THE PUBLIC PURCHASING PROFESSION REVISITED

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ABSTRACT. This article revisits two vital questions largely ignored in the scholarly literature devoted to professionalism in government. First, is the public purchaser a professional? And second, is public purchasing a profession? Our reexamination of the first question led us to conclude that a public purchaser that meets certain requirements in government purchasing practices distinct from traits reserved for recognized traditional professions such as law, medicine and clergy can be a professional. Furthermore, when we analyzed the basic criteria that characterized a profession such as the existence of esoteric knowledge, rigorous formal training, codes of ethics, representative association, autonomy in practice, and criteria for admission into the occupation, we concluded that public purchasing is a profession.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for professional status by purchasers and other public sector specialists is as real today as when the original version of this article was published in 1981. Educated and encouraged by their “professional” societies, many governmental purchasing officers have bought into the concept that they are uniquely qualified providers of essential services and as such, professionals in the fullest sense of the term. They pursue, obtain, and proudly display their certifications and other indicators of their special knowledge and ability. They write job descriptions that reference those certifications and other indicators. And, they encourage their colleagues to do the same.

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Yet, are these individuals attaining professional status, or are they merely buying into the marketing message of the organizations that represent them? Are they true professionals, or are they merely technical specialists playing to an inside audience consisting only of themselves? The reality is that few if any of the vocational categories in the government service would satisfy the rigorous criteria that distinguish the true profession from the technical specialty. There is, after all, a lot more to professionalism than a series of letters following one’s name, or typically requirements for professional certification in some but certainly not all position descriptions. What, then, can the public purchasing official do to attain professional status?

**THE NECESSARY ACTIONS**

First, the public purchasing practitioner must insist on looking at each transaction in its totality. He or she must patiently gather the information concerning the transaction, often working with representatives of the department for which the purchase is being made, and central administrative activities such as budgeting and accounting. Only when the purchaser has all the pieces can he or she then design the procurement that will help achieve the customer’s objectives. The governmental purchasing officer recognizes that every situation is different, but he or she consistently seeks to achieve maximum value while avoiding unnecessary expense and time exposure. He or she maintains absolute integrity, and exercises vigilance and care throughout the process in order to counteract any possibility of corrupt actions.

Second, the professional public purchaser must consider excellence of performance as the standard for every action. Although perfection is as elusive in this field as in any other, the craftsmanship demanded by that measure is still paramount, even in the fast-paced, complex environment of public purchasing, where numerous decisions must be made quickly and well. Obviously, then, the practitioner must carefully balance the various factors involved in decision-making in order to best serve the various stakeholders by making accurate, informed decisions in a legal, businesslike, and timely manner. Operating in this fashion does not necessarily guarantee victory in popularity contests. Not infrequently there is need for a firm yet tactful “no” instead of an easy “yes”.

Third, public purchasing is no longer a simple, transaction-based process. It has become, instead, a strategic function that must relate with all aspects of
the government and be a “big picture player” in order to make the highest possible contribution. Thus, the public purchasing officer must be able to think in terms of and in accordance with function, and adapt to agreed-upon statements of vision, mission, goals, and objectives. This requires many qualities, including a broad, inter-disciplinary, and current base of knowledge. It also requires the ability to anticipate, analyze, communicate, and cooperate; and such traits as flexibility, resiliency, patience, and adaptability.

Fourth, the governmental purchasing officer has to be able to function in an extraordinarily complex environment. A wide range of public needs and interests are present in this environment; and numerous social, political and economic activities -- all of which act, interact and react on each other -- are at work. Taxpayers and elected officials expect good value for moneys spent, and they demand economy and efficiency of operations. Moreover, there is the rather important consideration of the effect of public purchasing quality on public health, safety and welfare.

The complexity of governmental purchasing is such that even the most dedicated, talented and knowledgeable individuals will make mistakes. Consequently, it is critical to learn from errors and shortcomings and to continually improve the process. It is also essential to understand that there are no universal answers to the myriad problems and challenges one encounters in this field. Pride of work is a required ingredient, but it must be tempered by a realistic and objective appraisal of one’s limitations and constraints.

The objectives of good public purchasing even pose a challenge, because it is frequently necessary to seek a balance among them. Those objectives, as stated in the proposed revisions to the American Bar Association’s (1999) Model Procurement Code for State and Local Government include:

- Simplifying, clarifying, and modernizing the law governing procurement by the enacting jurisdiction;
- Permitting the continued development of procurement policies and practices;
- Making as consistent as possible the procurement laws among the various jurisdictions;
- Providing for public confidence in the procedures followed in public procurement;
- Ensuring fair and equitable treatment of all persons who deal with the procurement system;
- Providing increased economy in procurement activities, and maximize to the fullest extent practicable the purchasing value of public funds;
- Fostering effective broad-based competition within the free enterprise system;
- Providing safeguards for the maintenance of a procurement system of quality and integrity; and
- Obtaining in a cost-effective and responsive manner the materials, services, and construction required by agencies in order for those agencies to both serve the jurisdiction’s business and residents.

TWO QUESTIONS

In this essay we seek answers to two questions regarding the public purchaser, a specialist whose role in government has been largely ignored in the scholarly literature concerned with professionalism in government. First, is he or she a professional? Second, is his or her occupational specialty a profession?

Our choice of questions is based on the need to distinguish the attributes of an individual who is a professional, regardless of his or her field of endeavor, from the characteristics of a “recognized” or “true” profession such as medicine. This distinction is based on our belief that an individual can be a professional, as noted above, without being a member of a true profession.

Our answer to the first question will be normative, consisting of a description of a professional in any area of public service. Our answer to the second question will be an exercise of an academic nature involving an assessment of public purchasing’s state of professional development in light of generally accepted criteria for full professional status. There will be, unavoidably, a certain measure of overlap in our answers to each of the two questions.

The search for answers to the questions we have posed is necessitated by the increasing importance of governmental purchasing. Not so long ago, public purchasing was the Rodney Dangerfield of governmental activities. It received little, if any respect. It was considered a routine, clerical function, or it was used as a means of distributing patronage. Increasingly, however, the
regard of senior public managers for the purchasing function is growing as the top level folks benefit more and more from purchasing’s input and participation in the overall effort to run governments “like businesses.” State agencies and institutions and medium to larger sized local governments now frequently look to purchasing specialists to play a meaningful role in periods of both normalcy and emergency. They expect those specialists to fulfil the majority if not the entirety of their requirements for goods, services, and construction competently. They even expect purchasers to participate in the making and implementation of strategic decisions at the top and agency levels. There is just not a lot of room for inefficient, ineffective purchasing any longer.

The reason for this is obvious. There is simply too much money involved, and the potential impact on virtually every aspect of governmental operation and service delivery is just too great. Purchases of materials, supplies, services and construction represent upwards of 40% of the typical jurisdiction’s operating budget. As a whole, governmental purchases in the United States reached approximately $1.17 billion in 1996 or about 15.5 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (Mikesell, 1999: 32).

**Question 1: Is the Public Purchaser a Professional?**

Our answer to this question is simple. The public purchaser can be B regardless of the status of public purchasing as a profession. This is true because a professional individual is absolutely nothing less than one:

Manifesting fine artistry and workmanship based on sound knowledge and conscientiousness, reflecting the results of education, training and experience and governed by the highest sense of honor and integrity no matter if it involves great personal inconvenience or even great personal sacrifice, while contributing to the benefit of society (Zemansky and Gordon, 1981: 498).\(^1\)

Being a professional in governmental purchasing does not require a practitioner to be a member of an occupational group that is accepted and recognized as a true profession, and thus characterized by the traits typically associated with one who is a member of such a group. Such traits include:

1. The field of concern is composed of complex and diverse subject matter requiring an educational process of university level standards of competence established through examination.
2. Professionals claim to know their occupation better than anyone else and often claim exclusive rights to practice it.

3. They may limit its practice to those adjudged competent, usually by an examining board of their peers.

4. They demand autonomy for their actions, perform their duties in an objective manner, and expect to be trusted implicitly in their professional judgment by their clients.

5. Professionals exercise a high degree of control over the behavior of themselves and their associates through associations that assume responsibility for maintaining and improving their quality of services.

These traits historically have been generally reserved for the recognized or true professions -- medicine, the law, and the clergy -- and in recent years have come to apply to "emerging" professions such as engineering, architecture, and accounting. Public purchasing remains, however, a far distance removed from recognition as even an emerging profession. Thus, the purchasing officer in government must redefine what he or she means by professionalism. He or she must think in terms of being or acting professional, rather than in terms of being a member of an occupational specialty that the public recognizes as a profession. The latter is, for the foreseeable future, unrealistic.

Several traits distinguish the professional purchasing practitioner from his or her counterparts who are less than professional. First, the public purchasing "pro" recognizes that he or she must educate and continue to educate oneself through more than on-the-job training, in order to stay abreast of rapidly occurring technical and professional developments. Although there are still relatively few for-credit course offerings and degree programs for public purchasing officials, generally, and for state and local purchasers in particular, the opportunities for continuing education have expanded dramatically within the past two decades. This expansion has resulted in no small part from the concerted efforts of the various societies and associations to which governmental purchasing officers belong.
Second, the public purchasing professional recognizes the obligation of the individual practitioner to contribute to the educational effort. This means, among other things, participating in defining the body of knowledge for the field and ensuring that it is current and relevant. It also means serving, where needs and qualifications coincide, as an instructor in for-credit and not-for-credit educational programs. Students need the framework, perspective, insight, and feedback that only the active and otherwise qualified practitioner can provide. Their absence in the classroom could mean theoretical irrelevance and obsolescence.

Third, the governmental purchasing professional seeks and obtains professional certification and encourages his or her colleagues to do the same. Professional certification does not guarantee competence but it does signify the attainment of a required level of knowledge within a field. Although there are several possible certifications from which the practitioner can choose, the reality is that the number of certified individuals, as compared to the total number of procurement officers, is still relatively small.

Fourth, the professional public purchasing officer advocates for the required consideration of professional certification and other meaningful standards of knowledge and ability in hiring and promotional decisions. This is a tough battle for several reasons. For one thing, many policy makers and top managers in government still cling to the myth that purchasing requires no special knowledge or ability. For another, some policy makers and managers really do not want to have to hire qualified purchasing specialists. Purchasing officers who are ethical and competent get in the way when there are political debts to repay.

Fifth, the public purchasing professional strives in every action to promote the highest good of his or her jurisdiction or agency. The purchaser does this, even when he or she may not have the final word on major procurement decisions. The purchaser does this, moreover, even when he or she is paid less than his or her counterparts who practice law or medicine in the public sector. Sadly, the purchaser is
still not always the ultimate decision maker on procurement in many jurisdictions, and his or her salary is often below that of the “traditional” professionals in the same entities.

Sixth, the governmental purchasing officer practices his or her specialty with unwavering integrity and in such a manner as to avoid even the appearance of being dishonest or unscrupulous. He or she meticulously observes the standards of conduct established for the profession and properly responds to questions of ethical practice and conflict of interest. When there is any type of untoward performance that could have a detrimental impact on the purchasing field as a whole, he or she is prepared to join with colleagues to remove improper performers from practice.

Seventh, individual public procurement officers who aspire for professional recognition participate, as is possible and prudent, in the public policy process. Their input on technological, social, and economic issues is needed and can prevent waste and costly mistakes. The “right” to participate in the policy development process must, however, be earned through demonstrated competence and the evidence of added value. Vested interests and other lobbyists are not necessarily going to welcome purchasing officers into their inner circle.

Eighth, the true public purchasing professional is devoted to public service and plays an active role in community affairs. He or she is willing to contribute time and expertise, as required, to make the community where he or she lives and works a better place.

Finally, the procurement professional actively participates in at least one professional society or association. This means attending, and encouraging and enabling others to participate in meetings, workshops, and other activities by the societies and associations. It also means doing one’s part to ensure that classes and other professional development meetings are of the highest possible quality and that the society or association has the financial and other resources it needs to perform its mission effectively.
Question 2: Is Public Purchasing a Profession?

In order to answer this question, we use as our reference point or “mirror” C. L. Sharma’s (1966) definition of a profession. Sharma has stated that a profession is an occupational group characterized by the following criteria:

- existence of an esoteric body of knowledge,
- rigorous formal training,
- formation of a representative association,
- development of a code of ethics to guide the behavior of its members,
- insistence on social service as its dominant motive,
- considerable autonomy in its practice, and
- establishment of criteria for entrance into that profession.

**Criterion 1: An Esoteric Body of Knowledge.** Is there a basic body of knowledge that belongs uniquely to public purchasing? Yes, there is. Leading academicians and public purchasing officials nearly 40 years ago developed a curriculum for public purchasing officials. This curriculum, which was first published in a handbook entitled *Prerequisites for Certification of Public Purchasing Agents*\(^{(2)}\) (NIGP, 1962), serves as the basis of the Universal Public Purchasing Certification Program.

Its elements, related to public purchasing in the pure sense, include:

- responsibilities and objectives of the purchasing function,
- law and enabling authority,
- organization,
- personnel selection and development,
Specifications and standards,
contracting,
source selection, and
documenting and reporting.

The curriculum also addresses topics in the areas of business administration, public administration, and related fields. The current CPPB and CPPO curriculum has requirements that encompass courses in accounting, economics, contracts, ethics, finance, management, personnel, purchasing, materials management, and transportation (NIGP, 2000).

Many state and local governments now formally recognize NIGP’s certification and educational programs as a standard for employment and advancement for their purchasing personnel (Brinkman, 1995).

Criterion 2: Rigorous Training. Training encompassing seminars, workshops, and short courses has been available to the federal government purchaser for several decades. In addition, a few degree programs have been available for federal government purchasers at higher education institutions such as George Washington University. The state and local public purchaser has not been so fortunate, however. Until NIGP began offering training on state and local purchasing in the late 1970s, most state and local purchasers had to rely almost exclusively on “in-house” training or on outside training and education directed to the needs of the industrial purchaser. Only a few institutions of higher education offered degree programs in purchasing and few of these curriculums or courses addressed the special needs of the state and local purchaser. (3)

Training and certification of state and local purchasing officials is still not typically a requirement. A recent survey found that over 90 percent of the states do not have legislation requiring training and certification of procurement professionals, and over 50 percent of the states have their own training programs (NIGP, 1998a).
NIGP developed its training program to compensate for the lack of college-level courses that address government purchasing (Brinkman, 1995). Its core curriculum seminars focus on operational needs (as opposed to academic needs) and are taught by qualified public purchasing officers who have been trained and certified in classroom training. Although these seminars have been well-received by public purchasers in throughout the United States and Canada, they still fall short of the ideal: a reasonably standardized degree program for those individuals who want to enter the field and a continuing education program for those already working in the field. Federal as well as state/provincial and local purchasers attend the NIGP seminars.

The curriculum for the degree program exists, and the seminars can be converted with little difficulty to an emphasis on continuing education. NIGP must continue to work with schools of public affairs and administration (and in some instances, schools of business administration) to create credit courses and, eventually, “majors” and degrees in public purchasing. Only when its own degree programs are widely offered and broadly accepted can public purchasing lay claim to full professional status. NIGP’s recently established relationship with Florida Atlantic University offers enormous potential benefit.

Criterion 3: A Representative Association. The National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc. (NIGP) serves as the representative association for purchasers in the public sector. Headquartered in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, NIGP was established in 1944 at the urging of the late Fiorello LaGuardia, Mayor of New York City, to provide education, certification, and technical assistance for public purchasing professionals in the United States and Canada. NIGP’s membership includes public purchasing officers at the federal, state, and local levels.

NIGP enjoys tremendous prestige within the public and government community, but its actual membership consists primarily of those public agencies with full-time purchasing officers. Agencies and governments that do not “officially” belong to the Institute do, however, tend to follow its lead on matters of policy and professional
development and use its information channels. Other professional purchasing associations in the public sector which enhance professional development and networking include the National Association of Education Buyers, the National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO), the National Purchasing Institute, and various regional associations.

**Criterion 4: A Code of Ethics.** Since its inception, a longstanding requisite of the NIGP has been that all its members ascribe to the NIGP Code of Ethics as a condition for membership. It is a condition of membership that the following ethical principals should govern the conduct of every person employed by a public sector procurement or materials management position:

- Seeks or accepts a position as a head or employee only when fully in accord with the professional principles applicable thereto and when confident of possessing the qualifications to serve under those principles to the advantage of the employing organization.

- Believes in the dignity and worth of the service rendered by the organization and the societal responsibilities assumed as a trusted public servant.

- Is governed by the highest ideals of honor and integrity in all public and personal relationships in order to merit the respect and inspire the confidence of the organization and the public being served.

- Believes that personal aggrandizement or personal profit obtained through misuse of public or personal relationships is dishonest and not tolerable.

- Identifies and eliminates participation of any individual in operational situations where a conflict of interest may be involved.

- Believes that members of the Institute and its staff should at no time or under any circumstances accept, directly or indirectly, gifts or other things of value from suppliers that might influence or appear to influence purchasing decisions.
- Keeps the governmental organization informed, through appropriate channels, on problems and progress of applicable operations by emphasizing the importance of the facts.

- Resists encroachment on control of personnel in order to preserve integrity as a professional manager. Handles all personnel matters on a merit basis. Politics, religion, ethnicity, gender and age carry no weight in personnel administration in the agency being directed or served.

- Seeks nor dispenses no personal favors. Handles each administrative problem objectively and empathetically without discrimination.

- Subscribes to and supports the professional aims and objective of the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc.

**Criterion 5: Social Service as the Dominant Motive for Action.** A true public profession imbues its neophytes and its old-timers with a sense of public dedication and responsibility. After all, it is for the sake of public dedication and responsibility that codes of ethics are developed. Unfortunately, in public purchasing (as in other areas of public employment) this sense of dedication and responsibility has often succumbed to personal desires for job security, and, regrettably, personal gain. If NIGP is to assure that public purchasers remain constant in their sense of dedication and responsibility, it must do at least three things:

- First, it must work with responsible legal organizations, including the American Bar Association, to remove the purchasing activity from undue outside pressures and political influence.

- Second, it must work with responsible public interest groups such as the Council of State Governments, the National League of Cities, the International City and County Managers Association, and the National Association of Counties to establish and enforce meaningful requirements for entering and staying in the field.

- Third, it must continually impress upon aspiring and practicing public purchasers their responsibility as trusted public servants.
**Criterion 6: Considerable Autonomy in its Practice.** The established professions demand autonomy for their actions. Public purchasing cannot; and, even if it could, it should not. The public purchasing function is essentially a service function since it has been set up to perform common functions on behalf of all operating units. Only by working with the personnel of the operating units it serves can the public purchasing unit ever hope to contribute to the agency’s improved economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Purchasing, whether in the public or private sector, is the business activity through which an organization procures the materials, supplies, tools, equipment, facilities and services it requires for maintenance, operation and production. Purchasing’s function is to secure such requirements at the lowest ultimate cost consistent with prevailing economic conditions and the appropriate standards of quality and continuity of service. At the same time, purchasing also must establish and maintain a reputation for fairness and integrity. Toward this end, the members of the public purchasing department must be thoroughly familiar with all current laws and regulations pertaining to business practices, taxes and the like to insure the organization against their violations.

One might well then ask what the requirements of good public purchasing service must be. The main requirement obviously must be to “Serve the People” (by serving the people who serve them directly) with integrity and in their best interests. The concept of value buying has moved to the forefront in the past quarter of a century and is more highly developed to satisfy this requirement than when the precursor of this article was written. Public purchasers still need to consolidate requirements in order to improve pricing and service, and to subscribe to the “rights” of sound public purchasing, i.e. the right material, quality, value, price, source, time and place. But, they also need to help departments identify the procurement strategies and approaches that will help their internal customers operate as cost effectively as possible, and provide services that are measurably better than those provided historically. This must be done, incidentally, without breaking the law or sacrificing the integrity of the procurement process. The latter is a daunting challenge in today’s world, where the
emphasis seems to be shifting away from quality and equity of the procurement process and towards results alone.

If the criterion of autonomy of practice stands between public purchasing and the status of a true profession, so be it. It can do better without it. Public purchasers must serve if they are to be professional.

**Criterion 7: Criteria for Admission into the Profession.** The public purchasing “profession” is far from being able to control who enters its ranks. Most governments still do not require certification, even for advancement. However, at least in part due to the efforts of the Universal Public Purchasing Certification Council (UPPCC), the possession of certification in public purchasing is rapidly becoming a desirable credential. Notice this recent advertisement for a director of purchasing and supply:

City of Miami, FL, $61,842-$99,225. Director, Procurement Management. Graduation from an accredited college or university with a Bachelor’s degree; have eight years of responsible administrative experience; must possess a current certification as a Certified Professional Purchasing Officer (CPPO) or be able to obtain certification by the second year of employment (NIGP, 1998b).

The certification boards of UPPCC, NASPO, and the National Contract Management Association have been in dialogue since the late 1970s, in an effort to reach agreement on an “essentially common” certification program for purchasers in the public and private sectors. The concept of a truly independent board (or council) to administer such a program continues to be an obstacle to the creation of a general certification for purchasing as a whole.

At the risk of sounding callous, the ability of public purchasing, in particular to control who enters its ranks, does not rise or fall with the emergence of a single certification for all purchasers---no matter how noble and common sensible such an attainment would be. It depends, instead, on the ability of NIGP, the National Association of State Procurement Officials, and the other associations and societies that represent public purchasing professionals to convince responsible
individuals and organizations that professional certification in governmental purchasing is the best available means of evaluating competency for positions in public purchasing. Whether the certification is provided through a stand-alone program or a specialty track of a more general program is of secondary importance.

To summarize:
- There is an established body of knowledge that belongs uniquely to public purchasing.
- Professional training is at least in embryo form.
- There is an association of public purchasing officers at the federal, state, and local government levels.
- There is a code of ethics for public purchasing officers.
- Social service is the dominant motive for action for most public purchasers, but not all.
- Public purchasers are not, and arguably possibly should not be, autonomous in their action.
- Public purchasing, as a body, has little control at this time over who enters its ranks.

From these observations we can conclude that true professional status for public purchasing is structurally available but still not fully a reality. Some of the elements are fully existent. Others are not.

**Over-professionalization**

In this period of dramatic and continuing rapid change, the public purchasing official must expend extra effort in order to keep from falling behind. However, in striving to keep pace, individual practitioners and their representative organizations must be careful not to over-"professionalize". They must keep an open mind and a cooperative attitude and assiduously avoid even the appearance of over-professionalization. Otherwise, they stand to harm rather than advance the interest of public purchasing.
Over-professionalization occurs when one puts the interests of his or her function ahead of the interests of the organization or the public agency or jurisdiction. Those symptoms of over-professionalism which must be guarded against are found in all professions and are typified by the seven illustrations listed below:

- Basic effort concentrated on achieving the lowest price while paying little, if any, attention to the concerns of using agencies or other related functions and failing to bring into balance the corollary factors of suitability, quality (reliability), delivery, risk and costs;

- Requirement for excessive personnel to perform the work;

- Lack of willingness to accept any risk for one’s function;

- Consistent estimations of costs with high contingency factors so that the function will appear effective even though the organization may lose the bid for business or other functions may overrun their budgets;

- Reluctance to accept advice or help from, or to use the inputs of, other functions without reworking or double-checking them, trying to do everything oneself;

- Requirement for excessive attention to one’s function; and

- Obstruction of general management and/or supervision of his or her field, on the assumption that he or she is a recognized expert in public procurement (Zemansky and Gordon, 1981).

Purchasing management personnel must recognize these characteristics as potential problem areas and eliminate them from their mode of operations if they are to survive in general management or publicly oriented environment.

**CHALLENGE TO PUBLIC PURCHASING**

Obviously, no matter when the professional comprehension and approach within the profession occurs to purchasing personnel, protestations of purchasing as a profession field will fall on deaf ears if the public does not recognize the area to be professional in nature. Therefore, in order to assure
the acceptance of public purchasing as professional, the public purchasing profession has to meet at least the following three areas of challenges (Holland, 1968):

1. There needs to be first and fundamentally real professionalism in the efforts.

2. There needs to be a more definite recruiting and training program for future public buying personnel.

3. There needs to be a realistic public relations program to educate and inform the public at large and governmental officials. According to one writer, governments lag behind industry in the recruiting battle. Apparently this is because government purchasing positions pay less and require substantial experience.

These challenges impose a special responsibility on everyone entrusted with buying goods and services with others’ funds. This applies to all, whether in private industry or government, who are involved in purchasing. The fiduciary responsibility in governmental purchasing is especially difficult to discharge because the dimensions of the job demand more than responsible, prudent, and average success. It requires public purchasers to perform with the highest of integrity while at the same time asking them to manage as effectively as possible. It compels them to secure better economic results and to speed up the process, to be innovative, and to take new major conceptual steps in our quest for more efficiency and less costly ways to accomplish their mission.

Public purchasers must, therefore, search out the most effective use of each of their organizations’ resources in achieving the organizations’ goals and accomplishing assigned functions with the least possible waste. Each individual, by contributing his or her full measure, can still recognize that he will not be alone in pursuit of these objectives. Public purchasers will also have to rely heavily on the integrity of other professionals, as well as that of industry. They must cooperatively address themselves to solving professional problems of joint involvement and/or interest. Everyone’s maximum ingenuity must be strenuously exercised to help meet these objectives. Any concerned
individual will appreciate the gravity of this responsibility and the immensity of the challenge.

Likely the most important steps professional people can take today are those that lead toward a degree of sanity in the midst of spiraling irrationality. Such steps, if taken, are at least able to support the otherwise faint hope that wisdom will ultimately prevail. The first such positive step could well be a reaffirmation of the truly professional posture of public purchasing’s professional societies and associations, including certification boards. It should be accompanied by a revitalization and modernization of applicable tenets of principles, policies and codes of ethics to reflect the results of past and current lessons learned and directed towards long range improvements for the common good. The second most positive step could easily be a cleansing and purification of the procurement process, including those procedures typically used by governmental entities to acquire professional services. Such steps may initially be met with resistance and finally taken with reluctance and argument. However, policy makers must be brought to the recognition that the public interest is best served by contractually engaging designers and other so-called “professionals groups or persons of high ethical standards” through purchasing procedures that are fair, reasonable, and equitable to all concerned, including the taxpayers. Without a doubt, such services are important and complex, but there is no business reason why cost should not be considered in the front-end of the selection process.

Obviously, people develop professional qualifications with a considerable expenditure of time, effort and money. Despite the fact that the professional classifications may not be as well off economically as other areas of endeavor, for people investing in professional attainment in light of questionable economics the reason could well be that the status achieved is desirable to the individual. It is not at all unusual for people from other professional disciplines, i.e., law, engineering, accounting, business administration, marketing, finance, public administration, etc., to find their professional development enhanced and desirable in the area of professional purchasing. It is noteworthy, therefore, to recognize that the
disciplines of any one or all of these other professions are adaptable for not only use in public purchasing but a considerable knowledge of all of these various disciplines is necessary for the composite purchasing professional to be properly equipped.

True professionals and associations, working together, can give both governmental organizations and the communities they serve the best value they have ever received through the purchasing process. They can so strengthen those processes far beyond the norm of adequacy by demonstrably striving for the integrity that is the true hallmark of the professional. This should be their minimum realistic expectation. May they strive to exceed these minimums as true professionals.

No greater challenge exists in society today than healing divisions that splinter our nation and the world. The code of honor that governs our lives here is now under terrific attack not only by great nations but also by great movements and considerable circumstances. Because of their numbers and the inherent quality of their membership, our professional associations represent one of the most potent sources of strength in our nation for restoring the sense of oneness that once marked our national identity. In giving themselves to that effort, public purchasers can serve both themselves and our nation -- and in so doing contribute to the community and national goals. Americans of professional persuasion can apply their wisdom and experience to a wide range of public and human issues with immense potential for achievement. They can become partners with all elements of society who seek to bind up the nation’s wounds.

Unfortunately, it would seem, at least in some of our professional areas, that the true situation often is the opposite. Perforce the professional association must give witness to the retention of its basic ethical character and the advancement of truth and understanding without sacrificing independence of spirit or opinion. Today, probably more than ever, there is a crying need for the proper professional approach in the performance of our day-to-day activities.

A true professional stays informed about the profession, participates regularly in continuing education, supports the profession
and its goals, serves the profession, meets regularly with other professionals in the same discipline, is recognized by the profession and is helped by the profession. Much has been and will undoubtedly continue to be said concerning professionalism in purchasing. The intensity of discussion often appears to outside parties to be brought about by the desire for self-aggrandizement, as is the case with many other functions of society. However, within the ranks of the practitioners there is a great consensus and certainty that purchasing generally and public, specifically governmental, purchasing in particular is professional in nature in the purest sense of the concept.

**SUMMARY**

In our opinion, a professional public purchasing officer must thus be characterized by the following traits:

- He or she is knowledgeable and competent in the areas of public purchasing, public administration, business management, and product/service responsibility.
- He or she is dedicated to the public service and the best interests of the whole.
- He or she is guided by a desire for excellence.
- He or she is governed by the highest ideals of honor, integrity, and objectivity.
- He or she is completely honest.
- His or her peers recognize him or her as a professional.
- He or she accepts responsibility for failure and is modest when successful.
- He or she is a team player.
- He or she is active in at least one professional organization of public purchasers.
- He or she is friendly, courteous, and tactful at all times.

The professional public purchaser therefore is:
- Influenced by, and in turn, influences society in a number of ways.
- Oriented to the political, economic, and business environment in which he must operate. This requires not only a broad-based basic education (and experience), but also a continuing education to enable him to cope with an ever-changing environment.

- Devoted to serving the best interests of the taxpayers. Therefore, he must be ever mindful that he or she has been entrusted to spend their money in the most economical, efficient, and effective manner.

- Even-handed, non-political, and efficiency-oriented. He or she must perform his or her appointed tasks in such a manner as to avoid even the appearance of being dishonest or unscrupulous.

- Recognized by one’s peers. This is first step toward recognition by the public. A certification from a recognized public purchasing organization attests that the individual is competent to carry out the public purchasing function. It also protects the health, safety, and welfare of the citizenry.

- Aware that the important thing is to learn from one’s mistakes and thereby improve performance. On the other hand, he or she recognizes that success is a result of more than one person’s efforts and is eager to share praise.

- Willing to work with others as a sign of good sense as well as professionalism. A professional recognizes his limitations, seeks the advice of others, and keeps an open mind.

- An active professional. He or she keeps abreast of developments in the field by participating in at least one association of professional public purchasing officers. He or she reads its publications, attends its meetings, and complies with its code of ethics.

- Friendly, courteous, and tactful at all times. This is of particular importance since of all the functions in government, purchasing is one of the more likely ones to bring out the bear in people.

- Able to produce service, support and value contribution results acceptable to his or her organization.

One of the easiest things in the world is to set one’s self up as a “Monday Morning Quarterback”. It is a most popular game to play, and an easy way to win on the basis of second guessing what has already transpired. One can also be very pure and holier than thou or a saint under such conditions. However, in the day-to-day confrontation with operational needs, it is not that
easy to make all the right decisions and win all of the minute-to-minute and hourly skirmishes, daily and weekly battles, as well as the long range war in conducting the procurement process. Therefore, without anyone appearing as a paragon of virtue, one must still apply the highest levels of professional ethics and integrity in coping at all times with the problems of this process. If these lights, even under conditions of changing social mores forever guide an individual, he or she can come very close to reaching his or her objective. This constant striving for perfection, which may never be fully reached, is an essential ingredient of the professions.

CONCLUDING REMARK: “WHAT MAKES A PROFESSION”

If there is such a thing as a profession, as a concept distinct from a vocation, it must consist in the ideals which its members maintain, the dignity of character which they bring to the performance of their duties, and the austerity of the self-imposed ethical standards. To constitute a true profession, there must be ethical tradition so potent as to bring into conformity members whose personal standards of conduct are at a lower level, and to have an elevating and ennobling effect on those members.

A profession cannot come into being overnight. The development of a profession requires many years, and the practitioners of an occupational specialty must earn their way to professional recognition through competent and ethical practice.

Having earned professional status, professionals must then continually demonstrate that they deserve it by living their professional commitment. That means bridging the gap between the generations and distinguishing the immoral from the moral. It also means separating the “wheeling and dealing” politicians from the statesmen and showing that there truly is a difference between the professional procurement officer and his or her less competent, less ethical, and less responsible counterpart.

NOTES

1. The quoted definition was authored by Stanley D. Zemansky but was not attributed to Zemansky in the cited article.

2. This handbook, prepared under the auspices of the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc., was the first curriculum for public purchasing officers.
3. The seminar program was designed by a committee of practicing state and local government purchasing agents under the chairmanship of Homer A. Foerster, Executive Director, State of Texas General Services and Purchasing Commission (then the Texas State Board of Control).

REFERENCES


