WHY PROFESSIONALISM MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

George Beaton

May 2022

George Beaton MBBCh, MBA, PhD is the Executive Chairman of Beaton Research + Consulting and FirmChecker.

Australian Council of Professions

Thought Leaders advancing Professions, Professionals and Professionalism

Published under the auspices of the
Australian Council of Professions

For Margaret

Foreword

When I grew up in urban Australia, in the 1980s and 90s, the professionals I encountered were invariably older, financially well-off men, operating under the paradigm of benign paternalism. Their offered opinions and advice were followed without question or challenge.

As George Beaton discussed in his 2010 paper **Why professionalism is still relevant**, professional training is a pathway that leads to knowledge, skills, expertise, and a qualification that confers members of that profession a monopoly on performing those services. The flip side, as he explained, is that such professional powers are open to abuse by those exploiting them to selfish advantage.

As a user of professional services, I've felt vulnerable when faced with the asymmetry of knowledge, expertise and power that the relationship entails. Yet as a professional, I've seen the paradigm begin to shift. The six key challenges faced by professions, as described by Beaton in **Why professionalism matters more than ever**, resonate.

In the veterinary profession, for example, there has been a shift from paternalism to shared decision making. The need to provide an increasing standard of care while ensuring that services are accessible. A recognition that the "good" professional must attend to self-care. Growing diversity among professionals (with room for improvement). Growth in competition, from within and outside of the profession. Technological advances in diagnostics, treatments and clinical management.

The internet has also emerged as a source of reliable – and unreliable – information. My clients have access to the same peer-reviewed scientific articles that I do. And it is impossible to ignore a widespread loss of trust in professionals and experts – both in the media and in one-on-one client interactions. Quite rightly, I am expected to justify my clinical assessments and recommendations.

Despite, and perhaps because of, these trends, Beaton argues that professionalism – using professional knowledge, skills and power for the good of clients and society at large – is as critical to the sustainability of professions and the wellbeing of professionals as it is to a flourishing society.

For Beaton, professionalism isn't so much about what professionals do but who they are. He offers a considered roadmap to ensure that we are best placed to meet the needs of our clients and the societies we serve, underpinned by altruism and ethics. Together, Beaton's papers underscore the importance of professionals and professions in reflecting on what it means to be a professional, and how professionalism can remain fit for purpose.

Dr Anne Quain
Senior lecturer, Sydney School of Veterinary Science
and co-author of **Veterinary Ethics: Navigating Tough Cases.**

Foreword

The story of human progress is built on the development of expertise. As we progress, specialisation necessarily increases, and the role of expertise becomes more important in navigating a highly complex world. Professionals are those who use their expertise to assist others. Their role will continue to be vital in helping people and organisations prosper today and build a better future.

Professionalism is an ethos, an attitude, a framing that is essential for professionals to create value. Unfortunately, not all those who are called professionals truly manifest professionalism. Moreover, in our fast-changing world, many professional services organisations are far from well adapted to the profound shifts in our environment.

Technology-driven change – including widespread access to information, greater transparency, globalised work, process efficiency, and artificial intelligence exceeding human performance on clearly defined tasks – is dramatically recasting the role of experts. Social shifts, including heightened expectations on every front, add to the forces of change. Together these shifts necessarily transform the role of professionals, including how they work and deliver services.

This is in fact a massive opportunity to move beyond the assumptions and models of the past, to adopt new structures for applying the human expertise of professionals in ways that can create the most value for their clients. One of the most important implications is the democratisation of access to services that can assist clients in their lives and businesses, enabling professionals to contribute far greater value to society.

I absolutely agree with George Beaton's thesis that "professionalism matters more than ever". His excellent paper lays out the current situation, the manifold steep challenges facing the professions and a clear path forward, including how to address those challenges.

The fundamental issues are not a matter of business models, organisational structures, professional associations or regulations. This is about character: integrity is an absolute prerequisite for professionalism. In this paper, you will find that altruism and aligned ethics are at the heart of how professionals earn the trust they need to fulfil their role. In a world driven by technology, the ability to create commercial and social value resides in human values more than ever.
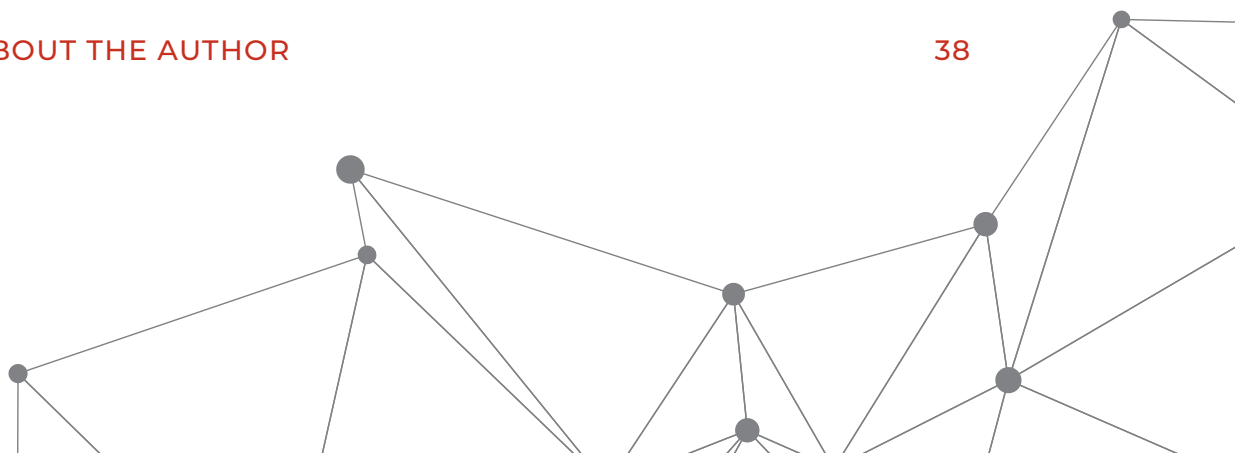
I dearly hope that the insights and proposals in this paper will have a real impact in helping professionalism continue to play its central role in creating a better future for us all.

Ross Dawson
Founding Chairman, Advanced Human Technologies Group and author of **Thriving on Overload.**
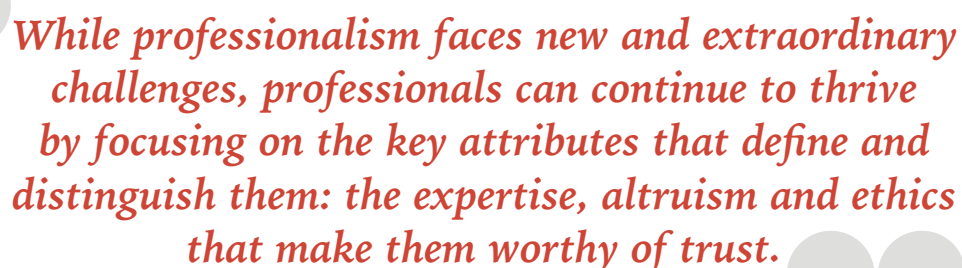
Contents

Introduction

When you allow an anaesthetist to put you under for an operation, you place great faith in their competence. When you consult a lawyer to defend you against an accusation or draw up a contract, you hope they understand both the legal system and your situation. When you engage an architect, you expect them to design a building that will not only be a pleasure to occupy but also fire-proof, structurally sound and safe over the long term. In each case you're relying on another person's qualifications, expertise and experience. More than that, you're relying on something that's more important and also harder to pin down: their professionalism.

But what is professionalism, how is it faring today, and what are the implications for professionals, professional services firms and related organisations? How do professionals balance their duty to their clients and to society as a whole? In this paper, I seek to address these questions and share further views from leaders in the field.

I conclude that while professionalism faces new and extraordinary challenges, professionals can continue to thrive by focusing on the key attributes that define and distinguish them: the expertise, altruism and ethics that make them worthy of trust.

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What is professionalism?

This is my second white paper on "the professions". The first, **Why professionalism is still relevant**, was published in 2010 and defined professionalism as a combination of the knowledge, skills, trustworthiness and altruism found in those who commit themselves to a life of service to others. That paper also noted how the professions differ from the trades-based guilds and have proliferated well beyond the classical three fields of law, medicine and divinity as knowledge has expanded.

Medicine, for instance, now includes dentistry, pharmacy, physiotherapy, psychology, veterinary surgery and community health, and would be better termed "health care". Others with legitimate claims to being professionals include accountants, actuaries, civil servants, diplomats, engineers, journalists, management consultants, scientists and surveyors. In addition, there are information technology (IT) and communications practitioners who properly should be considered professionals *(Beaton, 2010)*.

Across this wide spectrum, professionalism contains a distinct essence that transcends each discrete discipline. That essence is a type of fiduciary relationship – the ethical responsibility to benefit not only the individual clients served, but also society as a whole. Today, "society" includes the environment, and professionals of all stripes continue to grapple with balancing the interests of their clients and positive social outcomes plus, in many cases, their own need to making a living. Lawyers who represent known criminals, for example, are very familiar with these tensions.

This paper discusses some of the ways that professions have sought to guide their members through this minefield, for example by requiring adherence to codes of conduct. Underpinning these measures is the idea that "professionalism" requires professionals to use the asymmetrical power they hold over others (by reason of the responsibility entrusted in them and their specialist knowledge and expertise) ethically and altruistically. This includes balancing their own need to operate sustainable enterprises with the needs of their clients and wider society. When all this is achieved, it not only renders the professions relevant to society but also makes them indispensable to its flourishing.

Threats to professionalism

In the years between my 2010 paper and this one, the position of the professions has become, as Richard Moorhead sees it, "precarious" *(6 March 2014)*. More than ever, it feels as if the once-solid ground beneath the professions has turned into shifting sand. This reflects – at the least – the following six challenges.

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1. RAPID CHANGE

Professionalism is facing momentous changes that my co-author Dr Imme Kaschner and I have described, in our book **Remaking Law Firms: Why & How** *(2016)*, as being kaleidoscopic. We see the future as being:

> … multifaceted, with providers offering a wide range of offerings to meet clients' … needs, delivered through a variety of mostly unbundled and technologically enabled services. These service providers span traditional … firms (themselves varying greatly) through to externally owned new forms of firms, and client-owned, backwards-integrated providers.

> While many of the building blocks of these services will not be all that different from what they are today (like written documents containing advice, for example) they will be generated and assembled in different ways – by standardised processes; adding technology; and by in-, co- and outsourcing each process in the most cost-effective combinations and manner *(Beaton & Kaschner, 2016, p. 71)*.

And today – just six years later – I would add that some professional services are becoming quite different and completely virtual. These include self-executing contracts, and property and rights in the form of non-fungible tokens.

British experts Richard and Daniel Susskind (a father-and-son team) put it this way: "We are on the brink of a period of funda-mental and irreversible change in the way that the expertise of … specialists is made available to society" *(2015, p. 1)*. That is, the traditional conduit of professionals dispen-sing expertise to people is going to be irrevo-cably different from now on. "Fundamental and irreversible change" is upon us.

The Susskinds also say that the professions are outdated, opaque and inaccessible to most who would benefit from their services *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 3)*. They add that the professions are failing in six ways: "economically, technologically, psychologically, morally, qualitatively, and in terms of their inscrutability" *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 33)*.

And they say the professions "will steadily be dismantled" as people "find new and better ways to share expertise in society" *(2015, p. 9)*.

Thomas M. Nichols agrees that professional dystopia has arrived, or is at least on the horizon, as the title of his book **The Death of Expertise** *(2017)* implies. According to Nichols, the forces arrayed against professionalism – including public ignorance and a misuse of technology – are formidable foes. As I discuss in more detail later, Nichols observes a growing mentality – a culture of wilful anti-elitism and ultimately anti-knowledge – aided and abetted by an internet-enabled connectedness gone awry. He sees this as leading to the dire situation prophesied in W. B. Yeats's poem **The Second Coming**, which Nichols quotes: "The center cannot hold; things fall apart [sic] ... The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

I'm more sanguine about the implications of the changing environment in which the professions now operate. I believe the professions have an opportunity – indeed a duty – to adapt and take leadership positions in both responding to and shaping the future, as they have done many times in the past.

Expertise (defined as specialised knowledge and the skills to apply that knowledge) cannot be replaced by common knowledge or by knowledge that is not verified by or

derived from reliable sources. We need professionals who are experts in their fields, but we also need them to be guided by a strong sense of professionalism.

I doubt if the day will come where laypeople Google instructions for a complex surgical procedure, then attempt to perform one. But we may come to the day – indeed, it is upon us – where a robotic arm performs surgery according to its programming, and machines monitor the patient's responses. Even in this new world, there will still be a surgeon, with their knowledge-steeped judgment and inherently human care, overseeing the operation and directing the machines and the technicians.

A distinction could also be made between a professional undertaking a specific task that could be done by others (often at a lower cost point), and other related professional work that generally cannot be mastered by others. That other work might include conceptual thinking, task design and oversight.

Finally, professions must move away from their inherently siloed offerings and accept the reality that often the only useful service is one that incorporates the combined skills and knowledge of many. A lawyer can produce a legally compliant consumer protection document, for example, but without the wisdom and input of others (behavioural scientists, for instance), the document could be useless.

2. PRESSURE TO DELIVER MORE FOR LESS

A pan-profession problem is that in general, clients expect professionals to provide continuously improving services at ever-reducing cost. In turn, professionals are often being forced to optimise their operations for economic efficiency, which can sometimes come at the expense of client service or the appearance of care for clients and society. As Susskind and Susskind say: "Across the professions, institutions and individuals are being asked to deliver more service, with fewer resources at their disposal" *(June 2018, p. 128)*.

This is occurring in an environment that is more heavily regulated and more prone to litigation and complaints. One example is the veterinary profession, where there is "the ethical obligation to provide effective and safe treatments and recommendations in a rapidly changing market with both more price-conscious clients and a more demanding regulatory environment. Careful decisions are required to minimise potential liability risks" *(Vandeweerd et al, 2012)*.

Yet clients do continue to expect more value for the same or lower fees, and this is setting off waves of change – including more automation. As reported by the Law Society of New South Wales in its 2017 **The Future of Law and Innovation in the Profession (FLIP) report**: "The imperative to keep costs low is the most powerful driver of change today" *(p. 17)*. It is now abundantly clear that some work, where the professional adds little or no meaningful value, can be done by others or by machines at a lower cost for the same or better quality.

This situation is not likely to change. As Dr Imme Kaschner and I highlighted in **Remaking Law Firms: Why & How**, there is a "strong consensus that price-down pressure from the client side in the post–global financial crisis commercial world is here to stay", and this pressure will and is filtering into the professions *(2016, p. 15)*.

Yet clients do continue to expect more value for the same or lower fees, and this is setting off waves of change – including more automation. 99

My firm has also published empirical long-term evidence of what's known as the commodity magnet at work in the accounting profession. The "magnet" refers to the inexorable fall in price, measured either as the price perceived by clients in professional services and/or the actual price in the market. This research covered the Australian accounting profession over 14 years from 2008 to 2021 and showed a progressive decline in the average fee levels as perceived by thousands of clients of the 20 largest accounting firms *(Beaton, 4 March 2021)*.

3. AN INFLUX OF NEW COMPETITORS AND SUBSTITUTES

Another change facing the professions is that people and groups who are not in the traditional professions are doing more of the work of professionals. This includes:

› para-professionals, who perform some of the traditional tasks of professionals without the same level of accreditation or remuneration;

› experts in fields such as journalism and IT services who are becoming more widely recognised as professionals (which I refer as "neo-professionals" in this paper); and

› firms that are using disruptive technologies.

In the field of medicine, physician assistants (now called physician associates (PAs)) are functioning in India, Israel, the United States (US), and at least a dozen other countries *(Pasquini, n.d.)*. PAs receive an education roughly comparable to medical school, but in a shorter period and at lower cost, and are then able to perform many of the tasks of traditional doctors. The nursing profession is also becoming more and more stratified, with nurses advancing steadily through the ranks until they are advanced practice registered nurses, doing much of the work that only doctors used to do.

According to **The American Journal of Managed Care**, there are more than 100,000 PAs at work currently in the US. What is more, PAs may be doing as good a job as physicians. After six decades of PAs practising, authors Hooker and Cawley said,

"in a wide range of studies, the evidence demonstrates that PAs produce care indistinguishable from that of the physician in general medicine" *(Hooker & Cawley, 2021)*. Moreover, patients' satisfaction with PAs was equal to patient satisfaction with physicians.

In my view, substitutes threaten conventional professional services firms, to varying and material degrees. One reason is that the more-for-less syndrome of current demand is fertile ground for substitutes that can operate at or below the break-even point of traditional firm incumbents, who are limited in their resource allocation *(Christensen, 2015, p. 100)*. Furthermore, substitutes often rely on external capital that very few traditional professional firms can match. They are also willing to take risks that traditional firms won't – or can't because of their licensing regime or professional indemnity insurance – and regularly substitute technology for labour, which allows them to deliver value to clients at lower cost and often more quickly.

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In the legal arena, I have used the terms "BigLaw" and "NewLaw" to distinguish between traditional law firms and newer, more agile ways of doing law's business

(Beaton, 8 August 2018). NewLaw firms are a genuine threat to traditional firms unless traditional firms can also embrace innovation and remake themselves.

For example, France is leading the world in the formation of technology-powered law firms. Sharon Cohen notes that some 30% of new techno-law firms in the world are in France. Far from being monolithic, she says NewLaw is dividing into four categories of substitute providers, all of which undermine traditional law firms' monopoly on such work. These four categories of substitutes are:

› automation and artificial intelligence (AI);
› alternative legal services providers (ALSPs), which usually use freelance lawyers, paralegals or other trained individuals who can perform routine legal support services at lower prices;
› legal process outsourcing (LPO), which often involves hiring foreign lawyers or firms that charge lower prices; and
› remote-working tools, based on software platforms that allow for the safe electronic exchange of documents and other sensitive material *(Cohen, 3 August 2020)*.

NewLaw is burgeoning worldwide too. More than half of law firms and 60% of corporate legal departments globally are using an ALSP. These providers have proven themselves effective and are here to stay, becoming common in the US, the United Kingdom, Canada, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand *(Cohen, 3 August 2020)*. As we said in **Remaking Law Firms: Why & How**, "NewLaw start-ups are the dot-coms of the roaring twenty-twenties" *(Beaton & Kaschner, 2016, p. 75)*.

Another substitution threat is globalisation. In accountancy, for instance, the profession in the developed world faces competition from qualified accountants located in the developing world who are often equally competent but charge less for their services *(Guthrie & Parker, 2016, p. 3)*.

> *Susskind and Susskind see technology as the wedge that causes cracks in the wall of the professions' edifice, leading to their dismantlement as we know them today.*

4. TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

The spectre of technology wielding power over humanity has long existed. There are numerous examples of this fear in fiction. Mary Shelley's 1818 novel **Frankenstein** featured the technology of "galvanization" to create a monster. Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie **2001: A Space Odyssey** involved a powerful computer (HAL) making decisions, on its own, that ended human lives. **The Matrix** movie series *(1999 to 2021)* presented a world where artificial intelligence (AI) has taken over, while the **Terminator** series *(1991 to 2019)* revolved around the prolonged war between a self-aware AI system and the nearly extinct human race.

Less dramatic (and perhaps more realistic) are fears that automation will replace traditional jobs. Susskind and Susskind see technology as the wedge that causes cracks in the wall of the professions' edifice, leading to their dismantlement as we know them today. They cite a good, but perhaps extreme, example of a robot in the pharmacy of the University of California at San Francisco that, at the time of their writing, had completed 2 million prescriptions without error. By comparison, human pharmacists had an error rate of 1%, resulting in many thousands of mistakes and their consequences *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 49)*.

But will automation or AI actually be able to replace every element of the professional? To answer that question, it's good to start with sentient software – software that might learn to think for itself. Since AI can assimilate and analyse vast reams of knowledge faster and more thoroughly than any human being, will it someday replace the repositories of knowledge in the collective and individual minds of professionals – and their sound, professional judgment?

So far, AI is still in its computational stages. It can compute faster and more thoroughly than the human brain and can store much more information, which it can synthesise to provide solutions. Yet AI does not "think" or feel. Any judgments it renders are the results of computation – algorithms. Algorithms can be wrong and are only as accurate in their predictions as their data inputs and the questions they are instructed to answer. Furthermore, algorithms can be manipulated by humans.

Indeed, a whistle-blower at Google, Dr Timnit Gebru, has already shared her criticisms of Google's AI systems and their opaque algorithms that have been shown to discriminate against people of colour and the poor. As an expert in AI, Dr Gebru believes that AI technology can be used for good and its bad effects corrected, as long as the profit motive doesn't take precedence over human welfare. She also does not think AI is at a "superhuman level that leads us to believe it is both inevitable and beyond our control" *(McGowran, 3 December 2021)*.

Future generations may see the risks that come with AI as being greater than the benefits of an algorithmic world – especially since the role of an algorithm is determined, for better or worse, at least initially by humans with all their judgments and biases. Yet AI is making inroads in the professions. Accountants and accounting firms find themselves supplanted by increasingly user-friendly software that comes at reasonable price points, which makes it available to large and small businesses alike. Such products greatly reduce the working hours of professional accountants and, in some cases, render hiring an accountant unnecessary *(Guthrie & Parker, 2016)*.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) is philosophical about technological innovation. According to a report written with Microsoft, the institute sees technological disruption as a part of architectural history: "Throughout the history of British architecture, technology has repeatedly transformed what architects can create, and how they do so" *(RIBA and Microsoft, 2018, p. 5)*. Architecture has adopted 2D and then 3D computer-aided design (CAD), in addition to current 3D printing, and is adapting to their use.

According to the RIBA and Microsoft report, 70% of architects were using building information modelling to digitally represent buildings and their functions at the time the report was written *(ibid., p. 17)*. Nevertheless, the report acknowledges that the digital revolution has brought about major changes that are "not without risks" *(RIBA and Microsoft, 2018, p. 17)*. "In the past," the report says, "we have seen technological innovation come hand in hand with de-skilling, a rise in wealth inequality, degradation of personal privacy and older generations being left behind" *(ibid.)*.

For my part, I think of this debate as a spectrum. At one end, the design and construction of a complex bridge might be best undertaken by machines working around the clock with minimal human input or oversight. On the other end, a counselling psychologist has very few, if any, technological substitutes. Psychologists use automated cognitive testing as a diagnostic tool, but not as a counselling process.

5. THE INTERNET AS THE NEW KNOWLEDGE DISPENSER

Traditionally, the professions have been reservoirs of society's most advanced knowledge. The internet has changed all that, redressing some of the information asymmetry and therefore bargaining power between providers and their clients. However, the information explosion is not always an improvement, and a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing if it leads to denial of facts, nihilistic attitudes or people making unnecessarily hasty decisions.

Nichols, for instance, has said that today's deluge of information and disinformation may be having an especially egregious effect. For one thing, it allows people with unsound knowledge in a field to become self-styled experts. For another, information can be misleading, whether unintentionally or deliberately. For those who do not know how to discern between reliable sources of information and false and misrepresented ones, misinformation can be especially problematic *(Nichols, 2017)*.

When everyone becomes an expert and anyone can communicate with others via specious blogs and sites, professionals can be particularly affected by a sudden lack or loss of credibility with the public. The way an expert is presented online – by themselves or by others – also influences how the public perceives their authority and professionalism. This presentation can often be beyond the professional's control, as many medical experts have learned the hard way.

And while the deleterious effects of social media are rightly the topic of current public debate and concern for governments, we should remember that the media of yesteryear (newspapers, radio and television) were also the cause of similar concerns. I remember my father, a public accountant, being accused of touting in the 1950s because he was interviewed by the evening newspaper and expressed views that resonated with prevailing public opinion.

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In **The Death of Expertise**, Nichols says that although "the Internet is without doubt a great achievement that continues to change our lives for the better by allowing more people more access to information – and to each other – than ever before in history … It also has a dark side that is exerting important and deeply negative effects on the ways people gain knowledge and respond to expertise" *(2017, p. 108)*.

The internet, Nichols also argues, is harming the very way people think, with its torrents of indiscriminate information and overwhelming speed. The very processes of technological consumption discourage critical examination of content. They can also lead to a sense of unreality as people become removed from real-time human interactions.

Social media is another aspect of technology that has both beneficial and pernicious uses. While it serves the purpose of connecting people, social media's power to disseminate false and harmful information is bringing it under fire from multiple sources. For example, Facebook's algorithms have been accused of encouraging ethnic violence in Ethiopia *(Cornish, 11 October 2021)*. A reporter on the ground in Ethiopia, Zecharias Zelalem, saw a strong correlation between untrue, incendiary posts against the Tigray people – and against journalists or critics of the government – and ensuing violence against such people. He cited an instance of an inflammatory and false Facebook post that accused the inhabitants of a particular village, who were members of an ethnic minority, of having committed violence. Just one day after hundreds of shares and likes of this false post, the village was reportedly attacked and burned to the ground, and its inhabitants killed *(11 October 2021)*.

6. A GROWING MISTRUST OF EXPERTS

The professions face another formidable force in the mounting wall of public mistrust that has grown up around all experts, including professionals and related institutions.

One of the factors that leads people to mistrust the professions is elitism. In **Our Own Worst Enemy**, Nichols said: "Enraged populists of the right and would-be revolutionaries of the left … have offered up a whole cast of villains, all of them in some form the hated 'elites' who ostensibly run the lives of the innocent billions … It is a Manichean view that pits good and pure-hearted 'ordinary people' against a self-serving, out-of-touch 'elite'" *(2021, p. 4)*.

Nichols has said that "American distrust of the media is just one symptom of the larger malady: Americans increasingly don't trust anyone anymore" *(2017, p. 158)*.
The public also appears to be becoming more uneasy about the sums governments spend obtaining advice from professionals. Further, they have seen the occasional inability of professional firms to complete their work effectively in situations such as failing to properly foresee or flag the potential collapse of Enron and Carillion.

Susskind and Susskind note that George Bernard Shaw famously called the professions "conspiracies against the laity" and have written that professionals are perceived as seeking to "ring-fence, isolate, and effectively exclude others from large expanses of knowledge" *(Susskind & Susskind, June 2018, p. 126)*.

What's more, they say, the professions "are unaffordable", which means that the professionals themselves and the people they serve are on higher economic (and social) tiers than the average person, leading to a lack of access to the elite except by the elite *(Susskind & Susskind, June 2018, p. 127)*. For example, there is a strong public perception that the person who can hire an expensive lawyer has a better chance of winning in court than someone who cannot afford a lawyer or must depend on legal aid. Thus, mistrust of the legal profession grows, as does mistrust of the system of courts, judges and law enforcement, and the laws themselves. To many, it is seen as a cynical system based on money and self-interest.

We are even seeing rage towards neo-professionals such as journalists, news anchors and editors, and the owners of their media outlets. These figures are being subjected to much of the same populist resentment as other professionals due to their perceived asymmetrical power in relation to "ordinary folk".

According to the Ethics Index, produced by the Governance Institute of Australia, Australians perceive the media generally as failing to live up to their ethical responsibilities. Negative perceptions of other professions have also increased. General medical practitioners, for example, have a high score of 71 points on the Ethics Index scale, but they still logged a decline of nine points from 2020 to 2021. Judges, public servants and politicians are perceived increasingly negatively, with a net ethics score of -1 – a decline of 15 points since 2020. Accountants log a net ethics index score of 35, but they scored 39 in 2020, so there is some decline in that profession as well *(Governance Institute Ethics Index, 2021, pp. 5–7)*.

What are some of the causes of a growing mistrust of experts and professionals? One issue that grates with people is that, in the public's view, professionals have a habit of changing their minds. As Dr Amitha Kalaichandran has written, "The fact that medical knowledge is always shifting is a challenge for doctors and patients. It can seem as though medical knowledge comes with a disclaimer: 'True … for now'" *(Kalaichandran, 2021)*. This reflects the professions' love of the scientific method, peer review and expansion of the body of knowledge, but is something that needs to be better articulated to wider audiences that want greater certainty from experts.

Of course, when professionals or experts make mistakes, it adds to the perception that they don't know any more about what they are doing than the average, sensible person. Perhaps worse, such mistakes confirm the idea that experts are only out for the money and do not care about their clients. As a result of their education and

training, many professionals also hold a traditional western way of thinking that can make them blind to the positions or perspectives of others, including indigenous peoples.

These criticisms may all have some merit, but it is also important to remember that clients play a significant role in the outcomes that professionals deliver. In architecture and engineering, the client's design brief is often to optimise against the codes and reduce cost rather than to design for reliability and capacity. It is incumbent on the professional to explain the options and obligations to the client, manage their expectations and negotiate – or co-produce – an outcome that meets the technical, environmental, safety, legal, cultural and economic aspects of the work.

Disasters can occur when a professional fails in this duty. For example, the Grenfell Tower tragedy in West London in June 2017 was one of the worst built environment disasters in modern history. A fire broke out in the kitchen of one flat and spread, resulting in 72 deaths. The residents had been told to stay in their apartments in case of fire, because, the experts assured them, the building was designed so that any fire in an apartment would be contained within the flat itself. This turned out to be untrue, as the building's cladding – consisting of aluminium sheets bonded to a highly flammable central polyethylene core – turned Grenfell Tower into an inferno *(BBC, 20 October 2019)*.

Faced with such disasters, it's understandable that the public asks how experts, professionals and other decision makers can be trusted. Yet society is better served by the presence of capable professionals than their absence, so how can professionals turn the tide of public opinion?

The way ahead

The changes and challenges outlined above are real, and they can be disorientating and distressing for professionals. However, they are no greater than history has seen in earlier periods, such as the introduction of the printing press, the emergence of computers and myriad pharmaceutical breakthroughs. They can also be seen as opportunities to continue to prove the worth of the professions to society.

The world needs professionals more than ever – and will continue to be prepared to pay a premium for their services – precisely because of the intangible qualities that set professionals apart: the specialist expertise, altruism, ethics and trustworthiness that define professionalism.

This is also where professionals will discover areas where they cannot be replaced by computers or other innovations – and will realise the importance of thinking on their feet and for themselves in novel situations. More than ever, the unknowable nature of the future and today's speed of change require professionals and their institutions to draw on their values in responding to new challenges and making difficult decisions.

WHY WE STILL NEED EXPERTS AND PROFESSIONALS

For the most part, people the world over are living better, safer, longer, more comfortable and healthier lives than ever before *(Diamandis & Kotler, 2012, p. 44)*. Despite the public's doubts, a great deal of this abundance is the result of experts, working in close collaboration with other key players such as governments, finance providers, and the owners of advanced technologies and intellectual property.

Does anyone doubt that it will be experts – including professionals – who discover the secrets of access to abundance? It will be scientists, engineers and lawyers who access and use resources at lower costs, through wider distribution, and with increasing fairness and safety. Likewise, it will be medical experts who help cure or prevent Alzheimer's, COVID-19 and other diseases that plague humankind.

When the public doubts professionals, and discounts or suspects their expertise, the results can be horrific. In **Our Own Worst Enemy**, Nichols gives the example of the response to COVID-19 in the US. When the COVID-19 crisis became "the people" pitted against "the professionals" (healthcare experts and politicians),

When the public doubts professionals, and discounts or suspects their expertise, the results can be horrific. ❞❞

mistrust abounded. Not getting a vaccine or wearing a mask became a statement of protest against experts. The results were, as Nichols cited, a "catastrophe that inflicted a 9/11-level death toll almost every day … [the pandemic] has killed more Americans than combat in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam combined" *(Nichols, 2021, p. xxi)*.

A loss of faith opens the door to charlatans, who are quick to offer empty or misguided solutions that can cause considerable harm *(see Berk & Binsbergen, 2020)*. Yet the burden of proving professionalism's worth to the public lies mostly with professionals themselves. Taking their oaths and fiduciary responsibilities with greater seriousness and striving to live up to those high ideals is the way forward when asked, *"Quo vadis, professionalism?"*

THE VALUE OF ALTRUISM AND ETHICS

For all their criticisms of the professions, Susskind and Susskind note that many professionals' work is a "labour of love". They describe being a professional as more of a "calling" or a "vocation" than a job; the "overriding aim and ethos is commonly thought to be that of helping fellow citizens" *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 11)*.

This altruistic motivation is directly related to the nature of professionalism. Ethics are what set the professions apart from other types of work *(Beaton, 2010)*. Susskind and Susskind agree. They say that in addition to specialised knowledge, admission into the profession through a credentialling process and regulation, professionals are "bound by a common set of values" *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 15)*.

Others go further and characterise a sense of altruism as the very soul of

professionalism *(Freidson, 2001, p. 12)*. As former Harvard Business School Professor David H. Maister points out, "being a professional is neither about money nor about professional fulfillment. Both are consequences of an unqualified dedication to excellence in serving clients and their needs" *(1997, pp. 18–19)*.

However, professionals don't always live up to this aspiration, so it's important for professionals and firms to place altruism at the centre of their value systems and work. As Maister has said, the unavoidable reality is that "too many professionals [are] in it only for the money or the personal prestige" *(Maister, 1997, p. 18)*.

These conflicting motivations emerge early in professional careers. When asked about their motivation for becoming a lawyer, law students have been reported to express

motivations divided equally between wanting interesting work, wanting to do good and advance justice, and wanting to earn money and status. However, a shift toward financial incentives takes place when students learn the salaries of lawyers involved in more socially beneficial work *(Moorhead, 6 March 2014, pp. 3–4).*

Not only is the profit motive very real and in need of replacement – or at least a rebalancing – by a profession's original sense of ethics, but the public must also perceive that this is the case. Moorhead has said that professionalism not only "depends upon serving the public interest but also upon proving to itself and to others that it does genuinely serve the public interest" *(6 March 2014, p. 5).*

Moorhead cites law as an example of a profession that "is not only increasingly seen as a business but as a business that is measured, and explicitly measured, in economic terms" *(6 March 2014, p. 18).* But he also says that the idea of the public interest is far from dead in the law profession: "I see daily in my contact with lawyers of all stripes, and online or in person, a belief in the idea that the service of clients and law in the public interest stands apart from self-interest … motivated by a sense of the greater good" *(6 March 2014, p. 35).* To which I would add the many lawyers in all parts of the world who put their clients' interests ahead of their own.

It is these kinds of professionals who need to hold the most sway, whose voices and motives must be widely heard, so that the professions can prove themselves as serving the public interest and as valuable to society.

BUILDING TRUST

Professionals' motives matter because they are central to trust – and trust is the oil that powers and lubricates not just the professions, but our economy and society. Ross Dawson said in his book **Living Networks**, "In an increasingly transparent world, trust is becoming more rather than less important, and organisations must take steps to develop trusting relationships with their partners" *(Dawson, 2022, p. 99).*

It is not as if the public starts out from a place of mistrust. Susskind and Susskind note that "we want to trust professionals, to see them as upright people whose motives often seem noble, and for them to be the embodiments of honesty, probity, and integrity. We expect that they will act in good faith and put the interests of those they help ahead of their own" *(Susskind & Susskind, 2015, p. 11).*

Moreover, professionals cannot expect clients and society to automatically accept their expertise and services. As they become more exposed to market forces, the professions must distinguish themselves as uniquely valuable to clients and society.

Trust must be earned, but it also needs to be deserved. As a professional, "it is still possible to be treated with respect and trust – but now you really have to earn and deserve these things" *(Maister, 1997, p. 19)*. To this end, Maister and his colleagues developed a "Trust(worthiness) Equation":

$$T = \frac{C + R + I}{S}$$

Trust (T), they say, equals **credibility (C)** added to **reliability (R)** added to **intimacy (I)** – the extent to which others perceive the professional as trustworthy on a personal level – divided by **self-orientation (S)** where the professional puts their interests ahead of their client's *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021, p. 93)*.

The logic in this is compelling. I regularly see examples of happy, high-quality, top-quartile-profit firms where strong, lived values define the way the people of the firm behave with clients and towards each other. Profit is a reward for being passionately values driven. I have also seen other firms that are equally technically competent, but primarily motivated by money. Those firms have tended to be less cohesive, develop lesser reputations and prove comparatively short-lived.

These are anecdotal points gathered over a 40-year career; I am not aware of relevant empirical studies in professional services. However, research into corporations such as the work published in **Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies** *(Collins & Porras, 1994)* has shown the superior performance of values-based organisations, and there's no reason to believe professional firms are different.

As Maister and his colleagues said in **The Trusted Advisor: 20th Anniversary Edition**, "Technology changes; markets and orga-nizations change; demographics, business roles, and communications media change. What stays constant are human dynamics, including the dynamics of trust" *(2021, p. xix)*. This is backed up by Ross Dawson, who says that even in our highly connected age, "Relationships Rule" *(2022, p. 99)*.

In short, it is good character on the part of professionals that proves the worth of professionalism to society. 99

True professionals, then, in any field, are always more than technicians. They should be people of discernment, empathy and probity, capable of winning the trust of their clients. The quality of a person's character is the real hallmark of professionalism – coupled, of course, with the requisite know-ledge and skills. In short, it is good character on the part of professionals that proves the worth of professionalism to society.

Addressing specific challenges

Even if they are clear about their raison d'être, professionals must still deal with the practical challenges discussed earlier in this paper, such as the need for professionals to do more with less, and to find their place alongside para-professionals and new technologies.

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Some optimistic members of the professions embrace the idea of "more with less" as almost inspirational. For example, Joey Havens CPA, writing in the **Journal of Accountancy**, says that time was once a "revenue-generating friend" because of billable hours in accountancy. However, he believes things have changed thanks to technology. "The on button for digital acceleration has been pressed, and there's no off button" *(Havens, 15 June 2020).*

Havens sees these innovations in a positive light. "More with Less is central to our future view … accountants should consider it our rallying cry," he says *(Havens, 15 June 2020).* He sees potential in the paradigm shift, asking, "What opportunities can we seize by being more open-minded and less reliant on our past beliefs and assumptions?" He goes on to say, "I think those opportunities are vast and have the potential to propel our profession forward for years to come" *(Havens, 15 June 2020).*

Digitisation, as Havens sees it, is liberating because it leaves more time for relationships *(Havens, 15 June 2020).* "Our future

workforce and client relationships will be less formal and more about the relationship itself," he argues.

Indeed, Havens believes that one lasting effect of the pandemic will be that it "flattened our organisational hierarchy". Suddenly, team members and clients alike had new and more access to leadership. In a way, Havens says, "We have never been presented with more opportunity to bring significant value/worth to what we do for clients" *(15 June 2020).*

From this vantage point, the kaleidoscopic nature of modern professional services is a way to serve better and improve relationships with clients – for leadership and membership to engage in dialogue, and for professionals to step up to do what they do best, which is to apply their expertise to serve their clients well.

Some architects are taking this concept to a new level, using the lack of resources in the areas in which they work to spur creativity and cooperation. **Do More With Less** is a documentary about architecture in Latin

America, made by Katerina Kliwadenko, a journalist from Chile, and architect Mario Novas from Spain. The film shows "a change in paradigm by offering a new understanding of the way this profession [architecture] interacts with society" *(Kliwadenko & Novas, 2018).* Young architects in Latin America were concerned about building homes for the estimated 2 billion people who will be living in slums by the year 2030. Traditional construction methods and materials cannot be used for many who live where there is little money or infrastructure. Tired of the old models that have not lifted people out of the most rudimentary of shelters, these architects have chosen to substitute creativity and good management for money and scarce resources. They build with local materials, thinking out of the box to construct viable shelters and other structures with what materials are at hand *(Kliwadenko & Novas, 2018).*

The **FLIP report** notes that as market conditions change, the character of professionals matters more than ever to their clients. "As budgets shrink and competition grows, clients value

timeless qualities in their lawyer: clarity, practicality, an understanding of their motives and objectives, a preparedness to work collaboratively" *(Law Society of New South Wales, 2017, p. 5).* At the same time, clients value more than just low prices. As the report says: "Value, efficiency and a deep knowledge of clients' needs – not simply the cheapest service – are the characteristics that are winning work for firms" *(2017, p. 17).*

The necessity to do more with less may well require increased collaboration between client and professional, together with a sense of "co-production". 🙶

The essential relationships between professionals and their clients – and the fundamentals of relationship building – have not changed. The necessity to do more with less may well require increased collaboration between client and professional, together with a sense of "co-production". In many ways this is a good thing, as it creates self-sufficiency and self-accountability for the client, and a chance to be more engaged in the professional service being provided.

LEVERAGING NEO- AND PARA-PROFESSIONALS

Practitioners in the traditional professions might not want to recognise neo-professionals and advancing para-professionals. As I mentioned in my 2010 article, the professional services firm I co-founded has come under pressure from the classic professions, particularly lawyers, to desist from recognising IT services providers for the Client Choice Awards in the business-related professions. Yet the increasingly specialised knowledge and expertise of these providers – and their now indispensable role in disseminating, globalising and democratising knowledge – make them very significant and worthy of being welcomed into the ranks of professionals, or of neo-professionals at the very least. Indeed, it is past time to welcome these people's support, just as it might be time to welcome and adapt to the support of technology.

A study I completed in the late 1970s with Dr Vicki Pinkney-Atkinson compared the physical and psychological differences among hypertensive patients treated as out-patients by doctors and by nurses. A programme was established at Johannesburg Hospital's hypertension clinic, wherein a group of registered nurses were trained to care for stable hypertensive patients. We found that the specially trained clinical nurses delivered better medical outcomes and patient satisfaction. They appeared to be highly acceptable to both patients and doctors, and, with proper training, were entirely competent in their roles and able to spend more time than doctors with patients. This success led to the development of a similar programme in the diabetic clinic, and there is every reason to believe that the skills of nurses should be further used in the management of other chronic conditions *(Beaton & Pinkney-Atkinson, 29 August 1979).*

Did this approach alter the traditional professional role of the doctor? To some degree, it did. The doctors became teachers and managers of a healthcare team, which included social workers and dietitians, and they responded to their new roles with alacrity. Thus, new competition and substitutes may not be all bad for the professions. To the contrary, they may prove to be an indispensable support system for professionals who become better able to do what they do best: exercising expert judgment and applying expertise at the top of the professional pyramid.

TAMING TECHNOLOGY

There is a danger that the status and wealth of the professions will be undermined as consumers find new ways to access and use technology, or as some professional services become automated. However, as discussed earlier, it is more likely that we will see professionals working alongside technology as they embrace today's innovations as productivity-raising tools, as they have many times in the past. After all, professionals have adopted word processors, email, CAD, automated measurement of bodily functions, spreadsheets and more. Technology is also enabling professionals to work anywhere, at any time, with enriched intellectual challenges and, almost certainly, greater satisfaction for themselves.

Society may also decide it wants professionals heavily involved as new technologies are introduced. It would be these experts who figure out how to control the technological monsters that might arise from AI, for instance. Indeed, we rely on experts in multiple fields of engineering, diplomacy and governance to keep our contemporary, ultimate Frankenstein – nuclear power – in check. We need advances in technology to make life better for humankind, and we need specialists and professionals to channel those advances into benefits while curbing any ill effects.

More broadly, technology has the potential to make the world a much better place. As Diamandis and his co-author Steven Kotler state in **Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think** (2012), humankind does not really face scarcities; rather, it faces undiscovered means of access. As an enabler of access, technology has democratising power, but it must be noted that technology itself is largely amoral and neutral. How and by whom technology is used determines whether it benefits humankind or not. We need to inject our human moral sense to ensure technology is used positively.

Social media is a case in point. Like all technology, social media platforms are tools, so their impact depends on how they are used. They also offer a medium through which the professions can reach wider audiences.

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Maister and his colleagues agree that social media is neutral. In building trusting relation-ships with clients, for example, they note that social media is neither "pro" nor "anti" trust-building, it just provides "a wider range of tools with which to create, or foil, trust" *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021, p. 86).*

Professionals, then, are well-advised not to "treat social media as simply vehicles to blast out the digital equivalent of highway billboards to mailing lists at zero

marginal cost" *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021, p. 86).* Instead, they should seek to understand how social media can be used to build sincere and trusting relationships – the kind of relationships necessary to sustain professionalism *(2021, p. 87).*

The real problem with technology, Green, Galford and Maister add, is that it has put new limits on in-person interactions.

The authors suggest countering this by making digital interactions as human and personal as possible, such as by using emoji and photos, and making the most of rare in-person interactions. They also suggest using technology to learn more about others, and to enrich communications, in a friendly, harm-free and caring way *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021, p. 63).*

WINNING BACK PUBLIC TRUST

The professions have plenty of work to do to win back public trust, and the task varies greatly depending on the profession and country. These efforts are likely to fall into convincing people that a profession exists to serve others, is competent and/or is not unreasonably elitist.

Professions typically have documented values that expound serving others, such as the Hippocratic oath in medicine and "The Charge" in accounting (see box). Research shows that professional oaths or pledges can be effective moral compasses that foster professionalism when it comes to compliance with ethical standards, and so may serve as a means for professionals to regain society's trust *(de Bruin, 2016, p. 28).*

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PROFESSIONAL OATHS

An oath is seen as a symbolic step towards consolidating trust between professionals and the public they are supposed to serve *(Cohen-Almagor, March 2014, p. 40)*. Although they do not take an oath, architects belonging to the American Institute of Architects (some 94,000 professionals in 200 chapters worldwide) adhere to six "Canons" of ethical obligations *(AIA, 2020, pp. 1–5)*.

Accountancy has a code of ethics based on "acceptance of the responsibility to act in the public interest" *(The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, January 1, 2020, p. 12)*. Likewise, the international Code of Ethics for accountants is based on five fundamental principles: integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality and professional behaviour *(International Ethics Standards Board of Accountants, 2021, p. 18)*.

Lawyers of course also take oaths, which for hundreds of years have been "condensed codes of ethics under which lawyers [swear] to abide by a relatively detailed list of conduct standards" *(Andrews, 2009, p. 5)*.

Pharmacists take an oath "to devote myself to a lifetime of service to others through the profession of pharmacy. In fulfilling this vow: I will consider the welfare of humanity and relief of suffering my primary concerns … I take these vows voluntarily with the full

realization of the responsibility with which I am entrusted by the public" *(Gadye, 18 September 2018)*.

IT workers also have oaths. The Pledge of the Computing Professional states that since the work affects people's lives, a Computing Professional bears "moral and ethical responsibilities to society" and must always use their skills for the public good *(Albrecht, et al., August 2012, p. 7)*.

In journalism, press councils in Germany, Canada, India, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and Israel, as well as the Society of Professional Journalists, all endorse codes of ethics that incorporate ideas such as having respect for human dignity and privacy; minimising harm; pursuing strict accuracy; promptly admitting and correcting errors; refusing to plagiarise, mislead, or fabricate words or images; avoiding prejudice, smearing or trying to do harm; and taking particular care with children when gathering information *(Cohen-Almagor, March 2014, p. 39–40)*.

And in the financial services industry, various scandals of misconduct and customer mistreatment have awoken a new sense of professional duty. In Australia, this manifested in the Banking and Finance Oath to promote ethical responsibility among financial service professionals *(Ethics Centre, n.d.)*.

The best way to demonstrate competence and care is to deliver the highest standards to every client, every day. This is of course also good for business in private practice and is often easier said than done, requiring presence and single-minded focus.

In our age of transparency, there is no place to hide incompetence or lack of care. Whereas once professionals might have been able to obfuscate results or attitudes, that is no longer the case. As Dawson has said, "We are now all naked – there is no hiding in the network economy. Your reputation will increasingly precede you as the flow of information through the networks rapidly increases" *(2022, p. 105).*

For professionals, delivering competence, care and results relies on being up to date, free from distractions, well supported and motivated to help. For educational institutions, it relies on inculcating appropriate values and lifelong learning abilities. For regulators, it relies on the high standards of accreditation, continuing education and transparent prosecution of transgressions. And for professional associations, it relies on members working collaboratively to contribute to the public good and the profession's standing, in shared acknowledgement that their status is due to much more than the "credibility" element of the trust equation set out by Maister et al.

Perhaps most importantly, professionals need to break down the longstanding walls between "them" and the rest of "us". These can be traced back to medieval times, when, by necessity, an aspirant to a profession had to belong to the higher social and economic classes: the long periods of study, without remuneration, meant that to be a professional, a person had to come from and continue to be part of the aristocracy – the elite *(Cheetham & Chivers, 2005).* This type of exclusion continues today of course, with people from disadvantaged positions not always having the support required to complete the training to become a professional.
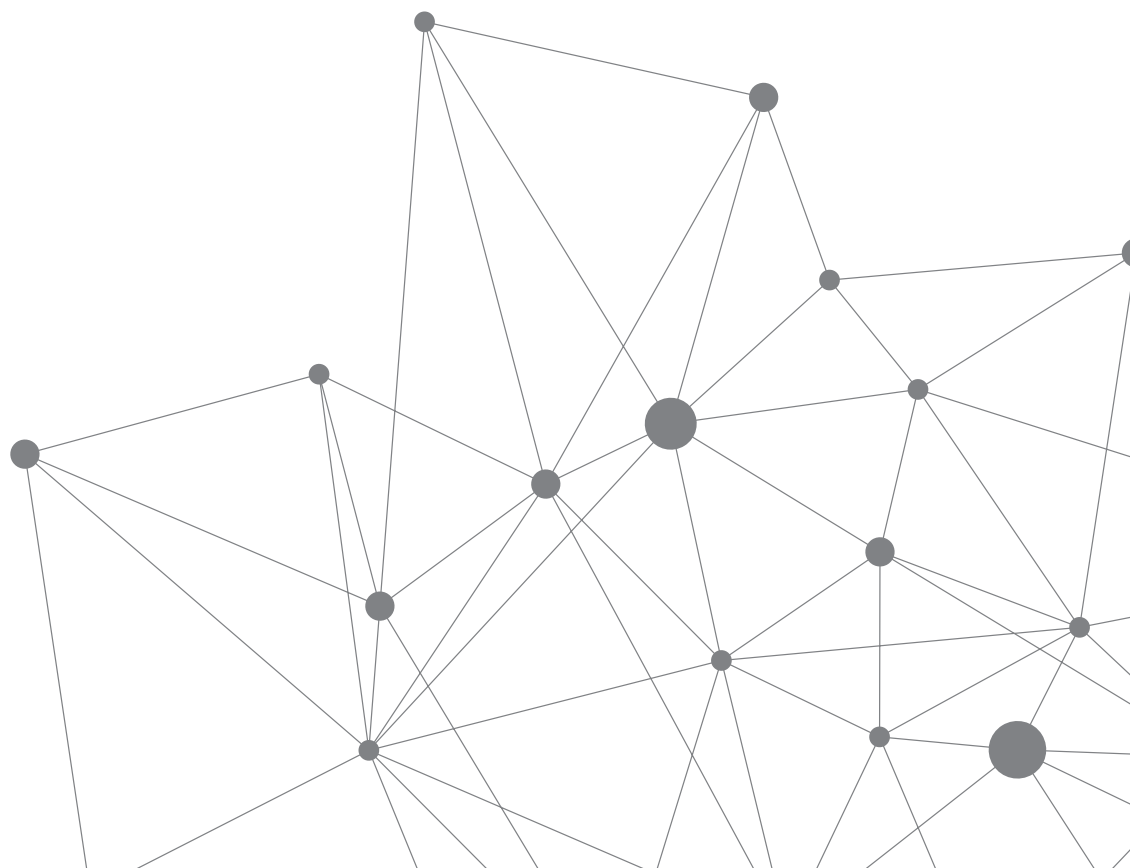
The best way to demonstrate competence and care is to deliver the highest standards to every client, every day.

Professional exclusivity can also be dysfunctional. It disempowers the client and it puts responsibility for solving the client's problems in the lap of the practitioner, rather than the practitioner helping the client solve their own problems *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021).* This attitude is often referred to as paternalistic and sets the professional apart from or above their clients. According to Maister et al, it interferes with the client–practitioner relationship in a way that is "incorrect, dangerous, and self-defeating. The essence of professionalism lies not in distinguishing

ourselves from our clients, but in aligning with them to improve their situation" *(Green, Galford & Maister, 2021, p. 43)*.

Moreover, professional exclusivity for the sake of "looking down" at non-professional people in society, including clients, only feeds into mistrust of professionals. And, as noted in my 2010 paper, some seeking to close others out of their craft admit that their motives – being both to protect the public from poor service and to secure more profit for themselves – are somewhat mixed *(Beaton, 2010, p. 6)*. Certainly, where enclosure is no more than veiled self-interest, it must be left behind, because barring people from the professions is a moral issue about access and equity. But professional enclosure for the purposes of setting and enforcing rigorous standards that protect the public from incompetence and fraud is wholly acceptable and necessary.

Conclusion

In 2010, I argued that professionalism was distinct and essential to the flourishing of our economy and society. In the more than 10 years since that paper was published, we have seen dramatic shifts in technology, service delivery models and social attitudes towards professionals. Yet despite all these changes, the professions still ultimately centre on people serving other people, and people haven't changed much.
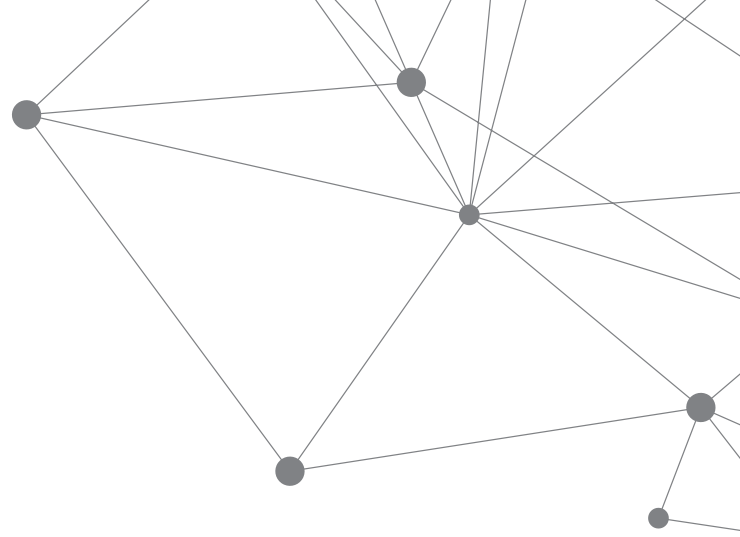
When dealing with important issues such as legal risk, health, finances, construction and environmental change, most of us still want quality advice and support from people we can trust and who have relevant expertise. We want experts to use their knowledge to devise approaches that will ensure our resilience no matter what the future might bring. Most importantly, we want to feel that those experts care about us, are ethical and will put our needs first in an altruistic way. Until that is no longer the case, professionals and the idea of professionalism continue to have a bright future even if it's obscured by the complexity of today's environment.

That is not to say there aren't challenges for professionals to address. These boil down to two sides of the same coin: behaving professionally and continuing to promote the value of professionalism in society, lest it ever be taken for granted – or worse, lost. Professionals need to live up to society's expectations and spend each day delivering a high level of expertise in a way that is guided by a sense of altruism, ethics and values, and is worthy of trust. This should be a universal trust that is understood across different cultures and world views.

Professional firms, associations, regulators and educators should strive to codify what it means to be professional in specific fields, ensuring those ideas are well understood by the professionals within that discipline. They should also take on an advocacy role and convey the value of their profession – and the very idea of professionalism – to clients and other stakeholders.

This is, of course, no easy task when there are so many changes and challenges to address. But I would urge all professionals and related bodies to remember that their biggest source of value is their ability to combine expertise and knowledge with irreplaceable human attributes such as altruistic intent, judgment, values and the ability to form relationships. These have set the professions apart since the days when the term applied only to doctors, lawyers and priests, and they will continue to set the professions apart no matter what technological or process innovations arrive. Most importantly, this sense of higher purpose will both serve society and ensure that being a professional remains uniquely fulfilling for the individuals who choose the path.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following for their invaluable contributions to shaping this paper. However, in its final form, it is my responsibility alone.

Auspices

The Australian Council of Professions and President Klaus Veil kindly agreed that **Why professionalism matters more than ever** should be published under their auspices. This is fitting because, in 2010, President Don Larkin encouraged me to write **Why professionalism is still relevant**, which continues to be available on the Council's website.

Researcher and editor

June Saunders BA. In 2010, June was instrumental in researching, drafting, fact-checking and referencing my earlier article, **Why professionalism is still relevant.** So it was natural I should turn to June to play the same role for this paper.

Editors

Grant Butler BA, MA. Grant is the Managing Director of the editorial services firm **Editor Group**, the author of **Think Write Grow** *(Wiley 2012)* and a former journalist with *The Australian Financial Review.*
Olivia McDowell BA, LLB(Hon). Olivia is a Senior Editor with Editor Group, based in New York. She edits for leading companies, professional firms and governments located around the world.

Designer

Ann-Christin Moellecken is a freelance designer living in Victoria.

External reviewers

Dr Anne Quain BA(Hon), BScVet(Hon), BVSc(Hon), MVetStud, GradCertEdStud (HigherEd), MANZCVS (Animal Welfare), Dip ECAWBM (AWSEL), Senior Lecturer at the Sydney School of Veterinary Science. Anne teaches The Veterinary Professional, a subject encompassing veterinary professional ethics, legislation and professional communication.
Doug Johnson BSc, MSc(Hon), Principal Consultant, Tonkin + Taylor Ltd. Doug has 38 years of postgraduate experience as an engineering geologist, including 20 years in executive leadership and managing director roles for professional services firm Tonkin + Taylor, which is recognised for leading client-focused delivery in the built and natural environment.
Jon Huxley BA(Hons). Jon has held senior leadership roles in the professional services sector for more than 15 years. He now consults to Australasian professional services firms, advising, training and coaching in strategy, client experience and business development.
Michael Gill LLB. Michael practised law with DLA Piper for more than 50 years and continues to practise being human.
Professor Caron Beaton-Wells BA LLB(Hons), LLM, PhD. Caron is the Dean, Internal at Melbourne Business School and is a former Professor in Competition Law at Melbourne Law School.

About the Author

George Beaton, MBBCh MBA PhD, chairs
Beaton Research + Consulting and
FirmChecker, which are dedicated to
providing professional services firms with
actionable insights and advice related to
their clients and the business performance
of their firms.

In addition to his interests in all things
professions, his books have contributed
to redefining the world of legal services:
NewLaw New Rules *(2013)* and
Remaking Law Firms: Why & How
with Dr Imme Kaschner *(2016)*.

For 30 years he taught in the Melbourne
Business School and Melbourne Law
School. He currently chairs the Master of
Legal Business Board for The College of Law
in Australasia.