

# An initiation into ICT<sup>1</sup> professionalism

The previous section emphasised problems in adequately regulating new technologies, particularly in the information and communications technology (ICT) industry, and the demands that this places on ICT practitioners to behave professionally. The three papers in this section are all based on the industry experiences of ICT practitioners and contain important reflections on the industry. As such, they are not typical academic papers. Rather, they give insights into how a number of thoughtful practitioners view their work and professionalism in the industry. In many occupations a common way of learning, or being initiated into that occupation, is through apprenticeship or an extended period of work experience often undertaken during a course of study. The initiates learn from the experts. This section can be taken as proposing a kind of apprenticeship approach to learning, not so much the content of ICT but the attitudes and concerns that experienced practitioners have. It is primarily a matter of seeing what these practitioners think, particularly about professionalism in the industry, and using these insights to discover more about the industry.

The first two chapters focus on professionalism and the third provides a different perspective to ethical concerns in ICT. In the first paper, John Ridge, a former president of the Australian Computer Society (ACS), discusses the fact that, generally, ICT is not seen as a profession by society at large nor, more surprisingly, by ICT practitioners themselves. This he sees as a problem because ICT is so important to almost all industries and for the prosperity of Australia, and 'professionalism is absolutely fundamental to the effect practice of ICT'. The core of the problem, he believes, is that the vast majority of ICT practitioners do not see ICT as a profession. That they do not is borne out by low memberships of relevant professional bodies such as the ACS (relative to the total numbers working the industry), by the lack of any certification or licensing of ICT practitioners, and by the view of many that professional organisations are elitist and exclusive. This last point is true, but a profession — by its very nature — is elitist and exclusive. Most of us are happy for medical professional bodies to be elitist. Ridge believes that the move to ICT being accepted as a profession by society must begin from within the industry. The practitioners must start to see themselves as part of a profession, something he, as ACS president at the time, hoped would happen when the ACS was admitted to the Australian Council of Professions (ACP), now Professions Australia, in 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> While we use the more common ICT, some authors prefer the older IT and we have respected their wishes in their contributions.

Neville Holmes, in the second paper, while an experienced ICT academic, writes more from a practitioner's perspective. He does not so much discuss whether or not ICT is a profession but focuses on what he believes are special responsibilities of the profession. He makes two main points. First, he thinks that programming should be seen as a technical skill and not part of the profession of software engineering and, second, he believes that professionalism needs to be taken beyond software engineering to computing in society in general. ICT professionals should focus on people, not on the technology. He sees three important ethical responsibilities for computing professionals. The first is to convince people that technology is not responsible for problems, people are. Blaming computers has become common but is clearly just a simple, and pernicious, way of avoiding responsibility. Second, and related to this, the profession needs to redefine itself in the light of developments that have taken place over the last 10–20 years, where computers have become ubiquitous in society. And, finally, the professions must take more responsibility for the way that ICT is used in society. The technology should be used for more than just making things cheaper and easier.

Mark Haughey, a long time practitioner in the public sector, in the final paper of the section, suggests a different way of considering ethical problems in ICT, informed by his professional experience rather than the academic literature. Instead of concentrating on general social issues he focuses on the development of information technology (IT) systems, taking as the starting point *specification, time and resources*. There is a lack of certainty in the relationships between these 'three potential moving surfaces.' For example, a lack of understanding of the specification can lead to problems with the project time frame and with cost; a time frame that is too short can lead to cutting corners and it is at this point that unethical practices arise. Haughey gives a variety of suggestions to minimise the potential problems including better project management, breaking the project into manageable pieces, the management of expectations and more engagement between the players.

## Biographies

**Mark Haughey** has held a number of senior IT executive roles with Australian Government agencies, large and small.

Since graduating from the University of Adelaide in the late 1970s, Mark has worked exclusively in IT. He has extensive experience in technical support, quality assurance, procurement, service management, and governance.

In 2007 he became the chief information officer for the Workplace Authority and later with the Fair Work Ombudsman. A major achievement in this time was the creation of an in-house application development and maintenance capability.

Mark has recently taken on the position of executive director IT projects with the Fair Work Ombudsman.

**Neville Holmes** worked as a patent examiner for two years, as a systems engineer with IBM Australia for 30 years, then as a lecturer at the University of Tasmania for 12 years, before shifting back to the mainland. He was a founding member of the Victorian Computer Society and has been a member of the editorial board and a columnist for *Computer*, the house magazine of the IEEE Computer Society, since 2000.

**John Ridge AM** is executive director of the ACS Foundation, a position he has held since 2005. From its launch in August 2001 until late 2004 he was the chairman of the foundation.

He was previously president of the Australian Computer Society, the professional body for ICT in Australia, in 2000 and 2001. Since first becoming involved in the ACS in 1992, he has held a number of offices at both the branch and national levels. He was awarded the Order of Australia in 2007 for his contribution to the ICT industry and education.

An initiative of the ACS, the ACS Foundation was established to encourage both private and public sponsorship of ICT education through scholarships and research projects. It has raised in excess of \$35 million and awarded over 3500 scholarships.