

Professionalism

Developing This Vital Characteristic

You know that it's essential to be professional if you want to be a success. But what does "being professional" actually mean?

For some, being professional might mean dressing smartly at work, or doing a good job. For others, being professional means having advanced degrees or other certifications, framed and hung on the office wall. Professionalism encompasses all of these definitions. But, it also covers much more.

So, what is professionalism, and why does it matter? And how can you be completely professional in your day-to-day role? In this article, we'll explore all of these questions, so that you can present a really professional image in the workplace.

Defining Professionalism

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines professionalism as "the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person;" and it defines a profession as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation."

These definitions imply that professionalism encompasses a number of different attributes, and, together, these attributes identify and define a professional.

So, what are these attributes?

Specialized Knowledge

First and foremost, professionals are known for their specialized knowledge. They've made a deep personal commitment to develop and improve their skills, and, where appropriate, they have the degrees and certifications that serve as the foundation of this knowledge.

Not all business areas have a stable core of knowledge (and the academic qualifications that go with it); not all areas demand extensive knowledge to practice successfully; and not all professionals have top degrees in their field.

What matters, though, is that these professionals have worked in a serious, thoughtful and sustained way to master the specialized knowledge that they need to succeed in their fields; and that they keep this knowledge up-to-date, so that they can continue to deliver the best work possible.

Competency

Professionals get the job done. They're reliable, and they keep their promises. If circumstances arise that prevent them from delivering on their promises, they manage expectations up front, and they do their best to make the situation right.

Professionals don't make excuses, but focus on finding solutions.

Honesty and Integrity

Professionals exhibit qualities such as honesty and [integrity](#) . They keep their word, and they can be trusted implicitly because of this. They never compromise their [values](#) , and will do the right thing, even when it means taking a harder road.

More than this, true professionals are [humble](#) – if a project or job falls outside their scope of expertise, they're not afraid to admit it. They immediately ask for help when they need it, and they're willing to learn from others.

Accountability

Professionals hold themselves accountable for their thoughts, words and actions, especially when they've made a mistake. This personal accountability is closely tied to honesty and integrity, and it's a vital element of professionalism.

Self-Regulation

They also stay professional under pressure.

For instance, imagine a customer service employee who's faced with an irate customer. Instead of getting upset or angry in return, the employee exhibits true professionalism by maintaining a calm, businesslike demeanor, and by doing everything that she can to make the situation right.

Genuine professionals show respect for the people around them, no matter what their role or situation. They exhibit a high degree of [emotional intelligence](#) (EI) by considering the emotions

and needs of others, and they don't let a bad day impact how they interact with colleagues or clients.

Looking the Part

Professionals look the part – they don't show up to work sloppily dressed, with unkempt hair. They're polished, and they dress appropriately for the situation. Because of this, they exude an air of confidence, and they gain respect for this.

How to Exhibit Professionalism

As you can see from these characteristics, professionals are the kind of people that others respect and value. They are a genuine credit to their organizations!

This is why it's so important that we work to earn a professional reputation in the workplace. True professionals are the first to be considered for promotions, they are awarded valuable projects or clients, and they are routinely successful in their careers.

Now that you have a clear view of what constitutes professionalism, are you demonstrating these characteristics to the people around you? You're likely already showing some of them, but you may find yourself lacking in others. To build your own professionalism, focus on improving each of these characteristics. (Focus on one at a time, so you don't get overwhelmed.)

Additionally, here are some further strategies that will help you to be more professional in the workplace:

Build Expertise

Don't let your knowledge and skills get outdated. Make a commitment to [build expertise](#) and to [stay up-to-date with your industry](#) .

Tip:

Take our Bite-Sized training session on [Building Expert Power](#) to find out how to build and maintain your own expert power.

Develop Your Emotional Intelligence

Professionals can sense the emotional needs of others. They're able to give clients and co-workers what they need, because they know how to [listen actively](#) and observe what's happening.

So, if you want to improve your professionalism, focus on [developing emotional intelligence](#) .

Honor Your Commitments

Whenever you make a promise to your boss, colleagues or clients, keep it. If it looks as if you won't be able to meet a deadline, let your boss, team or client know as soon as sensibly possible. However, do what you can to avoid ending up in this situation!

Don't make excuses – instead, focus on meeting expectations as best you can, and on making the situation right.

Be Polite

Be kind and polite and use good manners to everyone you come into contact with, no matter what their role is, and no matter how you're feeling. This might sound unimportant, but it makes a significant impact.

Have the Tools You Need

Do you show up to a client meeting lacking important samples? Do you arrive at work, only to realize that you left a vital file at home? Or, do you find yourself operating in situations where you don't have the skills you need to do a good job?

True professionals are always prepared. This requires advance planning, timeliness and attention. Focus on improving your [time management](#) and [planning skills](#) , so that you're always in control.

Note:

Although professionalism means keeping commitments, doing high quality work, and having expert status, occasionally the pursuit of these attributes might tempt you not to volunteer for projects that fall outside your "comfort zone."

However, this doesn't necessarily mean that you shouldn't try! [Analyze risks](#) beforehand to minimize the consequences of getting things wrong, be honest about any skills gaps that you have, and work to fill them. Then do the best that you possibly can!

Key Points

Professionalism is a trait that's highly valued in the workforce. It has many attributes, including:

1. Specialized knowledge.
2. Competency.
3. Honesty and integrity.
4. Accountability.
5. Self-regulation.
6. Looking the part.

To improve your own professionalism, focus on improving in each of these areas.