



Personal vs. Professional ethics:

In discussing engineering ethics, it is important to make a distinction between personal ethics and professional, or business, ethics, although there isn't always a clear boundary between the two. Personal ethics deals with how we treat others in our day-to-day lives. Many of these principles are applicable to ethical situations that occur in business and engineering. However, professional ethics often involves choices on an organizational level rather than a personal level. Many of the problems will seem different because they involve relationships between two corporations, between a corporation and the government, or between corporations and groups of individuals. Frequently, these types of relationships pose problems that are not encountered in personal ethics.



Is Engineering a Profession?

As a starting point, it will be valuable to distinguish the word “profession” from other words that are sometimes used synonymously with “profession”: “job” and “occupation.” Any work for hire can be considered a job, regardless of the skill level involved and the responsibility granted. Engineering is certainly a job—engineers are paid for their services—but the skills and responsibilities involved in engineering make it more than just a job. Similarly, the word “occupation” implies employment through which someone makes a living. Engineering, then, is also an occupation. How do the words “job” and “occupation” differ from “profession?”

The words “profession” and “professional” have many uses in modern society that go beyond the definition of a job or occupation. One often hears about “professional athletes” or someone referring to himself as a professional carpenter,” for example.



In the first case, the word “professional” is being used to distinguish the practitioner from an unpaid amateur. In the second case, it is used to indicate some degree of skill acquired through many years of experience, with an implication that this practitioner will provide quality services.

Neither of these senses of the word “professional” is applicable to engineers. There are no amateur engineers who perform engineering work without being paid while they train to become professional, paid engineers. Likewise, the length of time one works at an engineering-related job, such as an engineering aide or engineering technician, does not confer professional status no matter how skilled a technician one might become. To see what is meant by the term “professional engineer,” we will first examine the nature of professions.



What Is a Profession? What are the attributes of a profession?

There have been many studies of this question, and some consensus as to the nature of professions has been achieved. Attributes of a profession include:

1. Work that requires sophisticated skills, the use of judgment, and the exercise of discretion. Also, the work is not routine and is not capable of being mechanized.
2. Membership in the profession requires extensive formal education, not simply practical training or apprenticeship.
3. The public allows special societies or organizations that are controlled by members of the profession to set standards for admission to the profession, to set standards of conduct for members, and to enforce these standards.
4. Significant public good results from the practice of the profession.