
An Analysis of a Study of the Behavior of New College Graduates at the Workplace

The report of the 2013 Professionalism in the Workplace study by the Polk-Lepson Research Group attempts to show the current state and trends for the professionalism of new college graduates. This is the latest report of an annual study performed over the last four years. For this study 401 human resource (HR) personnel answered a survey on a variety of categories dealing with professionalism in the workplace in regards to their new college graduate hires. The results from this survey demonstrate that, from the respondents' perception, there is a growing concern with the professionalism of new college graduates. The conclusions of the survey point to no clear improvement in professionalism and in some cases a worsening trend over the last 4 years. I felt the Polk-Lepson report only deals with perception of the persons responsible for the hiring of new employees and may be a poor indicator of professionalism in the workforce overall.

Analysis/Evaluation

The study had its strengths and weaknesses. These include the limited scope of the study despite the title, the large number of respondents, the areas on which these human resource people place importance, and the generational difference in the respondents.

First, it was a reasonably large study and was done by surveying over 400 HR personnel. The problem is, only those responsible for the hiring of employees, were given the survey. It is their definition of professionalism and their perception of professionalism that is used in this report. The title of the article was "Professionalism in the Workplace". Perhaps a better title would be "Professionalism in the Workplace through the Looking Glass of Human Resources". The HR staff's perception is important, especially if they deal with the day to day operation of a business, such as the owner of a small business. Although, I suspect this is often not the case. About forty percent of those that responded were from businesses with 50 or more employees. In cases like these, besides the interview, the respondent may not have any dealing with the employees on a regular basis. In a circumstance where unionized labor is used the human resource department may have an adversarial type of role when dealing with entry level or low level employees which I could see skewing their understanding of the average worker in a large company. Co-workers, direct supervisors, managers, or the customer/client may be better suited to gauge the professionalism of an employee than a human resource director, whom may not have an interaction with the employee unless a problem arises. An interesting study would be to compare the results of this survey if answered by the new graduate's coworkers to the

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results by the HR persons. Next, let's look at the aspects of professionalism.

According to the results of the study, appearance and punctuality of employees seems to account for the bulk of what these respondents equate with professionalism. While these attributes are significant and often need to be considered, perhaps they should not dominate the list. I believe it is hard to recognize someone's ability when such an enormous emphasis is placed on appearance in particular. Perhaps if the professionalism definition stressed objective categories such as productivity, output, and overall outcomes rather than emphasizing subjective categories such as appearance or attitude it would be a better gauge of the employee.

Due to the recent economic downturn the article made reference to a larger pool of applicants from which the human resource people have to choose. Despite this apparent abundance of applicants, the perception of professionalism is basically unchanged or worse than prior to the downturn. I believe this may be due to using an outdated lens with which to gauge professionalism. The lack of perceived professionalism may have more to do with the organization than the individuals that are hired.

The study also reported the increased trending of a sense of entitlement with the new employees. I think this is more of a reflection of our culture and society than a failure of an individual. We as a nation continue to move toward more governmental entitlements and further away from personal responsibility. This leads to some individuals a feeling of being owed by society, more so than in the past. I do agree with the authors of the report when they stated that an attitude that cannot fail is one of "no one owes you anything". This quote sounds like something my Granddad might have said. He was a man that grew up during the great depression. A time with very few entitlements.

Speaking of the other generations, the report also addressed the difference of perception, among various age groups, placed on IT violations as related to professionalism. Reporting that the older respondents had more of a problem with the use of IT for non-work related activities. I believe this is a factor of stratified generational perceptions. Such that, many younger employees may view using an electronic device as a way to fill downtime in a normal work day. Not as an attempt to multitask as the study reported. In the past this downtime may have been filled with items such as: non-work related conversations, reading, word puzzles, etc. Now this downtime is often filled with electronic interactions. Maybe the question should be: Are the IT violators less productive or safe than the non-violators? If yes, then a valid point could be made that IT abusers are less professional. Until then, it is all a case of perceiving someone texting their spouse as less professional than someone talking about their vacation with coworkers during routine downtime in the course of a workday.

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Conclusion

Although I believe the study is flawed when discussing and defining professionalism it does demonstrate at least one important point. The point is that the people in charge of hiring new employees place an enormous emphasis on items such as someone's appearance and punctuality. It would behoove any new graduate to be armed with this knowledge. Until an applicant or new hire's ability is evaluated rather than his hers appearance the perception of professionalism is paramount. All that being said, this study does report on how HR perceives professionalism. That point is very important to any new college graduate because from the HR viewpoint...Perception is reality!

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