

Minding your P's and Q's

by Robert M. Gignac

Back in the days of hand set typesetting, the phrase “mind your P’s and Q’s” had to do with the fact that the letter “p” and “q” while appearing to be mirror images of each other are in fact slightly different. The expression reminded one to be careful not to switch them, since they were side by side in the letter bins. This later evolved into a phrase encouraging you to “mind one’s manners” or “mind one’s own business”. Today, I would like to relate it to the following: Professionalism and Quality.

How many P’s can you find in the word “Professional”? Just one? What makes someone a “professional”? I will offer that there are four ingredients to being professional, all beginning with the letter ‘P’, and they are: Purpose, Plan, Performance, and Perseverance.

Purpose

Professionals understand why they do what they are doing. People who are professional typically did not stumble into their jobs by accident. I believe that in order to be professional, you must be doing what you love to do. When you are not doing the work that you love (you’ll notice that I didn’t use the word ‘like’), it will show in both your attitude to your work, and your performance.

Plan

We do not plan to fail, but we often fail to plan. Actors have scripts, architects have blueprints, and professionals have plans. Plans involve both thought and action. The first step is deciding what it is you want to accomplish, then writing the plan down, so you have an achievable objective. The act of writing the plan creates insight, raising issues that will not be found if you are merely using a mental ‘virtual’ plan instead of a concrete documented one. That said, good plans are not static. A big part of planning is the re-writing of the plan. Why? Things change. People change. Markets change. Do not count on others to do this planning for you. Personal plans are your responsibility. But you just changed last year? So what? Be prepared to change yet again. As someone once said, “a curve is not the end of the road unless you don’t make the curve.”

Performance

Having a Purpose and a Plan will set you on your way to being a ‘professional’, but those two steps are irrelevant if you don’t Perform. Actions always speak louder than words, and your actions will reveal more about your professionalism than any other thing you do. Your clients may never know your Purpose or Plan, but they will judge you by your performance. How you perform will reveal your attitude as well. We all know someone who at

best is an adequate performer, but their positive, upbeat attitude endears them to their clients. At the same time, we all know people with an abundance of talent and an attitude that makes working with them a chore at best, and impossible at worst.

Perseverance

We have all taken on a project that we wish we hadn’t. A professional perseveres through these difficult times because tough times do not last. Tough situations are often the best teachers, because if everything goes as planned all of the time, we do not learn anything, and perhaps worse, we begin to think that we know everything. Most of us have seen numerous applications of “Murphy’s Laws”. Not familiar with Mr. Murphy? Stick around, he’s coming. Perhaps the phrase, “Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong—and at the worst possible time”, will ring a bell? When this happens, your ability to persevere will be given a chance to shine.

Mind your “Q” – Quality

The Ford Motor Company once used a slogan that said, “Quality is Job 1” and it is something worth remembering as we strive to be professional. Another definition for quality reads: “Relating to the characteristics by which customers or stakeholders judge an organization, product, or service”. The people we work for and with will judge us on our work, and a reputation for producing quality work is far more valuable than our glossy marketing brochure or jazzy flash-enabled Web site. Unfortunately, Quality is not for us to decide—that rests with our clients and how they judge our work and organization. However, we can influence it by our commitment to deliver the best work we possibly can at all times.

Are you professional?

Now that you have seen the P’s and the Q, are you professional? Are the people you work with professional? Your ability to state and stay true to your Purpose, work to your Plan, consistently Produce work of high Quality, and Persevere through difficulty will earn you an enviable reputation. While we are responsible for our own P’s and Q’s, encourage those around you to mind theirs as well; it’s another part of what being professional is all about. **E**

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