

CANADIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT IS MANAGEMENT A **PROFESSION?**

As I was preparing to write this article for The Canadian Business Quarterly, I couldn't get the story of young Virginia O'Hanlon out of my head. In 1897, the eight-year-old girl asked her father whether Santa Claus really existed. Her father suggested that she ask the question of a New York City newspaper, The Sun. Her question to the editor was as follows:

“Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, ‘If you see it in THE SUN it’s so.’ Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?”

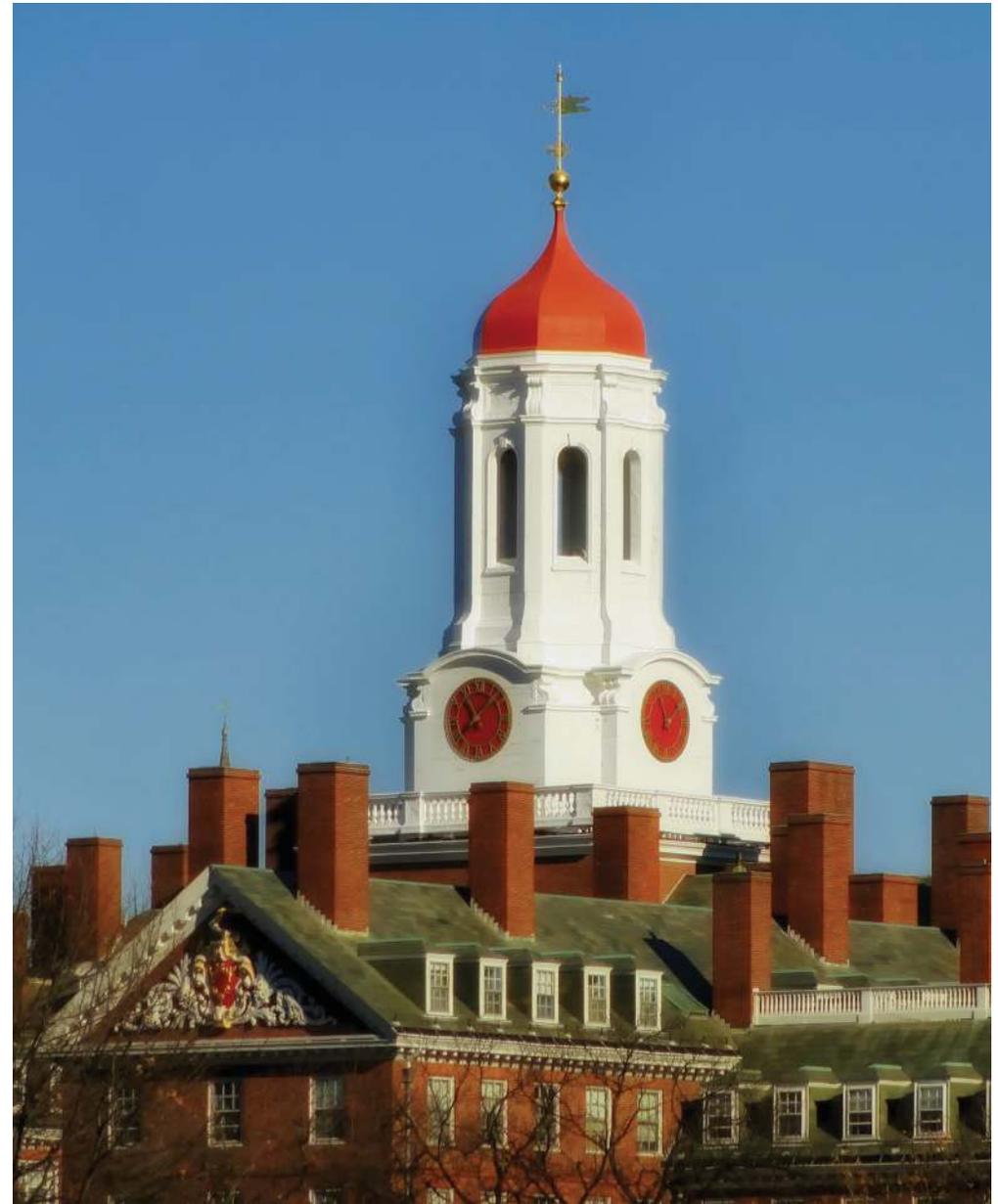
It may seem odd that I, as the CEO of Canada's chartered professional management association, is asking this question. Surely, it's rhetorical? Surely, it's tongue-in-cheek? There are thousands, more like hundreds of thousands, of people around the world that work in industry that define themselves as “managers”. These men and women go about their busy days never questioning their role, plugging away to make their companies successful. Their card-stock, emblazoned business cards hold various titles... engineering manager, operations manager, HR manager, accounting manager, sales manager... the list goes on with new adjectives being added regularly.



Yet, how does one become a “manager”? Getting an MBA? Fiscal accountability? Reading “guru books”? Networking and attending conferences? Sheer luck/fluke? All of the above? None of the above? Some people are “accidental managers”, others make a concerted effort to achieve the coveted “manager title”, others walk into the office one day and find that their manager is “no longer with the company”. They soon realize they have been offered a “field promotion”, as is sometimes done when a military battle goes sideways, and their commander has perished.

I am drawn to the following quotes by Matthew Stewart in his 2009 book (one of the finest books on the topic, IMHO), *The Management Myth*: “The ethical integrity of a profession rests not on science or any technical subject, but on trust.” ... “In any serious profession, just as in any stable society, furthermore, this trust relies on a fair and perspicuous system of punishments and rewards.”. My view is that these punishments and rewards form the centre of mass when it comes to the definition of a true profession.

In 2009 a group of MBA students from Harvard University voluntarily signed the “MBA Oath” with an intent to professionalize management. This noble undertaking has spread to over 100 business school and approaching 10,000 graduates at last check. Meant as a type of “Hippocratic Oath for Managers”, the philosophy behind it was to bind MBA graduates to a higher ideal of professional and ethical standards for those that practice management. I believe that this may have grown out of the Global Financial Crisis when there was a tremendous public loss of confidence in people that should have known better as managers.



However, what defines a profession goes beyond the academic requirements to practice that profession. In fact, the academic formation is arguably the first and perhaps least important component. Physicians, engineers, architects and lawyers all go through the academic process, with the ultimate goal to obtain a license to practice their profession. Licenses can be revoked, degrees (usually) cannot. While the MBA Oath was a good and well-intended step, the “management profession” can only become a true profession if industry and society require some form of revocable license or certification to practice.

The world is not without post-academic management certifications. In the English-speaking world, professional management associations and designations exist within Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK. All these designations have an academic requirement; however, it goes much further than that. Codes of ethics and professional conduct, standards committees, professional experience requirements, reference checks, and policing mechanisms all exist in some form or another, to varying degrees. Designations can be granted, and they can be revoked. These are the punishments for bad behaviour.

The biggest issue is on the “demand side”. Until business, society and government make a conscious decision to make these designations mandatory for certain positions (like is done within medicine, law and engineering), management can never truly become a profession. One cannot be held accountable to their academic degree, but they can

certainly be held accountable to something that can be taken away from them. The requirement of these designations would be the reward for those that achieve them.

In answer to young Virginia O’Hanlon’s question, the Sun editor responded: “Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus.” My answer to a similar question would be: “Yes, management is a profession.”

Dr. Matthew Jelavic, C.Mgr., P.Eng., is the CEO of the Canadian Institute of Management (CIM), www.cim.ca. ●

