

Gaining Credibility through Competence – Professionalizing a practice?

Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18)

In the last IAIA Newsletter I mentioned the role that competence plays in the formation of trust and in this Newsletter I will focus on the importance of competence as a vital element of a profession. After all, the importance of a profession, linked to credibility, becomes apparent when considering Sean O'Beirne's call "*IAIAsa – Go big or go home!!*" (O'Beirne, 2009) and Cally Henderson's response "*Go home, I say, for what Big is there to go to.....?*" (Henderson, 2010) – Perhaps there is an opportunity to go *BIG*?

In considering competence amongst SIA practitioners we immediately hit a snag that needs to be addressed before proceeding any further and this is that currently the only academic training offered to SIA practitioners in South Africa is provided through the Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg *and* only at a postgraduate level. There are no undergraduate courses, structured towards preparing SIA practitioners which also seems to be the international trend. Consequently, most SIA practitioners rely on first degree majors, drawn from a plethora of disciplines such as anthropology, economics, education, geography, psychology, social work, sociology, theology and town planning, as a basis from which to engage in SIAs. This, rather eclectic array of backgrounds amongst practitioners does little to portray an aura of a profession within the practice and herein lies an opportunity for some academic institution to grasp the chance to close this gap. What is desperately needed within the field of SIAs is a scientifically developed body of knowledge. A body of knowledge that is specific to the field and which would draw on relevant disciplines to equip practitioners with the academic background and necessary skills to move the practice onto a professional level. Without this body of knowledge, based on continuing research and development, it would be erroneous to regard the SIA practice as a profession which undermines the credibility of the practice, and this probably also holds for most other forms of impact assessments. What then constitutes a profession.

There has, for some time, been some confusion amongst a number of associations as to what actually constitutes a profession. This uncertainty has, however, led to research from which some consensus seems to be emerging. It has been established that, in order to be able to refer to a profession, a number of requirements must be in place. Amongst these requirements are (Welie, 2004; Rice & Duncan, 2006; van Rensburg, 2010);

- A defined common body of complex knowledge together with a set of common skills;
- An autonomous self-regulating national professional guild or association, in most cases set up under an Act of Parliament.

- A certification programme through which professional qualification can be achieved;
- A code of ethics to guide the behaviour of members of the profession;
- A social contract between the custodians of the profession and the entrusting public;

In accordance with these requirements a professional member is expected to display behaviour such as;

- Demonstrating the appropriate knowledge and skills;
- A continual commitment towards self-improvement;
- An ethical and trustworthy mannerism;
- To be service orientated and accountable to the public-at-large;

Research recently undertaken in association with the South African Board for People Practice (van Rensburg, 2010, p. 30), the professional association for the Human Resource fraternity in South Africa, “ *...found that all recognised, major professions had [the following] four core elements in common...*

1. *A mastery of a complex body of knowledge and skills;*
2. *A commitment to integrity and morality through a Code of Conduct;*
3. *Autonomy in practice and the privilege of self-regulation;*
4. *Acceptance of a duty to society as a whole”.*

A fair lesson can be taken from experience gained in the Human Resource or People Management field. At one time human resources practitioners found themselves facing a similar credibility crisis much the same as many impact assessment practitioners currently face. HR was at one stage referred to as ‘Personnel Management’ and at that time largely filled an administrative and to some degree welfare function within the workplace. Qualifications in personnel management were also drawn from a wide range of disciplines, mainly from within the social sciences with many candidates coming through industrial psychology. Commencing with discussion at the Institute of Personal Management in 1973 the issue of professionalization eventually culminated with the establishment, in 1981, of what finally became known as the South African Board for People Practices (van Rensburg, 2010, p. 25).

Today Human Resources is recognised as a profession, with many universities having academic departments of human resources under which a great deal of research is generated and teaching is undertaken. Human resource qualifications are offered at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels; the profession has a code of ethics, is self-regulated and performs a duty to society.

Is there perhaps anything to be learnt from this? One thing is clear; a key factor on the road towards professionalization is competence, with training provided within an academic setting in accordance with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act No 58 of 1995. To achieve this would require a coordinated effort from a number of role players. Does the IAIA have a role in this, in much the same way as the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) played in professionalising Personnel Management way back in 1973? Can an answer to Cally Henderson question “*WHY are there no special categories of registration?*” be found in the system employed by the SABPP. The Board’s professional registration option caters for generalists and specialists. Under specialists there are 7 categories listed as; Planning, Recruitment and Selection; Learning and Development; Reward Management; Employee Relations; Safety, Health and Environment; Organisational Development; HR Information Systems and HR Administration. All quite diverse specialisations collected under one profession. Is there any merit in considering a similar arrangement within the impact assessment field?

Huma van Rensburg, Registrar and CEO of the SABPP, has kindly agreed to share her experiences, gained over 21 years of professionalising HR, with anyone from the IAIA wishing to set up a meeting. Her details are (011)773-6222 email huma@sabpp.co.za and the Board’s web address is <http://www.sabpp.co.za/>

Works Cited

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