The minimum deliverable. I want to find the very minimum requirements that I can deliver, including the latest delivery date that I can meet, that will satisfy the most important operational needs of the client.

Of course, every client has a wish list that goes well beyond the minimum deliverable. But as a professional I contractually commit to the minimum deliverable and nothing more. Then, of course, I make good and sure that I meet that minimum deliverable and at least a little extra. (If all I ever deliver is the minimum deliverable the client will find another professional sooner rather than later). With the minimum deliverable firmly in my mind I am clear on what must come first. Not meeting this minimum deliverable always carries severe penalties.

I plan to have my minimum deliverable completed ASAP, preferably before half of my available time is gone. Clearly, with this time line in mind, there is a fair to middling chance that I won't have to pull too many all-night efforts in the days before the drop-deadline. I don't always meet the lofty goals of getting it done in half the available time, nor do I always produce more than the minimum deliverable.

Now I begin setting up the problem. Using a word processor in 'outline' mode will do. I write down in plain English the minimum deliverable, then the general work it will take to meet this deliverable. I note which work items I know how to do, and estimate how long it will take to do these items.

On every item I am familiar with doing, I estimate that it will take almost no time at all. That is because I am absolutely crappy at remembering just how long it took me the last time, and my mind really compresses the time taken by familiar activities. This is a serious danger when I estimate the time it will take me to do familiar activities.

It is likely that some of the work is new or unfamiliar to me. This is the work that will determine my success or failure in the project, and failure is not an option. It is probably not new to the world in general. I immediately begin searching for authority on how to do the work I am not good at.

That doesn't seem very professional, does it? Instead of trying to 'solve' the problem myself, I turn to other professionals for guidance. Look, people, I can't afford to miss my minimum deliverable. That is my commitment, and not to some lofty ideal that I 'master' every problem before me on my own. That

would be silly and, quite frankly, fatal to my career.

Mostly I refer to written documentation which, frankly, is abundant. But it never hurts to have a 'conversation' with another professional on occasion. This conversation is another key example of where I must preform professionally if I hope to get any good quality help. Qualified professionals hold conversations, and not 'question and answer' sessions. I always form my question this way: "I am currently working on this problem, and I am doing this work just now. I was thinking of doing it this way. Am I on the right track?"

I almost never get blown off. If the guy knows the stuff, he will inevitably go on and on about stuff I don't understand. I nod my head as if I get it, but in the end I clarify by saying: "So if I understand correctly I should start by doing this?" He will correct me if I am all wrong, and I say thanks and head off to try these first steps. I don't expect that I will, all of a sudden, become equally enlightened as the expert. All I want is to get started on the work.

I have always found that the solution becomes more clear when I do some steps towards the this solution. Of course I sometimes find myself at a step I don't know how to do again. No matter: I go back to this same expert and give him a brief progress report, then say "I was going to do this now. Am I on the right track still?" Almost always the expert gives me the guidance I need. I return the favour, of course, in areas that I am familiar with. This is how it works between professionals.

But when I go to ask the expert, how do I know what 'this' is when I don't have a clue what to do next? Simple. I make a wild guess. It doesn't matter if I am right or wrong. What matters is the psychology. I must convince the person who's time I am consuming that I am not dependent on him for answers. I will go ahead without him and learn from my own experience if necessary. And I will, because I own this problem and I must solve it.

Speaking of conversations, it is obvious when I meet a professional. They discuss things. They never present questions as cries for help. They never answer with nouns or single words. It sometimes starts with a yes or no, but always progresses from there. Experts know that all answers are context sensitive. They feel the absolute need to qualify the answer so that it doesn't get misinterpreted. I do this. I do this because often I am in conversation with a client, and there is a liability attached to every answer I give. Fear makes me careful.

If I am approached by someone with a 'professional' question, I am always calculating my liability when I answer this question. If it is another professional asking for help, I always qualify my answer and then assume the courtesy of not being held liable for the answer. If it is an amateur then I probably won't volunteer to help. The liability is greater. Beyond this, the amateur sucks up way too much energy and time.

Contrary to popular believe, making a slip does not disqualify you as a professional. I make mistakes all the time. However, I make every effort to catch them myself, or have a cohort catch them for me before the client does. In any event, I make every effort to deliver to the client before the drop deadline in the hope that the client will catch any mistakes before it gets too costly.

For good reason I gave up on 'making my best effort'. I realized a long time ago that if I had time and resources to spare I could always do better and more complete work. So instead I have set myself a simple rule: I make a good effort. Making a good effort simply means applying good techniques, and paying fair attention to what I am doing. It also means continually monitoring for improvements I

could make if I had more time and resources. It includes monitoring for the inevitable mistakes I am currently making. I make notes to this effect all the time. It is humbling at first, but a life-saver in the end. It makes recovery from those mistakes more likely and less costly.

Oh yes, one more thing: As a professional I charge for my time.

So now, if I may be so bold, I will propose a fairly complete set of bullets that describes what I do as a professional. Perhaps they might serve as guidance:

- **Getting your teeth into the problem**
- **Identifying the Minimum Deliverable**
- **Starting a Plan**
- **Starting work on the unfamiliar (dangerous) parts first**
- **Getting help on the unfamiliar work**
- **Asking the questions right, not just the right questions**
- **Getting more help when needed**
- **Never making your best effort**
- **Finishing the minimum deliverable ahead of the drop deadline**
- **Delivering a little more than the minimum deliverable**
- **Getting paid**