



What Makes CM a Profession?

Many CM practitioners would recoil from hearing their work described as “paraprofessional.” Yet that’s exactly the word used by an academic author recently in a recent guest column in *ENR*:

“Trends indicate that the role of construction manager eventually could be considered simply a paraprofessional who works under the direction of an individual with a state-regulated professional license,” this author wrote.

This column appeared at a time when several initiatives were moving forward simultaneously, all based on determining exactly what “professionalism” means as applied to CM and what education, skills, and credentials the industry should rely on in identifying true CM pros.

A joint meeting of CMAA’s Board of Directors and the Board of Governors of the Construction Manager Certification Institute, held in San Diego during the recent CMAA National Conference & Trade Show, devoted several hours to a discussion of these topics. This installment of *CMAAdvisor Professional Practice Corner* draws on that discussion, along with other industry resources, to summarize the status of the CM profession today and the challenges it faces in the future.

Defining a Profession

“The CM profession is largely unregulated,” noted a breakout group at the joint Board meeting. Some participants held that “One key to the definition of a profession is that it is licensed by somebody. Every profession is licensed.” However, it is also common for CM to be performed at a high level by individuals holding licenses as engineers or architects, or holding no government-issued license at all. Moreover, holding an engineer’s or architect’s license doesn’t necessarily reflect qualification to perform CM well.

If a license is not crucial to the definition of a professional, what elements are?

Andrew Abbott, in his book *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labour* (University of Chicago Press, 1988) defines a profession as “an occupational group with some special skill.” Among the keys to a profession’s success are its ability to claim jurisdiction over particular tasks and determine who is entitled to perform those tasks.

The rise of university education has reinforced this power. Abbott held that universities have served as “legitimizers of professional knowledge and expertise.” In the same spirit, the joint Board meeting found that “CMs today are better

educated than in the past, and their scope of work is larger than before, including more social issues. The academic course of study is much more recognized today, and there are more programs than ever before.”

Indeed, CM-specific university programs are becoming both more numerous and more accepted. One reflection of this trend is CMCI’s recent decision to recognize, in reviewing applications for the Certified Construction Manager program, relevant undergraduate degrees granted by any institution accredited under the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In the past, this recognition has been extended only to degrees granted by programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Construction Education (ACCE) or the Accreditation Board in Engineering Technologies (ABET).

Although educational resources continue to grow, a critical element of true professionalism, according to Abbott, is the fact that the profession itself determines what skills and knowledge it requires of newcomers. To be successful, a profession must be able to control who can claim membership. In this regard, Abbott says, “a single, identifiable national association is clearly a prerequisite.”

The Professional Process

One key factor is that professionals bring a special body of knowledge to the service of their client and have a duty to operate in their client’s interest. That body of knowledge, embracing wisdom, experience, creativity, and technical proficiency, is hard to specify and it is hard to measure its delivery. Therefore professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers and now Construction Managers) are selected based on their qualifications more than price.

Critically, a professional has a duty to serve a client’s interest, which a vendor of a specified product does not have.

Another consideration is the standard to which a practitioner is held in assessing the outcome of his or her work. The CMAA College of Fellows addressed this topic in its 2010 White Paper on *Managing Integrated Project Delivery*. The basic question, the Fellows noted, is whether the CM is expected to deliver a *product* or to manage a *process*.

If, by doing a job in a workmanlike way, a practitioner can be expected to deliver the same product to the same specs every time, then the standard by which the work is judged is the creation of a “defect-free” product.

On the other hand, in some cases every job is different and conditions may be difficult to predict, let alone control. In such cases, the Fellows paper says, “professionals...are in the business of exercising learned judgment, based on experience with a body of knowledge and on situations and decisions not totally knowable or under their exclusive control.”

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management makes the same point in different words in its Job Family Series descriptions:

“Professional work involves exercising discretion, analytical skill, judgment, personal accountability, and responsibility for creating, developing, integrating, applying, and sharing an organized body of knowledge:

- Uniquely acquired through extensive education or training at an accredited college or university;
- Equivalent to the curriculum requirements for a bachelor’s or higher degree with major study in, or pertinent to, the specialized field; and
- Continuously studied to explore, extend, and use additional discoveries, interpretations, and applications to improve data quality, materials, equipment, applications, and methods.”

These two descriptions show that definitions of professionalism tend to focus on three elements: Discretion or judgment in executing the work, based on specialized education and an organized, broadly accepted body of knowledge.

Performance Standards and Increasing Scope

Because of the prominence of individual judgment in delivering professional services, and the high variability of job conditions, professionals are measured by a metric different from that of “defect-free” products, name, a “standard of care.”

Under this doctrine, each professional is expected to deliver “the same level of care employed by reasonably prudent professionals practicing in the same field in the same area.”

The professional’s ability to adapt to changing and unpredictable circumstances is becoming more critical, the combined Boards noted. “Often the technical part of a project is a slam dunk, but a large part of the job is on the social side.”

Increasingly, CMs today are called upon to manage stakeholder relations, sustainability issues, and a whole gamut of other tasks calling for mastery of so-called “soft skills.” The combined Boards noted that business acumen is often as critical to CM today as technical ability, and effectiveness in financial management, communication, and leadership often makes a decisive contribution to project success.

Similarly, today’s CM is often called upon to advise owners about many aspects of a project that fall outside of the traditional construction stages. As important as technical and soft skills is the CM’s adherence to an established code of ethics that is recognized by all practitioners.

Credentialing Professionalism

Professional credentials like the CCM administered by the Construction Manager Certification Institute—as long as they are recognized as being fairly earned through demonstrated mastery of an accepted Body of Knowledge—can serve many of the same purposes as a license. Continuous improvement and enlargement of the Body of Knowledge through research and practical experience are essential to gaining this recognition.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Standard 17024 provides the means by which personnel certification programs can assure their transparency, consistency, and equity. The American National Standards Institute is authorized by ISO to accredit certification programs that comply with ISO 17024, and has granted this accreditation to the CCM program.

The industry also benefits from the availability of several other credentials. Notably, the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), based in the United Kingdom, certifies practitioners on an international basis, and the American Institute of Constructors (AIC) offers a Certified Professional Constructor credential for contractors and others who focus on the construction process and related tasks.

The possible arrival of specialized endorsements to well established licenses (such as the PE-C, for Professional Engineer—Construction) also may have a significant impact on the professional practice of Construction Management.

Yardsticks of Professionalism

In summary, a profession can be identified by these qualities:

Its practitioners exercise independent judgment in response to conditions that vary and are not easily predicted or controlled.

This judgment is shaped by rigorous and specialized education, coupled with a broadly accepted system of Standards of Practice.

The Standards of Practice and related Body of Knowledge undergo continuous review and improvement.

The professional practice is governed by a Code of Ethics and represented by a single nationwide association. **CM**

Join the discussion of what makes CM a profession and where the profession stands today. Post your views online at <http://www.cmaanet.org/what-makes-cm-a-profession>.