IT Crowd, Are we just Stereotypes?

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Abstract:
In today's highly dynamic work environments, the role played by IT professionals is becoming increasingly important. Not alone the power of technology, but also its impact on an employee's working life, has initiated the creation of new professions which are realized and therefore generalized in organizational environments. As a result of this process, the importance of IT workers in society has generated a defined social image of the profession which is exploited in cultural media. This work presents the results of an empirical study about the way in which IT workers are portrayed in the media, particularly television, and as a consequence, the perception of the profession which is reflected in future IT professionals.

Keywords: Computing Profession, IT Stereotypes, Personality Traits.

Background

In recent years, the IT field has profoundly expanded beyond the traditional stove-pipe organizational systems; it has filtrated its presence ubiquitously into companies and homes alike. It is evident, according to Denning, that the current identity associated with the IT profession is a combination of a number of personality traits. Compared to other professions, for example, the medical profession, the IT profession appears to be rather immature. Alongside the attempts for "fragmentation" of the different branches of the profession and the lack of professionals, this profession has been obliged to face a difficult downside: professional stereotypes. In the case of IT workers, this stereotype is fixed and not particularly positive.

Professional stereotypes are a common feature in the vision society has about the different jobs. Stereotypes are defined as: "a set of shared beliefs about personal attributes, usually personality traits, but also the behaviors of a group of people". Presently, cinema and TV play an important role as socializing agents. Actually, all kind of stereotypes: gender, race, religion or even professional are part of the conceptual mosaic of the conception of particular social groups. In this "think tank laboratory", the ever increasing importance of IT in today´s world has implied the recurring emergence

of a huge number of cinema plots. As a consequence of this focus, this particular stereotyping research is undergoing a renewed interest.

Several authors have addressed the stereotype image of the IT profession: Nerdy/Geeky, Smart/Intelligent, Math Skills, Programming Skills, Lack of Social Skills, Long Hours, Not Interesting / boring, Individualistic /Solitary / works alone, Unethical, and worst dressed.

It has emerged from previous studies that an important disparity can be detected between perceptions of the profession and the professional role. For example, according to some authors, within the stereotype "Unethical", the importance of Ethics/Privacy becomes evident, reflecting an increasing concern among professionals in modern-day organizations to maintain corporate integrity. Alongside "Individualistic" or "Anti-social", for example, the traits "Desire to collaborate", "Information sharing", and "Team orientation" can be found, among others.

Two important research questions can be derived from the current situation. On the one hand, the stereotypes are generally unattractive, and on the other hand, they are distinct from the real working life of the employee. Such a circumstance represents a problem for the recruitment and retention of professionals, who constitute one of the highest employee turnover rates in labor markets. In this setting, the requirement for qualified professionals and the attraction of future professionals for the fulfillment of the profession is a challenge for organizations and third level institutions. Examining a recent study performed by the consultancy Gartner the lack of available talent is threatening business growth in IT Sector. Thus, the study of the strongest and most decisive medium for the diffusion of such a stereotype in shaping our opinions is necessary for illustrating stereotypes, and the very real implications of such stereotypes.

IT Crowd. The Study.

Methodology.

Bearing in mind the significant capacity of television to form public opinion in today's society, the series "IT Crowd" was selected in order to conduct an experiment analyzing the stereotypes portrayed by the principal characters of the series. Initially, the samples used for viewing were the first two episodes of the first series, written by Graham Linehan and produced by Ash Atalla for the British channel, Channel 4. The episodes are entitled "Yesterday's jam" and "Calamity Jen".

The sample was comprised of 40 subjects. 20 of the subjects were IT professionals, and the remaining 20 were students in their final year of high school. The average age and profession of the subjects corresponded to a similar demographic profile to the actual characters of the TV program. The students were comprised of a sample representative of potential students of various IT fields.

Once the subjects had viewed both episodes, they were required to fill out a questionnaire which related to the content of the episodes, and their opinions regarding their impressions of the characters. Essentially the questionnaire presented only two questions. The first task proposed that the subjects provided 8 adjectives describing the two main male characters of the series. The second question was different for the IT

professionals and the students. The first group was asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 – 4 whether they identified with the characters of the series. The students, on the other hand, were asked when considering the characters, did they find IT roles attractive, on a scale of 1 – 4.

As stated before, the sample was composed of 40 people, where 20 were IT Professionals and 20 were students. The average IT Professionals age is 30.6 years and the remainder was 17.8. The sample was composed of 22 men (55%) and 18 women (45%).

Results

Descriptions following the corresponding pattern using 23 different adjectives were gathered from a set of 320 descriptions. Table 1 includes the adjectives and its frequencies.

Table 1. Adjectives frequencies

Adjective	Frequency
Geek	32
Dirty	28
Arrogant	27
Nerd	25
Freak	21
Tacky	21
Unfriendly	17
Socially inept	17
Neglected	13
Lazy	13
Shy	12
Intelligent	12
Ugly	12
Innocent	10
Nervous	9
Idiot	9
Know it all	8
Casual wear	8
Introverted	8
Isolated	7
Capable	6
Highly gifted	3
Negligent	2

A first glance at the results shows the overwhelming presence of the adjective "Geek". It is highly notable from the descriptions of the characters written by the subjects that many stereotypes are present. With the objective of empirically analyzing the classifications of the adjectives, a taxonomy of these was constructed. In this way, taking account a typology of the adjectives, two groups could be established: those adjectives which denote Personality Traits, and those which denote Physical Traits.

Additionally, in both groups, with the objective of establishing the numerical weight of the adjectives provided by the subjects, a second classification could be established relative to their values and their associated connotations. Three groups may be found in this taxonomy: those which constitute positive connotations, those which comprise negative connotations, and those considered neutral connotations. Table 2 summarizes the frequencies of the distinct types.

Table 2. Groups of Adjectives and their Connotations

	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Personality Traits	21	6,56%	279	87,19%	8	2,50%
Physical Traits	0		12	3,75%	0	

Analyzing the figures displayed in the table, a greater tendency to specify adjectives related to Personality Traits is evident, which represent 96.25% of the descriptions, in comparison with the descriptions of Physical Traits, which only sum to 3.75% of the descriptions. In relation to the connotations of the descriptions, it can be viewed that 90.92% correspond to negative descriptions, with only 6.56% positive descriptions, and 2.5% of the descriptions considered neutral. Overall, it can be noted that the profession is not viewed in a positive light.

Lastly, two different questions were put forward to the two sample populations. The IT professionals were requested to reveal whether or not they felt that their personality was reflected in the characters. Applying a Likert scale which represented the lowest to the highest grade of identification with the TV personalities, the distribution of the responses may be viewed in Table 3:

Table 3. Level of identification of professionals with TV personalities.

	Total		Women		Men	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	12	60%	8	40%	4	20%
2	7	35%	1	5%	6	30%
3	1	5%	0	0%	1	5%
4	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Examining the results, the level of identification is zero in 60% of cases, average in 35% of cases, and notable in only 5%, that is, only one case. In relation to gender, the level of identification with the characters is greater among women than men.

The objective of the question posed to the students was to elucidate whether they considered IT work attractive in the environment viewed in IT Crowd, on a Likert scale of 1 – 4, from lowest to highest grade of interest. The pattern of the results has been summarized in Table 4:

Table 4. Attractiveness of the IT profession to students.

	Total	Women	Men

	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	16	80%	9	45%	7	35%
2	4	20%	0	0%	4	20%
3	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
4	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Analyzing the results obtained, the subjects exhibit a very low level of interest in the profession in 80% of the total cases, with a very definite 100% of women falling into this category. Only 4 subjects consider the work slightly interesting, and all are men. None of the subjects considered the IT positions as interesting or very interesting.

Discussion
The description of the TV personalities reveals a very negative image of the profession. The great majority of the descriptions of the characters imply negative aspects. This is in contrast with a previous study conducted on a sample of films. In this study it was revealed that if negative stereotypes continue to be generated, particularly taking into account the appearance of IT professionals in star roles, the number of positive descriptions rise concurrently and become subject to a normalization process. It was further revealed in this work that there is a higher presence of women in professional environments as the age of films transfers from the 20th to the 21st century.

In relation to the descriptions produced in the current work, it can be derived that such descriptions correspond much more closely to the professional stereotypes than to the competencies associated with any other type of work, in relation to actual professional activities. Consequently, for the current work, descriptions have been classified according to the following stereotypes; "Lack of social skills" (socially inept, isolated, introverted, unfriendly, shy), "Smart" (Intelligent, know it all, capable, highly gifted), "Nerdy/Geeky" (Geek, Nerd, Freak), and "Bad Dressed" (Casual Wear, Tacky).

Regarding the identification of the professionals with the characters, examining the differences between their real competencies and their stereotypes, it appeared logical to conclude that the level of identification, and therefore empathy, would be low. It was revealed that this was indeed the case. Also, the level of empathy is lower in the case of women than in the case of men, this result may have been influenced by the fact that both TV personalities viewed were masculine.

Lastly, examining the figures provided by the students in the context of this study, attracting future IT workers to the profession is not aided by series such as "IT Crowd". When faced with a shortage of IT professionals like a chronic disease affecting the IT sector, this fact constitutes a problem which requires comprehensive analysis, and using all means, possible solutions.

Conclusions

In current social circles, the IT profession is regarded without a doubt as distinct from other established professions, as in the case of architects or solicitors, the characteristics

of which are not usually the subject of biases and prejudgments. The lack of maturity of the profession may be one of the factors causing this circumstance. It is clear that there is not a shortage of research in the field of competency descriptions of professionals, as fully fledged competency models have been developed. However, reflecting on the roles of professionals in society, it appears that the professional community has not adequately conveyed to the public the professional characteristics of IT workers. The generalization of IT in the business world is a clear modifier that will certainly change society stereotypes about the professionals in the sector. From now on, the increasing necessities of the professionals in this sector cannot count on the support of popular media with attractive competency descriptions. It is more probable that a more mature and dominant presence of IT workers will help to define the true characteristics and professional circumstances of IT workers.

Further Reading.

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