The Essence of Professionalism
Will it make a difference in your career?

By Pete McGarahan & Ric Mims

Professionalism is knowing what to do, and doing it with passion and purpose.

Tribal Stories
At the beginning of this year, Ric and I attended an HDI Faculty Forum in Colorado Springs. The Forum brought together some of the Service and Support industry best instructors. It was great to see old friends and make new ones. As always, we capitalized on every opportunity to share experiences, opinions, and “tribal” stories centered on a variety of topics, including the need for professionalism. This topic was also discussed at a recent Support Center Director’s course in Washington, D.C.

At both meetings widespread disappointment was expressed by attendees at the lack of professionalism displayed by team members and other IT professionals, which damages the function’s reputation and credibility within the business. It’s one thing to be occasionally rude and/or indifferent; it’s another thing to take pride in this type of behavior and attitude. Would business training help? Does it trickle down from IT leadership? Moreover, how can we bring attention to the lack of professionalism in our industry, and do something about it?

Remember When?
There is something nostalgic about the concept of “Professionalism.” It used to be that professionalism was a key requirement for success in any business. Given the visible degradation of professionalism in today’s workplace, I wonder if people still hold such a quaint notion in high regard.

Is professionalism still important today in conducting day-to-day business with customers and peers? How many IT professionals care about courtesy and respect in their dealings with clients? Do they take pride in their appearance, their work ethic, and the quality of their work?

In simpler days, professionalism had everything to do with customer service, relationship building, and creating the foundation for effective, persuasive communication across all levels of the organization. In our formative years with Fortune 500 companies, it was a compliment to be known as being a professional. Sadly, Ric and I have witnessed significant changes in culture driven by Generation X, the “dot-com” birth/death cycle, relaxed
dress codes, the “GEEK Squad” attitude, eroding company loyalty, and leaders casting a shadow of non-professionalism.

**An IT Makeover**

The IT industry shifted dramatically in recent years, from a focus on technology to one of supporting the business function and corporate culture. The ITIL process framework, along with recently developed quality assurance programs, are highly effective doing so and have been widely adopted in many IT businesses to deliver measurable, predictable and repeatable outcomes. Many IT forums and conferences continually evangelize the need to run IT as a stand-alone business, and the concept is gaining steam nationwide.

Years ago, IT professionals took pride in their own oddball culture. We were different than the rest of the business professionals, yet the business needed us and was willing to overlook our quirks if we just continued to make things work and fix them when they were broken. It was good to be the IT king because we owned the data; we could afford to live in our own world and occasionally treat the business and our customers irreverently. But this also created a negative perception of our function – and deservedly so. One of my first CIOs, Susan Cramm said that she could walk into any company gathering and within seconds identify the IT clique.

But times have changed, and for the better. The business is now driving the bus and taking IT with it, to more cost-effective service delivery, greater fiscal knowledge and accountability, and creating business value from IT-enabled business initiatives and innovations. Now we need to bring professionalism to the forefront of the IT makeover.

**The Essence of Professionalism**

Professionalism isn’t your appearance and your aptitude, it’s attitude: Knowing what to do, and doing it with passion and purpose. In your passion you demonstrate your work ethic, your determination, and your brand pride. In your purpose you show your technical knowledge, business savvy, maturity, innovative nature, and analytical decision-making ability.

Professionals channel their energies and skills toward the betterment of other people, services, and products. Professionals are people-oriented and task-driven, and are adept at both. They relish challenges, attacking problems confidently and optimistically. They have a high level of personal responsibility and respect for other people, always taking the high road. Class and character, behavior and attitude are their most valuable assets.

**Establishing a Business Presence**

As IT leaders, we have the responsibility to always act in a professional manner; we must lead by example for the next generation of IT professionals. We can start by examining and continuously improving our attire, attitude, communication, relationship-building, networking, business/financial skills, and our desire to continuously educate ourselves.

We have to hold ourselves to a higher standard in the way we relate to one another and to our customers. If we are to bridge the gap of respect and credibility with the business, let us start by building meaningful relationships based on professionalism and a common pursuit of doing what’s best for the business to create value.
About the Authors:

Ric Mims, President, SupportCenter Global Technologies, Inc, has over 18 years of experience in Help Desk management, consulting and operations. Ric began his career with Apple Computers’ Midwest regional help desk in 1989 as a help desk analyst providing support on the Performa line of products. In the mid-90s he held the positions of Help Desk Analyst, Team Leader, and Relationship Manager at Entex Information Services in Cincinnati, OH. After relocating to Hartford, CT., Ric was given the opportunity to plan, design and implement the IKON Office Solutions National Help Desk offering. He provided strategic direction for sales and led the team to numerous successes by winning and renewing accounts for the organization. He provided guidance and leadership in all sales efforts, customer relationship management strategies and help desk consulting efforts primarily focused on business process re-engineering. He also co-founded and held the position of Vice-President at Global Help Desk Services which is also located in Hartford, Connecticut. While there he was responsible for designing, implementing and maintaining the staff, workflow processes and technologies necessary to provide world-class support to various Fortune 500 clients. Under his guidance the support teams were empowered to achieve customer satisfaction rates of 90% and higher. Ric has acted as Project Leader and Consultant for companies such as MetLife, Adidas Footwear, the Treasury Department, Lucent Technologies and EDS to name a few.

Peter McGarahan is the founder and president of McGarahan & Associates. Pete is also the acting Chairman of the IT Infrastructure Management Association, a sister organization to HDI. Pete's value to the service and support industry and business is his thought leadership. As a practitioner, product manager and support industry analyst and expert, he has influenced the maturity of the service and support industry. His passions for customer service led the Taco Bell support organization to achieve the Help Desk Institute Team Excellence Award. IT Support News also named him one of the “Top 25 Professionals in the Service and Support Industry” in 1999. Support professionals voted McGarahan “The Legend of the Year” in 2002 and again in 2004 at the Help Desk Professionals conference for his endless energy, mentoring and coaching and his valuable contribution to the support industry and community.