

## **A note on project management, and different understandings of the nature of professions and professionals**

*By Alan Stretton*

### **ABSTRACT**

This is an extension of a one-page article I wrote many years ago in the Australian Project Manager entitled “What is a professional?” (Stretton 1997). That article was written for an Australian audience, and briefly discussed differences in common usages and understanding of the nature of a “professional” between Australia and the USA. It appears that similar differences may also exist in other cross-international contexts. This note expands on two different interpretations of the nouns “profession” and “professional” in a general context, and their relevance to the project context.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Stretton 1997 I pointed out that different understandings of what “professional” means had contributed to substantial misunderstandings on both sides in the Australia-USA project management context. These misunderstandings may have diminished in more recent times, but still appear to be significant. Further, there are grounds for believing they may also apply in some other cross-cultural/cross-international contexts. It therefore seems appropriate to expend this topic in a little more detail than was possible in the one page that comprised Stretton 1997. The focus of the following is on different definitions of “profession” and the noun “professional”, and choices made about which interpretations have been commonly adopted by different cultures.

### **DIFFERENCES CONTAINED IN DEFINITIONS OF A PROFESSION**

Definitions of a profession are many and varied. Following are definitions from five different dictionaries, from Australia, UK and USA.

#### **Profession n**

##### The Macquarie Concise Dictionary

1. a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science, esp. one of the three vocations of theology, law, and medicine (formerly known as **the professions** or **the learned professions**);
2. any vocation, occupation, etc.

##### The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (my numbering)

1. A vocation, a calling, esp. one requiring advanced knowledge in some branch of learning or science, spec. law, theology or medicine;
2. *gen.* any occupation as a means of earning a living
3. The body of people engaged in a profession

American Heritage Dictionary (order changed)

- 1b. An occupation, such as law, medicine, or engineering, that requires considerable training and specialised study.
- 1a. An occupation or career.
- 1c. The body of qualified persons in an occupation or field.

Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary

1. a vocation requiring extensive education in science or the liberal arts and often specialised training
2. any vocation or business
3. the body of persons engaged in an occupation

Collins English Dictionary

1. an occupation requiring special training in the liberal arts or sciences, esp. one of the three learned professions, law, theology, or medicine.
2. the body of people in such an occupation

Three interpretations of the noun “profession” can be identified in these definitions.

The first interpretation in each case has a strongly specialised sense, which (following the notation *spec.*, which is an abbreviation of *specific*, *-ally* in the New Oxford English Dictionary), I will discuss under the heading *Specific Interpretation*.

In contrast, the second interpretation in four of the five definitions (excluding Collins) is strongly generalised, and again following the Shorter Oxford's notation *gen.* = *general*, *-ly*, I will discuss this under the heading *General Interpretation*.

The third interpretation, which is in four of the five definitions (excluding Macquarie) is of “profession” meaning the body of persons engaged in an occupation. This interpretation is not particularly relevant to this article, and will not be discussed further. We now discuss the first two interpretations in more detail.

### ***Specific interpretation***

All five definitions emphasise requirements for specialised study/education/training and/or advanced knowledge in relevant professional domains.

With regard to the latter, four of the definitions include law and medicine as specific examples of relevant professional domains, whilst three include theology, and one engineering. The Wikipedia encyclopedia says that the traditional professions were doctors, engineers, lawyers, architects and commissioned military officers.

When I first wrote and spoke on professionalism in 1982, most Australians had a very traditional understanding of the nature of a profession. This *specific interpretation* generally implied the possession of a relevant university degree, or equivalent, as part of the qualification for the right to practice that profession.

It can also be said that there tended to be somewhat elitist overtones to that interpretation, and Stretton 1982 discussed adverse reactions from many quarters related to that phenomenon.

By the time I wrote a second article on professionalism (Stretton 1997) the range of avocations which were regarded as professions in Australia had expanded, but in general the traditional viewpoint of the nature of a profession continued to prevail – in spite of the fact that Australia's Macquarie Concise Dictionary allowed both the specific and the general interpretations.

In the decade leading up to 1997 I was quite heavily involved with the Project Management Institute in the USA. In this period, I became very conscious of the fact that most North Americans had a distinctly different understanding of what a profession meant, although it took some time (and many talking-past-each-other arguments) before I came to clearly recognise that my US colleagues normally embraced the *general interpretation*.

### ***General interpretation***

The *general interpretation* of a profession appears as an alternative in four of the five definitions above. The only exception is the Collins English Dictionary, which confines itself to a *specific interpretation*.

The words used in these four *general interpretations* of a profession are very similar, and essentially embrace any vocation, or occupation, as a means of earning a living.

If we now look at definitions of the noun “professional” in the above dictionaries we can get a more detailed indication of other aspects of this *general interpretation*.

### **Professional n**

The Macquarie Concise Dictionary (my numbering).

- (1) one belonging to one of the learned or skilled professions.
- (2) one who makes a business of an occupation, etc., esp. in an art or sport, in which amateurs engage for amusement or recreation.
- (3) an expert in a game or sport, hired by a sports club to instruct members.

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (order changed)

2. A person engaged in a profession, esp. one requiring advanced knowledge or training.
1. A person who makes a profession of an occupation usually engaged in as a pastime.
3. A person highly skilled or competent in some activity or field.

American Heritage Dictionary

1. A person following a profession, particularly a learned profession
2. One who earns a living in a given or implied occupation
3. A skilled practitioner, an expert

Collins English Dictionary

1. (Business/Professions) a person who belongs to or engages in one of the professions
2. a person who engages for his livelihood in some activity also pursued by amateurs
3. a person who engages in an activity with great competence
4. (General Sporting Terms) an expert player of a game who gives instructions, esp. to members of a club by whom he is hired.

Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary

10. a member of a profession, esp. one of the learned professions
11. a person who earns a living in a sport or other occupation frequently engaged in by amateurs
12. a person who is an expert at his or her work

In each of the five groups of definitions of the noun “professional”, the first interpretation most readily links with the *specific interpretation* of the nature of a profession. The other interpretations most readily link with the *general interpretation*, and introduce further examples.

One such example is the wide-spread use of “professionals” in sporting contexts, both as players and coaches. Another example is professionals who earn a living in some other occupations which are also engaged in by amateurs. The other popular *general interpretation* is a person who is expert, highly skilled or competent in some activity or field.

So, we have added some more specific examples to the very broad “any vocation, or occupation, as a means of earning a living” *general interpretation* of “profession”. We now turn to looking at consequences of difference between the *specific* and *general* interpretations.

**Some consequences of differences between the two interpretations**

The major consequence of differences between the two interpretations is the obvious one of talking at cross-purposes, misunderstandings, and sometimes hostility. As indicated above, my own experience is an example. Up to, and through most of the 1980s, I had the traditional Australian *specific interpretation* of a profession. Indeed, I had never encountered anyone who didn't. But when I became heavily involved with PMI from 1988, it soon became apparent that my North American colleagues generally had quite a different understanding – i.e. a *general interpretation*.

For example, PMI's Project Management Professional (PMP) accreditation puzzled me, because the word “professional” had such a different connotation for me than for my American colleagues. We had many arguments about this, but of course we were talking at cross-purposes. It took quite some time for me to recognise this key difference of interpretation.

As I said in Stretton 1997, addressing an Australian audience,

.....Australians automatically tend to interpret “Project Management Professional” as meaning “professional project manager” [in the *specific interpretation* sense], which, of course, is simply not the case. This lack of understanding of the US usage of the word “professional” lies behind the negative remarks that are often directed by Australians towards the PMP qualification, ..... [and behind] antagonistic responses from US people, who do not recognise that Australians are using the word “professional” in a much narrower context.

Those words were written in 1997. What has happened since then?

### **Indicators that differences between the two interpretations may be declining**

It is difficult to assess how far this has changed in more recent times. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the *specific interpretation* still seems to be dominant in Australia, although I have no empirical data to support this assessment. But the *specific interpretation* is evidently the one that has been adopted by the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), judging by the accreditation processes it has promulgated.

It is also noted that the *specific interpretation* appears to lie behind most of the project management credentialing processes in the UK, and in many parts of Europe.

On the other hand, PMI’s PMP qualification has been obtained by large numbers of people all over the world, and one has the sense that it is much more widely understood that the word “professional” in PMP is used in the *general interpretation* context.

It is therefore concluded that there appears to be a more widespread acknowledgement that there are two different ways in which the nouns “profession” and “professional” are interpreted. However, I have seen examples quite recently which indicate that there are still many project management people who still do not recognise that there are two different interpretations. Consequently, it seems likely that similar misunderstandings may continue to occur.

### **CONCLUDING**

It is hoped that this short article may help project people appreciate that there are two different understandings of the nouns “profession” and “professional”, and that there is consequent potential for misunderstandings, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

### **REFERENCES**

STRETTON, Alan (1997). “What is a Professional?” *The Australian Project Manager*, Vol 17, No 3, September, p 12.

STRETTON, A M (1982). “Questioning Professionalism”. *The Engineering Conference, Hobart*, 22-26 February. The Institution of Engineers, Australia, Preprints of Papers, pp 14-19.

## About the Author



### **Alan Stretton, PhD**

Faculty Corps, University of Management  
and Technology, Arlington, VA (USA)

Life Fellow, AIPM (Australia)



**Alan Stretton** is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 120 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at [alanailene@bigpond.com.au](mailto:alanailene@bigpond.com.au).