



**AuSAE 2005 National Conference.
Association Management: A Professional Evolution.**

By

June Smith

1. INTRODUCTION

Like other occupations, such as nursing, policing and financial planning, your occupation is moving towards new and important considerations of what it means, in both an ethical and professional sense, to be an Association Executive.

In this context, can Association Management become a recognized profession, with Association Executives as the members of that profession, and what does this mean?

Recognised professions usually meet a number of common criteria including the existence of a common identity; an altruistic motive rather than individual self interest; a strong ethical context; intense academic preparation and an esoteric common body of knowledge.

This session will consider these issues and ask:

- What does it mean to be a professional and a member of a profession in the 21st century?
- What are the key features of a profession?
- How does an occupation evolve into a profession?
- What are some of the key competencies required of an Association Executive?
- What journey does Association Management need to take in order to be recognized as a profession in its own right?

This will lead into Michael Anderson's presentation where he will look at the Canadian experience and discuss in more detail how Association Management is transforming into a profession internationally. This will include a presentation of the AuSAE competency framework for the recognition of the Professional Association Executive.

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My role therefore is to set the theoretical framework for your future discussions and most importantly – get you thinking.

2. WHAT IS A PROFESSION? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

There is no generally accepted definition of the term “profession” outside the dictionary or thesaurus version. The Collins Dictionary² defines a profession as:

A type of work requiring special training, such as in the law or medicine. The people employed in such an occupation.

An “occupation” is defined as: *a person's job or profession.* Whereas the term “professional” is defined as:

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2 Collins Compact Australian Dictionary, 2000, HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney

Taking part in an activity, such as sport or music as a means of livelihood. Displaying a high level of competence or skill: A professional and polished performance undertaken by people who are paid.

I confess to being somewhat perplexed by the overuse of these words today, particularly the use of the word ‘professional’ as both an adjective and a noun, in circumstances where the latter is intended to describe membership of a profession. I can cope with someone being called a professional tennis player or that staff from Harvey World Travel refer to themselves as the “travel professionals”, but this does not make either members of a profession. Can you have the profession of tennis playing? What is meant is that tennis players now get paid to do this task full time and at times, undertake that task in what is commonly described as a professional manner, for example by being respectful of the linesmen.

In this respect, I agree with Robert Brown³ that the word “professional” has been devalued. It no longer refers to a person acting independently with a focus on the client and the wider public interest. It simply refers to how well a person performs a task which he or she is trained to do.

This is not the same as belonging to a profession. For example, it would seem odd I believe for someone to be called a “professional lawyer”, almost a tautology.

So for the purposes of this paper, I shall use the term “profession” to mean a vocation requiring special training and a “professional” to mean a member of a profession.

I have lost count of the different professions or professional labels I have been tagged with during my career, including:

- Lawyer
- Public servant
- Association manager
- Company Secretary
- CEO
- Consultant
- Teacher
- Ethicist

Of course some would say I have now reverted to type having returned to the law. I would say I never really left it. Why? Because that is the profession I have always associated myself with, that is my calling and training. In a sense and from a professional perspective, if I tell you I am a lawyer, you may immediately identify with who I am, the service I can offer and how I will provide it.

Traditionally society has recognized different groups as being professions such as lawyers, doctors, engineers and priests. Traditionally they gave advice and counsel using specialised skill sets that set them apart from other citizens. Over time they formed collegiate groups and began articulating the requisite skills and requirements necessary to be a member of that group. This was coupled with them being recognized as a unique group within society, albeit over hundreds of years.

In contrast, other occupations have taken different Journeys. For example, financial planning, as a method of providing financial advice, only began to crystallize in the 1980's. The Financial Planning Association of Australia⁴ (“the FPA”), for example, was only formed on 1 January 1992 from a merger of the Australian branch of the International Association of Financial Planners and the Australian Society of Investment Financial Advisers. After only 13 years its membership is on the cusp of recognition as an emerging profession although I believe it will take another five to ten years for this to fully occur.

An emerging profession is an occupation which has some generalized knowledge and community orientation and whose status is clearly defined by others.⁵ For example, social work. Its members do not share equal amounts of any feature or characteristic that they may possess as a group, but the elite within that group are clearly

³ Brown, R.C., 2002, “Have the Professions Lost the Plot?” *St James Ethics Centre Newsletter*, Winter, Issue 48, p.6.

⁴ Financial Planning Association of Australia, *CFP Education program - Ethics, professionalism and Compliance CFP1*. CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ and CFP® are marks owned by the Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards, inc. (USA) and used by the FPA under license.

⁵ Barber, B. 1988, “Professions and emerging professions”, in Callahan, J.(eds.) *Ethical Issues in Professional Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp.35-38

professional. It is usually they who push for the advancement of professionalisation within the group.

Indeed the rise in the number of emerging professions is indicative of a recent phenomenon. The rapid increase in the number of recognized professions in the 20th century is probably related to the fact that one characteristic of a profession is the provision of advice rather than a thing. Technically complex societies, such as the ones that exist now require a greater application of specialised knowledge to function effectively⁶. This trained ability or knowledge then provides an important service to society by assisting in the delivery of some key human activity as we shall discuss in more detail later.

Appreciating how traditional professions have developed allows emerging professions to consider the essential characteristics and responsibilities of their own occupation or group, the qualifications and codes of practice they may require and the uniqueness of their common identity and objectives.

Appreciating that we now live in a world where the recognition of professions will become more commonplace is also important for a group such as yourselves who are embarking on this journey.

You may ask why any group would want to be a profession? I suggest there are numerous reasons including that traditionally professions have been associated with respect, social status and autonomy. Its understandable therefore that more groups would want to be recognized in this way.

3. THE KEY FEATURES OF A PROFESSION.

There is a distinction between a profession and an occupation. Although there may not always be a clear dividing line between the two, some argue⁷ that a profession and the behaviour expected of its members follow a number of common criteria, including:

- a) A common identity;
- b) An altruistic motive or a primary orientation to the community interest rather than individual self interest;
- c) Intense academic preparation and an esoteric common body of knowledge;
- d) A strong ethical context usually articulated in a Code of Ethics;
- e) A high degree of autonomy of decision making and self control of behaviour; and
- f) Usually, a certain institutional status which is typically accorded legal recognition and protection.

Others⁸ suggest that the question of whether or not an occupation is more or less professionalized depends on how thoroughly it manifests these characteristics. For example, paradigm professions like medicine and law have strengths in some areas that others lack such as institutionalized status.

Inevitably, not all professions meet all the criteria and some occupations will meet some, but not others – however, this does not detract from the fact that there is a distinction that can be made.

So let's consider some of these criteria in more detail.

4. HOW DOES AN OCCUPATION EVOLVE INTO A PROFESSION?

I recently read an article⁹ which argued that for financial planning to be accepted as a real profession and financial planners as real professionals, they had to start "thinking like a financial planner". This meant that financial planners had to develop a professional identity, a tradition, a common way of looking at themselves and their relationships to their clients.

So I ask you – Do you think like an Association Executive? Do Association Executives know who they are as a group, why they are, what they are and how they do it? I suggest you must be able to answer these types of

⁶ Callahan, J. (eds.), *Ethical Issues in Professional life*, Oxford University Press 1988 at p. 28

⁷ Barber, B. 1988, op cit. Other authors who share this view include:

Wagner, R. B. 2004, "To think ...like a CFP", *Journal of Financial Planning*, February, vol. 17, issue 2, pp.64-70 and

Miller, S. 2002, *Model Code of Ethics Principles*, paper prepared for the Professional Standards Council, June, P.S.C., Sydney

⁸ Callahan, J (eds.), op cit, p. 28.

⁹ Wagner op. cit, p. 64.

questions as a group to reach the end of this journey.

Many occupations have become or aspire to become a recognized profession. Recent examples include policing, nursing, and journalism. All have the characteristic of working with ambiguity.

Some occupations have become professions by developing an intellectual interest or field of knowledge that is shared, for example, psychology. Others have developed a unique practice in a particular field of endeavour, for example, archeology.

Most pursue recognition as a profession to ensure a change in status of the occupation, for more recognition, more independence and autonomy, maybe a clearer distinction between those on the inside and those on the outside. The reasons are numerous.

What are some of the characteristics or features of a profession that are required for this evolution to occur and how might this be relevant to Association Management?

(a) A common identity.

The members of a profession usually share a common identity. This includes a collective accountability or responsibility in relation to the ethical behaviour and competence of other colleagues.¹⁰ The individual obligation to report unethical behaviour for example, is part of the collective responsibility to ensure minimum standards within the group are complied with.

The question to be asked then is: do Association Executives share a common identity as a profession or group and if so, what is it? According to AusSAE information I have read, its membership derives from business, professional, technical, trade, sporting and welfare associations. There are also members from religious and educational associations. However, despite their varied backgrounds, Association Executives have a number of things in common:

- They usually work in not for profit organizations which have a unique culture not found in commercial enterprises;
- This work is performed in the service of others, usually the membership of the association.

The common identity of this group at the moment therefore may not be so much about where its members have come from or the training they have received, but what the group represents now and where it wants to go.

(b) An altruistic motive or a primary orientation to the community interest rather than individual self interest.

One of the strengths of a profession is this notion of a vocation. That is: a profession takes its moral status from its links to others in the delivery of some key human function¹¹ such as the delivery of justice, health services or religion. Members of traditional professions in particular often identify with a special urge to enter the particular calling or career.

Even in emerging professions there is usually a “common calling” or “vocation”¹² and a sense of serving others, although it tends to be more heterogeneous in nature than say for medicine or religion.

In relation to financial planning, the overarching objective is to assist clients with personal financial advice. For lawyers it is the administration of justice. For doctors it is the prevention of illness and healing of the sick.

Ask yourselves – what is the altruistic motive of Association Executives? Does Association Management have a common calling? Is Association Management a vocation? Are you obliged as Association Executives to act appropriately in accordance with a particular status?

Membership of a profession also means one has responsibilities to others; to clients; to the community; to other professionals and usually to authorities such as regulators, professional associations or the law. “In the service of others” is the well known catch cry often used. In others members of professions shouldn’t just be in it for the money or to earn a living. This is also very clearly linked to a profession’s obligation to avoid self interest and

¹⁰ Miller, op cit, p 56.

¹¹ Oakley, J. and Cocking, D, 2001, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles*, Cambridge University press.

¹² Callahan op cit, p27.

act in the interests of their client and the wider public at large.

(c) Intense academic preparation and an esoteric common body of knowledge.

The successful undertaking of the work of a profession involves the completion of extensive and ongoing education in a common body of knowledge by its members. This is necessary because of the unique, complex and specific nature of a profession's work as previously discussed, usually involving the provision of advice, not a thing. A profession's work is also fundamentally underpinned by the ethical obligation to act with competence, due care and skill and this cannot be achieved without a great deal of training. As professions have access to and control specialized knowledge, society is also dependent on them for the effective use of that knowledge.¹³

The training usually involves a significant intellectual component due to the intellectual tasks and skill sets required to perform the services offered. Indeed, by holding yourself out as a member of a profession –say, an Association Executive or a lawyer, you are impliedly representing that you have the training, competency and professionalism of such a practitioner.

The knowledge base of a profession is usually associated with an undergraduate degree in the traditional professions, but this doesn't always have to be the case for emerging professions. For example, financial planning is associated with a Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Financial Services (Financial Planning) and then accreditation through specific programs such as the Certified Financial Planner™ program conducted by the FPA and the Personal Financial Planner designation program conducted by CPA Australia.

Recently the FPA has decided that from 1 July 2007 an applicant to the CFP® program will require an undergraduate degree in a related discipline.

One of the stated objectives of AuSAE is to provide structured and/or formal education modules and a certified program, in addition to the provision of an accreditation program that acknowledges skill levels gained through education and experience.

Continuing professional development is also important to all professions. The application of professional judgment over the years requires a professional to keep knowledge and skills current. It is a commitment you make for life. Most of you may already belong to another profession, such as the law or accounting, so are already bound by such requirements under the terms of that membership.

(d) A strong ethical context;

What does it mean in a moral sense to be an Association Executive?

The ethical obligations and ethical context of a profession stem from the role it plays or institutions it serves. The concept of a profession by definition therefore implies infinite levels of ethical complexity and ambiguity in decision making¹⁴.

In this context the test of professional ethics is not of satisfying one's personal conscience but of acting in ways that are consistent with the duties entrusted to the professional role¹⁵. This means as a member of a profession you not only have individual moral obligations but share in the collective moral obligation of the profession.¹⁶

Ethics and related concepts such as morality and values mean different things to different people, but the Collins Australian Dictionary¹⁷ defines ethics as "a moral principle or set of moral values held by an individual or a group." Morals are really principles of behaviour usually in accordance with community standards of right and wrong.

In summary then, ethics¹⁸ is fundamentally interested in character. It is about the actions an individual ought to

¹³ Thompson, D. 2004 "Tasking the Taskforce: When is a CFP® Certificant a Fiduciary?" *Journal of Financial Planning*, March, p.22.

¹⁴ Francis, R. D. 2000, *Ethics and Corporate Governance: An Australian Handbook*, University of NSW Press Ltd., Sydney

¹⁵ Preston, N. 1999, *Understanding Ethics* the Federation Press, Sydney.

¹⁶ George, R. 1986, *Professions, Business & Ethics*, 2nd ed. MacMillan, New York at p.338

¹⁷ *Collins Dictionary*, op cit.

¹⁸ Francis, R.D. 1994, *Business Ethics in Australia – A Practical Guide*, Centre for Professional Development, Law Book Company Ltd. Victoria.

take, the behaviour they should exhibit in particular circumstances and the ideals and morals they should uphold in their decision making and reasoning processes. It assists us in determining what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and where the boundaries lie in terms of relationships with others.

It is very unlikely that one individual will have exactly the same ethical values or perceptions as another. In addition each situation and ethical dilemma faced will be different. Making ethical decisions is not as easy as following a black and white formula as there are so many shades of grey in real life situations.

I suggest there is a set of fundamental principles¹⁹ that shape the ethical value and moral values of most individuals, which also assist with and influence the decisions we make as professionals and Association Executives. Here are just some of them:

- Personal responsibility and accountability
- Integrity
- Honesty
- Fairness
- Fidelity or loyalty
- Respect for others
- Justice

Let's consider how these principles may relate to a new profession of Association Management:

Integrity

High standards of straightforwardness and sincerity in the provision of professional services are expected. For example, a professional should not engage in an act or omission that misleads, is deceptive, dishonest or fraudulent. Integrity also demands that personal interest not come before honesty and candour.

Honesty

Association Managers are placed in a position of trust and confidence by their stakeholder groups, who should therefore feel confident that all dealings with their Executives are underpinned by honesty. To be honest and trustworthy is one of the duties of all professions.²⁰ Dishonesty and untrustworthiness, including cheating in accreditation and CPD programs, places professional reputations at risk.

Fairness

Professional services should be provided in a manner that is fair and reasonable. This requires impartiality, intellectual honesty and disclosure of conflicts of interest. It contemplates treating others the same way that the Association Executive would want to be treated.

Respect for others

There is an obligation for Association Executives to act with dignity, respect and courtesy in dealing with all stakeholders including fellow professionals.

Justice

In using professional judgment to resolve ethical dilemmas, Association Executives should consider what is right, fair or just in any business or professional arrangement. Of course what is just or due to a person may be adjudicated in different ways. I suggest a distributive justice model which is concerned with who ought to get what; based on merit, need or ability. It is akin to social justice.

These aspirational principles are usually articulated in some form in a professional Code of Ethics and sit above minimum legal and regulatory requirements. They should be used by members of a profession as a framework for responding to ethical dilemmas. They are usually supplemented by matters such as a duty of care, skill and competence. Most also frown on behaviour that brings the rest of the group into disrepute.²¹ For example, Codes often have a rule that members of a profession conduct themselves in a manner that brings credit to the profession and must ensure that their behaviour and conduct does not bring the profession into

¹⁹ Smith, B. 2002. "An Ethics Primer", *CPCU eJournal*, May.

²⁰ Leinster, S. 2002 "Do what I say, not what I do", *Medical Education*, 36, pp.113-114.

²¹ Financial Planning Association of Australia, Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct, Regulation 1/97.

CPA Australia & Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia, APS 12 – Statement of Financial Advisory Service Standards, (Exposure Draft), March 2005.
, Law Society of NSW,

disrepute.

In this day and age everyone and everything seems to have a Code of Ethics, including organizations, so I no longer believe that this criteria alone is indicative of the presence of a profession, but it is a mechanism to define and articulate the behaviour expected of its members, how they should conduct themselves and the ethical values shared. It becomes the standard by which they are judged as a group.

Whilst I also acknowledge that there is no absolute common morality that can be identified in a Professional Code of Ethics,²² and that many dispute the influence such a Code has on behaviour²³, a common set of professional rules add value to ethical decision making and allows some self control of behaviour.

As Professor Miller²⁴ says:

The interdependence of commitment to a common set of ideals and principles is in part constitutive of a self conscious community of practitioners, and is a necessary condition for the community having an ethical (common) culture.

Ask yourself:

- Is there a strong ethical context for Association Executives?
- Do you use professional ethics as defined in a Professional Code of Ethics as a framework when making ethical decisions and providing advice?

(d) A high degree of autonomy of decision making and self control of behaviour.

A profession is also defined by self regulation, which implies a shared ethos and agreed standards of behaviour. This can only be fully effective where the maintenance of those standards within the profession itself is perceived as the responsibility of every individual. This responsibility is repudiated when loyalty to an individual colleague takes the place of loyalty to the profession.

Another characteristic of a profession is autonomy of decision making and the exercise of professional judgment.²⁵ I believe that Association Executives exercise considerable professional judgment in the performance of their tasks as there are not always clear cut solutions to problems or black and white rules.

Remember, appearances and reputation are everything and the exercise of professional judgment in your own interests is a conflict of interest and inconsistent with what the public expects of a professional.

5. SOME KEY COMPETENCIES FOR AN ASSOCIATION MANAGER?

We have already considered the notion that a profession has a common body of knowledge which its members are trained in. This is usually underpinned by a set of key competencies that these professionals must meet.

In the paper I will concentrate on identifying what I believe are some of the key competencies required of an Association Executive. I will leave the personal examples and my rationale to the presentation itself.

The first things that struck me about working for a not for profit association were:

- The different culture – no commercial imperative;
- The sheer number of stakeholders one had to deal with. For me this included a Board, numerous Committees (standing, advisory and reference), other management and staff, members, government, regulators, media, consumer and advocacy groups and the public at large;
- The governance issue – just exactly what are the mission and objectives of the Association, who runs it and why?

²² Seedhouse, D. 1994, "Commitment to health: A shared bond between the professions", *Journal of International Professional Care*, August, vol.16, issue 3, p.249.

²³ Skene, L. 1996, "A Legal perspective on Codes of Ethics" in *Codes of Ethics and the Professions*, Melbourne University Press.

²⁴ Miller, op cit at p51.

²⁵ Dal Pont, 2002, "Ethical Issues Confronting Lawyers – What should I do when?" paper presented to the 13th Commonwealth Law Conference, Melbourne.

- Whose interests do the Executive serve? The Association, its members, the CEO, the Board. I can assure each stakeholder group has a different opinion.

What I understood early on was I needed a wide range of skill sets to tackle the different tasks and duties assigned. Many of you will sympathise with the notion of becoming a “jack of all trades” due to the limited resources available to achieve objectives.

Here are my top six key competencies based on this experience, no doubt there are others you can think of:

- a) Leadership Skills – no Association Executive could do their role without them. This requires leadership of not only management and staff but all stakeholders groups, including the Board. It includes many different types of leadership as well.
- b) Strategic planning – A not for profit association has the unusual honour of purportedly not having to be commercial, whilst at the same time having to be a viable long term financial operation. It requires all of the same business planning and skills as a commercial enterprise.
- c) Advocacy/ Negotiation – Advocating on behalf of members or an industry goes hand in hand with the role, as does the need for significant negotiation skills. I feel this is particularly so given the sheer number of stakeholders involved.
- d) Membership service – that’s what it is all about. Members are clients just like the clients of any other organization, competitors wait in the wind to steal them as well. Unless you have membership service or client service skills as I call them, you may as well go home.
- e) Finance/management – The use of the term “Not for profit” is a misnomer in this sense. In fact I believe more time is spent on making the most of and allocating very finite resources in an association environment. Management skills are crucial given most associations have a small number of staff and so much is expected from so little.
- f) Media and crisis management – Information is power and understanding public relations and its impact on your reputation is vital. You do not want to be thinking about why you didn’t take media training in the middle of your first television interview.

6. What journey does Association Management need to take in order to be recognized as a profession?

My PHD is in part looking at this question in relation to financial planning. That is, whether financial planning has professionalized or what further steps it needs to take on that journey.

I am not going to articulate my thoughts on your occupation because Michael Anderson’s presentation will cover this in detail using the Canadian experience.

So I will simply leave you with the questions posed during the course of this paper:

- Do you think like an Association Executive?
- Do Association Executives know who they are as a group, why they are, what they are and how they do it?
- What is the altruistic motive of Association Executives?
- Does Association Management have a common calling?
- Is Association Management a vocation?
- Are you obliged as Association Executives to act appropriately in accordance with a particular status?
- What specialized training is required to become an Association Executive?
- Is there a common body of knowledge?
- What does it mean in a moral sense to be an Association Executive?
- Is there a strong ethical context for Association Executives?
- Do you use professional ethics as defined in a Professional Code of Ethics as a framework to make ethical decisions and provide advice?
- How do Association Executives exercise professional judgment?
- Is there a key set of competencies required of Association Executives, if so can they be isolated and articulated?

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