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Burial of the Dead

Do you work in an entry-level position or even a middle-level job in a hotel, a hospital, a software company or a government organization? Or are you a self-employed professional like a doctor, a lawyer or a journalist? In all probability you are educated, know English and are working in (or have worked with) the corporate sector. Perhaps an MBA, or a student at an engineering college? You probably consider yourself a professional, or on the road to becoming one. Regardless of what you do or what stage of your career you're in, it's probably safe to say that your station in life is well above someone whose job is to, say, bury unclaimed corpses from city hospitals.

And yet this fact alone does not make you more of a professional. I know a man who has dedicated his life to dealing with dead bodies—unclaimed dead bodies. His job is dirty; it is morose; it requires no degree; yet he exhibits the true meaning of a professional more than most white-collar workers out there. His name is Mahadeva. He came to Bangalore as a child when one day his mother simply walked out on her entire village and her

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own family in a huff. Mother and son lived on the streets, and she worked to support him until the day she became sick. She brought herself and her son to the government-run Victoria Hospital. There she was admitted in a state of delirium, and her little son, Mahadeva, made the streets outside the hospital his home. He found many playmates among the urchins there and soon that world engulfed him. For the first time, little Mahadeva had people to play with—people who became his family—and he lost himself completely in this new world. Then one day someone told him his mother had died. Died? What was that? Where had he been when that happened?

The hospital had waited for someone to claim the dead body for the mandatory three days after death and, as often happens in countries like India where unclaimed dead bodies cannot be indefinitely kept at the morgue, had disposed of the body.

Now Mahadeva was an orphan.

A few people in the hospital ward raised money to help him go back to his village, but he refused to take it. That is when he met his benefactor, an old man who was a permanent fixture at the hospital. The man ran errands for poor, illiterate villagers who did not know the ways of the big city. He was the man who had secured a hospital bed for Mahadeva's mother. The old man took pity and asked Mahadeva to move in with him. Like Mahadeva, he did not have anyone in the world. Under his tutelage, Mahadeva grew up running errands in the hospital.

To Mahadeva, the hospital became the universe. One day, the police asked him to bury an unclaimed dead body and paid him two hundred rupees for the job. This was the day Mahadeva entered his profession, and he would go on to become the go-to guy for burying the city's unclaimed corpses. Every time the police

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picked up a dead body that had no claimants, Mahadeva was summoned. He had to do a turnkey job: pull the stiff body from the morgue, hire a horse-drawn carriage, put the body in it, take it to a burial ground and dig the grave all by himself—for only two hundred rupees. After completing the job, he would wait around in the hospital until he was summoned to do it all again.

Mahadeva did his work with such dedication, focus, care and concern that soon he was very much in demand. His workload increased and he bought his own horse-drawn carriage.

One day, the horse died.

People who had watched Mahadeva all these years came together and bought him an auto-rickshaw. Today, a picture of the horse has become Mahadeva's logo; it is painted on his rickshaw and appears on his business card. Mahadeva has buried more than 42,000 corpses in his lifetime, and his dedication has earned him phenomenal public recognition. Local gas stations do not charge him when his hearse is filled up, and the chief minister of Karnataka, the state in which Bangalore is located, thanked him for his selfless service to the abandoned citizens of Bangalore. Mahadeva is proud of his work, and today his son has joined him in the business.

Mahadeva: the high performer, and a true professional.

What are the two qualities Mahadeva has that make him a professional rather than someone who is simply professionally qualified?

One is his ability to work unsupervised, and the other is his ability to certify the completion of his work.

Whenever Mahadeva gets a call to go to the morgue, day or night, rain or shine, he arrives. His task is gruesome and difficult

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because there is usually no way to tell how or when someone died.

In his business, Mahadeva does not choose his clients. He accepts them in whatever size, shape or state they come. The day he buried the man who had taken him home after his mother died, he cried and bought the man a garland as a mark of his respect. That day, it occurred to him that he should be garlanding all the bodies he buried, not just that of his benefactor. Mahadeva believes that everyone—dead or alive—deserves respect no matter who they are or where they came from.

The police do not supervise Mahadeva, and he is not an employee of the hospital. He does not have a boss who writes his evaluation or gives him constructive feedback for continuous improvement. He reports to no one except himself. Whenever Mahadeva picks up a corpse, it goes straight to the burial ground—no place else. He completes the task with the immediacy it demands. And each time, he makes sure that all the steps are complete, from covering the dead body properly to digging six feet under, even though he knows no one is watching or would ever question him.

In most work environments, people who produce anything of economic value usually need supervision. A person who needs supervision is no professional. He is an amateur, maybe even an apprentice.

Ability to certify completion is an interesting and powerful idea. The concept is easy to understand when we look at the work of a painter, musician or sculptor. Who but only they can certify that their work is complete in all respects and is ready for the world? Who else but the painter knows that his painting did not need any more work, or that he could have done an even better job? How does the world know the musician or the sculptor truly

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did her best while creating something new for the world? Only they know.

That same ability to discern what constitutes completion and self-certify that the work is complete in all respects applies in equal measure to a software engineer who must write defect-free code, a young lawyer who is required to study a case and write a brief or a surgeon who must cut open a patient and make sure that he removes every instrument and every piece of gauze before stitching him up again.

