

THE USER SERVICES PROFESSION

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As a profession develops, its members tend to formalize the definition of the profession's scope, the educational requirements and ethical standards for the practitioner, and, in some cases, certification procedures. This will happen to user services if the profession continues to exist with a fair measure of distinction from mainstream computer science and from applied computing. As the number of user services people employed under the title "programmer" decreases, and the number employed as "consultant," "writer," or similar titles increases, people both inside and outside of the profession will begin thinking about what a user services person is and where he or she should come from. In this paper, I suggest that we begin thinking now about some formal issues concerning the profession, such as the skills needed to practice it and the requirements that should be met to enter it. Admittedly, this is an early stage of development at which to discuss these issues, but I encourage it for two reasons. First, we should prevent over-formalization that would spoil the character of the profession. Second, we should develop some mechanisms now to advance the personal growth of user services professionals.

User Services Now

Currently, the user services profession is characterized by diversity and informality. At the 1981 User Services Conference, an informal poll was conducted of the educational backgrounds of the people sitting at one banquet table. College majors included English, engineering, anthropology, computer science, mathematics, library science, elementary education, and psychology. It is easy to get the feeling that user services professionals constitute a random sample of educated people. The profession is also informal in its functioning as a whole. No one, to my knowledge, worries about what sorts of people get into the profession, as long as someone is willing to employ them, or

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about the stature of the profession as a whole. How much of this diversity and informality should be intentionally maintained? Most of it should, but more about that later.

Skills

The skills needed by a user services person fall into five categories: Computer science, applications of computing in other fields, consulting, writing and education. This follows from a knowledge of what user services groups do. It is more difficult to specify exactly what a user services person should know about these general areas--and I do not intend to try. That is a task for a group of people, preferably from SIGUCCS, to spend some time on. Hopefully, though, it is obvious that it is not necessary to have the equivalent of a computer science degree to meet the needs for computer science skills, nor a year-long supervised internship for consulting. But a person only possessing skills in one or two areas will not be of much long-term use to a user services group. We need to provide some descriptions of skills to help in the selection of user services staff and, just as important, to give people already in the field some targets for their own development.

Ethics

Those user services professionals who are members of ACM already subscribe to a code of ethics. The ACM Code is broad. It encourages improvement in professional standards and the advancement of human welfare. It condemns misrepresentation of one's abilities, intentions, creations, or authority, as well as irresponsible or dishonest conduct. (See Weiss, 1982, for an introduction to the ACM Code of Professional Conduct.)

The ACM Code is certainly a good background for ethical considerations. It handles extreme possibilities in user services, such as plagiarism or lying about the capabilities of facilities. It may be beneficial, though, for user services people to provide a code that applies to more specific concerns of user services groups. For example, what responsibility do user services people have to safeguard restricted information at a university, such as grade files? When does giving help to a student user become unethical because it short-circuits a problem-solving exercise intended by the instructor? What guidelines should we use in dividing our resources between internal (usually academic) users and outside users? When is it unethical not to refer a user to other facilities or people if there is uncertainty about meeting that user's needs? Abshire (1981) has already addressed some of these questions. It may be worthwhile to pursue them further.

Formal Requirements

The requirements for entering other professions vary a great deal. To be an accountant, a person must usually have a B.S. in accounting and, to become a CPA, pass tests and fulfill experience requirements. A lawyer must (nowadays) have a bachelor's degree before entering law school, but the B.A. or B.S. can

be in any field; fitness to practice law is assessed ultimately by bar exams. Computer programmers may be people who never attended college or who have a degree in computer science or some other discipline. Some data processing analysts attain special certification after fulfilling certain requirements. There are no hard and fast rules for determining qualifications to work in programming but membership in ACM requires some experience plus a bachelor's degree in any field, or, with no degree, four years of experience in computing. Physicians can have a bachelor's degree in any field, but must take a set of "pre-med" courses in sciences and mathematics. After medical school, there are two more major milestones for the physician: passing general medical boards and, after a residency, passing specialized boards. Elementary school teachers must have a bachelor's degree in elementary education and must be licensed by their states to teach. High school teachers get a bachelor's degree in the subject they will teach, but must take a set of education courses, do student teaching, and be licensed. College professors normally have graduate degrees in their discipline, but have no other formal requirements. (B. F. Skinner, apparently unaware of user services, said college teaching is the only profession for which there is no formal training.) Registered nurses earn degrees in nursing (associate or bachelor's) or graduate from hospital training programs, as well as fulfilling other requirements of licensing. Engineers usually must have a B.S. in some field of engineering and some go further to earn the title "Professional Engineer." Many older managers in business do not have degrees or have degrees in arts and sciences, but companies today often require a bachelor's or even a master's degree in management.

Now to do some sifting. The questions that need answering in order to specify the requirements for entering a profession are:

- Is a bachelor's or associate degree required?
- If a degree is required, must it be in a particular discipline?
- If any degree is required, is there a set of specific courses that must be taken?
- Is a graduate degree required. If so, in what field?
- Must standardized tests be passed in order to practice the profession?
- Are there optional ways to obtain higher recognition of professional competence?

There is no profession that requires its members to meet intellectual challenges in as many academic areas as does user services work. At an academic computing center, it is not unusual to become deeply involved in problems of chemistry, German, and sociology on one day. For this reason, diversity of academic backgrounds among user services people should be assiduously maintained. Most of the patterns of requirements to enter other professions narrow a person's focus at the undergraduate or graduate level. Members of other professions are usually expected to have very similar backgrounds. This would weaken user services.

As discussed earlier, though, the user services profession would benefit by specifying the set of skills necessary to deliver user services, i.e. the common core skills needed to make one's specialized skills accessible in a computing

environment. These two needs, for diversity and for a set of core skills, suggest an educational model for user services somewhat like that of the high school teacher. The user services person should have a background in any academic discipline (preferably equivalent to a bachelor's degree) and demonstrate competence (through coursework or experience) in the five core skill areas. At the present early stage in the development of the profession, these qualifications should be encouraged, not required. My guess is that encouragement would suffice indefinitely.

Licensing should not be required to practice the user services profession. Licensing is usually required of professionals who are in a position to do direct harm to a client or patient. This may be the case to some extent in user services work, but we usually operate in academic environments where students and faculty are supposed to be taking care of themselves (or learning to) and where no one else is licensed except psychotherapists and medical staff. Besides, to resort to intuition, user services just wouldn't be user services if people had framed licenses hanging on their office walls.

To encourage professional development, user services people should consider establishing optional advanced forms of recognition of achievement. These could be awards made by SIGUCCS, a special title (Certified User?) an advanced degree, or some similar mechanism.

Conclusion

This entire discussion has been based on the premises that the user services profession has a distinct future and that formalization is inevitable in any developing profession. If these are true, we have an opportunity to shape the profession to be unlike any other, to maintain the liveliness and diversity we who attend the SIGUCCS Conferences enjoy, and to advance greatly the opportunities for personal growth of user services professionals.

References

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