What Makes a Trainer "Professional"

(Written in June 2014 and revised in July 2024)

When I initially wrote this article, I was asked whether a qualification or certification is the final ingredient that makes a trainer a professional. That question never seems to go away and has been raising its head more often recently with clients I have chatted with. I thought I would share my "personal" thoughts on the matter.

I hope my answer encourages you to consider what being a "professional" Facilitator, Trainer, or Tutor means to you. This could be extremely important for freelancers or associate trainers as the brand we think we have compared to the brand we are seen to have by others may not be the same.

I believe that we need to learn what makes us professional, achieve that, and then advertise why we deem ourselves professional trainers.

First, let's seek to establish the meaning of the word professional. As we can see below, there are a few different takes on this and even how we tend to use or perceive this word.

Some examples include:

1. Relating to or belonging to a profession, such as a professional builder, teacher, glassier, etc.

2. Worthy of or appropriate to a professional person; competent, skilful, or assured:

   - Their professional expertise.

   - A true professional at what they do.

   - That person is a professional in their field.

3. A person who is certified or qualified in a skill set within a recognised profession:

   - Professionals such as lawyers, doctors, surveyors…

4. Engaged in a specified activity as one's main paid occupation rather than as an amateur.

   Examples of such professions include:

   - a professional boxer

   - a professional musician

   - a professional footballer

In my opinion, there is nothing absolutely definitive about what a professional is. So, perhaps it is more of a personal perspective of professionalism and, therefore, differing opinions. If so, we must try to cover all perspectives to be recognised as professional by anyone.

My main point, however, is that there is sufficient, if not overwhelming, evidence to suggest that trainers must prove their professionalism in a way that will satisfy all perspectives, perhaps more so if we are "associate" trainers.

I read an article that stated, " Those qualified professionals among us are probably the ones we should discuss this with." This suggests we can be professionals without qualifications or certifications in our chosen occupation!

What makes a professional footballer a professional? With my very poor knowledge of football, I would suggest that their skill, experience, club history, goal scoring, defending capability, and so on determine their status as a professional, not a qualification.

However, playing devil's advocate, if I were to ask parents whether they prefer their children's teachers to be Qualified or not, the response would not just be "Qualified," but they would insist on it. I would suggest most parents find the concept of having their children taught by an unqualified teacher ridiculous and even irresponsible! So, how many people think the same about trainers?

What about the builder, plumber, or tradesperson working on your home? Would you not check that they are certified, affiliated, or registered with a governing body such as the Federation of Master Builders, CIPHE, CORGI, or NICEIC?

Look back at those parents and ask what they wanted to see regarding teachers' qualifications. I would suggest their main focus was not on whether teachers were qualified in geography, history, or science but whether they were qualified to "**teach**"!

So, becoming a "Professional" trainer does not just mean I have vast experience regarding my subject matter expertise; it also means we must be certified, qualified, or both to **train** others, proving our ability to transfer skills, knowledge, and understanding effectively.

Getting certified proves your skill and that you invest in your professionalism.

If we wish to be treated as professionals, should we not do all we can to prove our professionalism and not just rest on our laurels by saying, "I have been delivering training for X years"?

I have been in the training arena for over 40 years, but my experience does not necessarily prove my quality. Experience adds credibility, but what is the whole package that makes us a "professional" trainer/facilitator in the eyes of others? Do I "have" to gain an excellent qualification to be accepted by all? I think we should! Better safe than sorry!

I believe I am regarded as a "professional" facilitator/trainer of learning due to a combination of factors. This includes many years of experience, the positions I have held, the certifications and qualifications I hold, the well-known brands I have been trusted to work with, and particularly my investment in the renewal of those certificates professing me to be a professional trainer and facilitator.

As trainers, we know all too well about "skill fade", so why ignore our own? To add to all this, I have statements from people who regard me as both passionate and professional in what I do. It all adds up to create my professionalism and my personal brand as a trusted trainer.

As a health check, try answering the questions below and see what you think. After all, only you can truly decide whether to invest in a membership, certificate, or qualification if you think it is worth it, regardless of what anyone else says. But be conscious of what others think.

1. Are you a member of a professional organisation or governing body that recognises you as a professional in your field?

2. Do you have a certification or qualification specific to delivering **training** to prove your skills, knowledge and understanding as a facilitator/trainer/tutor?

3. Do you demonstrate your commitment to CPD by having your skills monitored on a regular basis? (Addressing the "Skill Fade" issue).

4. Can you provide references from other recognised professionals supporting, proving and enhancing your credibility?

5. Are you subject to, and do you adhere to, codes of professional conduct that promote ethical and even moral obligations?

All the above ingredients add substance to our claim that we are professionals, but it does not mean we cannot act professionally without them.

However, if you could get into two taxis where both were experienced, but one had no driving licence, and the other did, which driver would you choose and why?

I would recognise both drivers' experience, but I would wonder why one didn't have a licence. I, personally, would go with the licensed driver, as they have met the driving standards under test conditions and passed. Food for thought, perhaps. What would you do?

I personally think the answer about being a professional is clear for a few reasons:

1. Investing your time and effort in your own CPD proves your desire to pursue quality and standards constantly and, therefore, shows you are acting responsibly and professionally.

2. Work opportunities in our world will not wait! If you have certifications and qualifications and don't need them, it doesn't matter, but if you need them and haven't got them, it matters a lot.

3. Gaining qualifications and certifications takes time, so act now to avoid disappointment or being deemed second choice because you lack certification in delivering training.

Ultimately, I believe what makes you a "Professional" may not be so much about what you think of yourself but **more** about what others think of you.

"The opportunity to learn is a gift; the opportunity to teach is a privilege."

~ Mac Macdonald ~