

What people don't get about my job

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Having a job is a privilege that brings many things - satisfaction, pride, a roof over your head, a way of life. But what happens when not everyone understands what you do, affecting how they perceive you and how much they want to pay you? A new study co-written by a Boston College Carroll School of Management professor aims to address that very issue.

Titled "What Clients Don't Get about My Profession: A Model of Perceived Role-Based Image Discrepancies" (published in the *Academy of Management Journal*), the study looks at four specific professions that are high in demand but sometimes misunderstood.

"If people don't understand what you do, they tend to devalue what you do," says Michael Pratt, Professor of Management and Organization at Boston College and co-author of the study. "They don't understand why you're making all this money - 'Why should I pay you all this money?' is a common question these [professionals](#) keep hearing."

While this "image [discrepancies](#)" study focused on these four professions, researchers say it applies to many more.

"I assumed professionals would actually get over it, that there would be frustration, it would be an interpersonal problem, and that would be the extent of it," says Professor Pratt, also the O'Connor Family Professor at Boston College. "I didn't think it would have such a big impact on how they did their job, how it affected their pay and how they performed. I was surprised at the depth of how this affected job performance. It's not simply annoying – it has real impact."

Researchers looked at 85 professionals: 24 architects, 13 [nurse practitioners](#), 17 litigation attorneys, and 31 certified public accountants (CPAs). In most cases, these professionals had to educate prospective clients on job responsibilities, while managing what researchers found were "impaired collaborations" along with "impracticable" and "skeptical" expectations.

"Architects are being told, 'All you do is draw lines, sketches, and pictures all day. What do you actually do?,'" says Professor Pratt about what prospective customers might say . "'You don't build anything. Why should I pay you all this money? If I am redesigning my house, why should I get an architect at all? Why don't I go to a general contractor and have him or her just build it? Tell him or her what I want and have them just build it for me.'

"Nurse practitioners can actually examine patients and prescribe medication but you'll get a patient in there saying, 'I don't want to talk to you, I want to talk to a doctor.' They won't tell the nurse practitioner their problems; they won't let themselves be examined.

"We found with accountants, people don't give them the information they need to do their job. People don't understand what they do. Clients don't want to give them information because they think the purpose of that accountant being there is to find something wrong."

"And with lawyers, their clients will expect them to be dishonest and they expect to immediately be going to court and win. Several lawyers had clients who are mad at them, wondering 'Why aren't we going to court? Why aren't we getting a deal offered to us?' It's because they watch too many lawyer shows. "

All of which has a sobering effect not only on a client's desire to pay these professionals, but also on their level of satisfaction.

"In addition to the emotional costs, [architects](#), for example, talk about fee erosion," says Pratt. "They're not making as much money anymore because they're competing against contractors which they don't think they should be doing because in their mind, they are providing a very different set of skills. Some professionals are being bypassed entirely. Nurse practitioners are being bypassed by people who want a doctor so they're not being used."

To counter image discrepancies, professionals find themselves utilizing a three pronged approach: educating a client on "what we do and how we do it"; demonstrating the skill; and relationship building, "getting to know personal details about people, your basic rapport building," says Pratt.

For certain professionals, defining yourself to clients may be just as important as the project itself.

"Even in situations in which it appears that clients do understand a profession," the study says, "it may be appropriate for a professional to manage clients' expectations to maintain initial trust, as gaining trust back after it has been lost may be even more difficult than gaining trust in the first place."

Provided by Boston College

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