

Empowering professionals for emerging challenges

Position paper

June 2015

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Summary

The nature of professional work is changing quite drastically. Researchers at Utrecht University working together in the focus area *Professional Performance* are examining the implications of these changes in order to better equip professionals and enable them to deal more effectively with changing contexts. These researchers come from various academic disciplines such as organisational science, psychology, social sciences, law, economics, health sciences, humanities and (veterinary) medicine. In this position paper we highlight why it is essential to establish a multidisciplinary research space like this, whom this is relevant to, and what needs to be studied. We highlight the essential questions driving our academic curiosity, as well as our ambition to contribute with practical interventions and solutions for professionals. We aim to generate a debate between various stakeholders (e.g. professionals and their organisations, politicians, academics and service recipients), to challenge professionals in the field, to fuel collaborative endeavours of science and practice and – last but not least – to pursue the joint search for knowledge.

I. Changing professionals' work

Professionals, such as medical doctors, veterinarians, judges, lawyers, professors, teachers and accountants, are facing substantial changes in their professional environment, including changing client demands and preferences, new technologies, fiscal stress and budgetary restraint (for oversight, Noordegraaf 2015a; 2015b). They need to deal with publicly exposed risks and incidents, with new social challenges, such as transparency, and political pressures

to create ‘healthy, wealthy and inclusive societies’. Most importantly, these are not incremental changes, but *fundamental* or paradigmatic transitions that alter the very nature, not only of professional work itself, but also of professional knowledge, identity and the way professionals are organised.

In fact, according to many, professionalism is ‘under pressure’ (e.g. Noordegraaf & Steijn 2013), if not ‘in crisis’ (e.g. Pfadenhauer 2006). Due to political, economic, social and organisational pressures, it seems professional fields are being hollowed out. Professional work seems to be managerialised and rationalised. Budgetary control and financial considerations affect professional work, which is burdened by bureaucratic rules and accountability systems. Some professionals (See Box 1 for conceptual clarity) have lost their moral stature and are confused about their identities; many have lost their ‘vocational calling’.

Box 1. Professionalism

A profession is a vocation founded upon specialised educational training, the purpose of which is to supply objective counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain. Professional societies and its members are characterised by some extent of internal regulation and quality control, autonomy, power, status and prestige. There are two sides to such regulation: (a) the distinct right of professionals to perform acts that people are otherwise forbidden to do and (b) an obligation of the professions to organise internal control of quality of work. Only with obvious quality of work, transparent quality control and a not unreasonable honorarium for services, society is willing to trust the professions.

These developments, critics argue, have far-reaching effects (e.g. Freidson 2001). Professional services and the quality of these services are deteriorating. Speed and efficiency have become major drivers and time and attention for clients have been severely reduced. A ‘de-professionalisation’ movement accentuates these effects: people are trying to regain ownership of their lives, including many aspects that used to be served by professionals.¹

Professional services, however, still represent a major share of public expenditure and professional work is not suddenly disappearing. Professional services remain crucial for wealthy, healthy and inclusive societies, and despite the ‘de-professionalisation’ movement, professionals remain valuable. But professionals cannot escape calls for better performance in order to remain effective, legitimate and trustworthy.

Traditional models and interpretations of professionalism that stress the importance of autonomous and committed case treatment may no longer be adequate in the changing context of our society (e.g. Evetts 2003; 2012; Adler et al. 2008; Faulconbridge & Muzio 2012; Noordegraaf 2007; 2011; 2015a; Muzio et al. 2013). Professional work used to be evaluated by norms and standards from the professional field; young professionals were trained in these norms and they were taught routines. Professional fields have long functioned as closed

shops, where professions regulate themselves by means of institutionalised regulatory mechanisms (such as oaths, codes of conduct, knowledge transfer, supervision and sanctioning), which structure occupational practices, define effectiveness and secure legitimacy. Such closed and therefore rather static domains could work well as long as patients and clients fully acknowledged the expertise of professionals, government provided sufficient (financial) means and society did not critically judge the quality of professional services. These conditions have changed, however. Present-day professionalism turned from ‘social trustee’ professionalism into ‘expert professionalism’ (Brint 1994). In addition, expert professionals work in teams, use multiple quality criteria, learn and innovate, and are transparent. New contexts call for teamwork, collaboration, a focus on results, accountability, innovation and leadership.

II. Why do we need research on professional performance?

There seems to be an increasing *mismatch* between professional workers, professional fields and how they are regulated on the one hand, and external surroundings, social challenges and public expectations on the other. This mismatch affects performance. When professional knowledge, development, norms, identities and competencies do not match tasks, duties and challenges, the quality of services and social effects will be negatively affected. Or more specifically, when medical doctors do not tackle multi-morbidity (i.e. multiple diseases presenting in one and the same patient), their effectiveness will be reduced. When judges do not respond to social calls for procedural justice, they might lose legitimacy. When veterinarians ignore public discussions on antibiotics, they lose professional stature. When accountants contribute to wrong financial and organizational systems, they lose respect. This mismatch may occur in several fields, each of them potentially jeopardising the professional’s performance:

1. *Technical*: professional knowledge, evidence, methods might be fragmented and contested, and/or not effective for dealing with cases.
2. *Practical*: professional skills and behaviours as well as professional development might be inadequate to deal with social challenges.
3. *Moral mismatch*: unclear values and weak ethical guidelines might be at stake, fuelled by publicly exposed failures (Enron, Shipman, et cetera).
4. *Political*: politicians expect problems to be solved and risks eliminated, which might be at odds with professional outlooks.
5. *Personal and social*: the professional’s motivation and well-being may have deteriorated.

III. Mission of the focus area *Professional Performance*

Although there is some knowledge about these mismatches, essential insights into the underlying mechanisms are still lacking and more *empirical data* is required to examine how

professional work and professionalism is affected by contextual changes and how this affects service outcomes and quality. Secondly, we need more *multidisciplinary* insights and theorisation to interpret these facts. We need to connect insights from public administration, organisation studies, sociology, social psychology, legal studies, accounting studies, educational studies and medical studies, in order to develop a fuller understanding of empowered professionalism in context. Thirdly, we need more *comparative* academic work in order to compare changing contexts and professional work in different settings and sectors, also internationally. We need to disentangle crucial hindering and favouring factors affecting the quality of professional work in order to explain changes and develop practical interventions.

These three research needs provide the background against which the Utrecht University focus area *Professional Performance* was founded. This new interdisciplinary focus area was established to generate a multi-disciplinary research space at the university where the transitions in professional work are studied and the empowerment of professionals to face new challenges is understood.

The mission of the focus area Professional Performance is to describe, analyse and evaluate transitions in and around professional services and professional work to help professionals deal more effectively with changing contexts.

The focus area connects the existing research traditions, activities and projects of five faculties, namely Medical Sciences, Social Sciences, Law, Economics and Governance, Veterinarian Sciences and the Humanities. These activities all focus on professionalism and transitions in professional work. In our research, we focus on classic professionals who have managed to institutionalise joint control of their own work (such as medical doctors, veterinarians, lawyers, accountants, judges, and professors; e.g. Krause 1996). We also focus on semi-professionals (e.g. Etzioni 1969) who control significant parts of their work, such as policemen, social workers, nurses, and teachers. Finally, we focus on organizational professionals (e.g. Larson 1977; Reed 1996), such as controllers and consultants. The way in which professionalism has been institutionalised, as well as the nature of professional work, will affect whether and how challenges are experienced and how professionals are or can be empowered to meet new challenges.

The focus area relates research activities and outcomes to multiple professional fields, especially medical, veterinarian, judicial, educational and accountancy fields, not only conceptually but also occupationally and practically. An emphasis on different fields allows us to tailor conceptual and theoretical models by applying them to different professional practices. It also allows us to make comparisons. We can compare professionals within fields, such as medicine, as well as across fields. We can compare professionalism in transition, inside and outside the Netherlands. Finally, it extends the relevance of our academic endeavours by combining different disciplines – sociology, psychology, economics, public administration, organisation studies, history, philosophy, as well as medical sciences, educational sciences, accounting studies – as well as attempts by different professional associations to improve professional action. Through research projects, international collaboration, conferences, advisory reports, contributions to debates, including public and

political debates and an advisory council, academic insights and professional action are linked. The faculties involved in the research area also train and educate professionals and hence shape the professional fields being studied.

The overarching research question of this focus area is:

To what extent and in what ways are professionals empowered to cope with the many challenges they face, what factors and mechanisms affect this, and how can professionals be helped to deal more effectively with the challenges?

IV. Research model

Professionals are expected to perform, but what performance means is unclear and contested. Performance effects ultimately concern social outcomes (e.g. good healthcare, high-quality education) and more specifically, they concern effective services (e.g. good patient treatment, excellent classes at school). One may even consider professional motivation and well-being of professionals as outcomes. Secondly, what these varying effects are and mean is ambiguous. Social notions and expectations of what ‘good’ education means differ and it is difficult to define what ‘good’ case treatment means. There are objective dimensions as well as subjective ones, which are changeable and difficult to codify. Thirdly, the quality of educational or of health services has different meanings for different actors. Medical doctors want to treat patients as effectively as possible; patients want to be treated well, but they also want care and attention; managers want effective treatment within budgetary constraints; insurance companies want optimal treatment against low costs; politicians want to prevent treatment, etc.

These ambiguities are important. Performance effects will be yardsticks for determining whether professionals deliver good services in changing societies, but it is difficult to determine what good services and strong societies are. Moreover, what good service is depends on stakeholders. For instance, for a health insurance company, good service means efficient service delivery, for the hospital it means satisfied patients, for auditing agencies it means compliance with rules and regulations, and for the professional it means that the service is up to professional standards. In other words, different views of performance exist, so performance quality is contested (e.g. Moore 1995). In that case, performance ambiguities become part of professional empowerment: are professionals and their associations able to determine whether they are effective and provide quality to multiple stakeholders? In addition to determining what is effective, professional fields and professionals need to determine how to remain or gain legitimacy.

Conceptual model

These reflections on empowering professionals for emerging challenges in the changing context allow us to identify three key variables that provide the three pillars on which we build the focus area. We focus on:

- (1) *Context*: economic, social, technological and organisational changes.

- (2) *Professionals*: professional fields, routines, competencies, professional work.
- (3) *Performance*: quality of services, results/outcomes, motivation/well-being.



Figure 1. Professional performance: Conceptual model

The CPP model in figure 1 allows us to identify critical research themes and questions, as the relations between the core variables (Context-Professionals-Performance) open up multiple research areas. Taken together, they explain what professional responses occur, why and when, and with what effect.

We have formulated six key themes and questions related to these core variables and their interrelationship that deserve our joint attention as well as academic and practical answers. We elaborate them below by discussing main issues, key drivers, key consequences and challenges for the future.

1. How do professional fields develop and how do they develop professionalism?

This concerns Context-Professionals

Coordinated by Mirko Noordegraaf, together with Wim Kremer & Philip Langbroek

1.1. Main issue

As professionals are trained and socialised, they develop professional identities and (self-)images of what it means to be professional (e.g. Witman et al. 2011). New conditions are not automatically translated into new occupational identities and images. First, professional fields are increasingly fragmented. Professional (sub-)groups and segments within a field develop different views and establish different ways of working. There are re-stratifications, e.g. when elite professionals focus on complex case treatment and routine professionals deal with the bulk of production portfolios. Second, professional work is increasingly dependent on outside environments, media influences and multiple stakeholders. When both professional effectiveness and legitimacy are under pressure, identities and (self-)images have to adapt. The question is whether this is occurring, and if so, why and how?

1.2. Main questions

How do professional fields (professional associations linked to universities and states) deal with the technical, moral, etc., aspects of transitions? How do they empower professionals to face new challenges in society? How do they establish adequate new professional images, identities, and development?

1.3. Key consequences

Ambiguities and fragmentation may lead to conflicts on training, knowledge transfer and supervision, and to a lack of professional consensus. Professional authority and power may be waning. Professional fields are at a crossroads. They need to acknowledge ambiguities within their fields and increasing dependencies on multiple actors and thus develop new images. Remaking identities and images is not only fundamental – including in the political sense – but also cultural and practical. How do professional associations remake and ‘implement’ new images? How is this visible in training and education, as well as other regulatory mechanisms? And how do professionals respond?

1.4. Challenges for the future

The key challenge is to develop new professional images and identities that fit larger contexts.

2. How do professional fields control and empower their members?

This concerns Professionals

Coordinated by Margriet Schneider, together with Paul Boselie

2.1. Main issue

The main issue is how professional fields, professional members and other relevant stakeholders deal with control and empowerment challenges caused by a changing society and organisations. Professionals are subject to all types of control, regulation and governance: legislation, codes of conduct, public opinion and social norms and values. Changing societies create new challenges beyond coercive and normative control principles, for example towards models of self-regulation and self-control. This causes a paradox² (Smith & Lewis 2011) of control and empowerment. The coexistence of professional control and compliance by government and professional autonomy and self-control raises the question of how to control and empower professionals effectively. The different control and empowerment regimes, and the combinations of these control and empowerment regimes, present a paradox for professionals: the elements seem 'logical in isolation', but 'irrational and inconsistent' when juxtaposed. This raises challenges for professional fields and their members.

2.2. Main questions

Are members of professional fields prepared to deal with different control and empowerment regimes? Are professionals ready to embrace ambiguities and look for synergies?

2.3. Key consequences

We need both an internal and an external perspective to fully understand control and empowerment in professional fields in order to encourage synergies and integrate the overall system. From an internal perspective, for example, medical specialists emphasise autonomy and dislike direct control where quality and safety are concerned. From an external perspective, medical standards and accreditation norms require collective standardisation within a healthcare organisation and the sector as a whole.

2.4. Challenges for the future

By combining knowledge and expertise from various fields such as healthcare management, organisation studies and HRM, the focus area will advance our knowledge of control and empowerment of professionals. The key challenge is how to combine and synergise control and empowerment in professional work.

3. How do norms and routines affect professionals and professional work?

This concerns Professionals Coordinated by Mirko Noordegraaf

3.1. Main issue

After many years of relatively undisturbed autonomies, professional work has been regulated in new ways since the 1980s and 1990s. Managerialism and New Public Management (e.g. Kirkpatrick et al. 2005; Noordegraaf 2015a; 2015b) set business-like standards, which led to clashes between managerial/organisational and professional norms and routines, in two ways. First, what are effective norms? Second, who sets and enforces effective norms? Although these clashes led to resistance against managerial intrusions and to radical criticism of standards per se, more viable research perspectives have focused on standardisation processes in and around professional work (e.g. Timmermans & Berg 2003) and on the effectiveness and legitimacy of norms and routines. Professional fields will have to redefine professional work and develop new professional routines. The question is, what are appropriate norms, and how are they set?

3.2. Main questions

When professional action is reconfigured, by establishing new routines, norms and values, how is professional work affected? Does it lead to enhanced outcomes and quality, which contribute to social needs? What role do (new) technologies play?

3.3. Key consequences

The nature of norms and routines determines how professionals experience them and whether they can work with them. This affects professional motivation and well-being, as well as the quality of professional work. The ways in which norms and routines are set and maintained affect whether there will be conflicts and whether professional groups feel their jurisdictions are respected and upheld or reduced and harmed. By understanding regulatory processes and their effects, the quality and strength of professional work can be enhanced.

3.4. Challenges for the future

We do not know a lot about contemporary re-setting processes in different fields, either in terms of the new routines and norms that are set or who or what sets them. Also, in terms of whether and how standards are turned into daily routine. We do not know a lot about how these new norms and routines play out in professional practice either – whether and how they affect education and socialisation, whether and how they affect professional work, and how they are experienced by professionals. This calls for extensive and in-depth comparative studies on the rise and spread of new professional norms and routines that make up professional work. The key challenge is to set and use appropriate norms and routines that secure leeway, but also coordinate the work of professionals.

4. How do professionals organise and lead professional work?

This also concerns Professionals-Performance Coordinated by Margriet Schneider, together with Paul Boselie

4.1. Main issue

Public policies have introduced new aims (such as risk reduction, accountability and striving for cost control, increased speed and effectiveness and market competition) into many professions. Technology is rapidly transforming professional work. At an organisational level, results are measured constantly and routines are adapted to ensure performance. Increasingly, professional performance is realised in a context of multi-layered interactions (specialised teams, organisations, associations, certifiers, standard organisations, supervisory bodies). This requires a different level of organisation within professional fields.

4.2. Main questions

How do professionals organise and lead professional work, including organisational and leadership challenges?

4.3. Key consequences

Teams are increasingly replacing the autonomous professional. Performance is the result of many (also non-professional) hands on the job. Professions have scattered into many different tasks for which new specialisations (knowledge and skills) are required. This leaves professionals subject to controls of and interactions with others in their daily work. Professional collectivisation requires a shift towards flexible professional identities within collectives in a professional field. It demands flexible organisation, flexible professionals and leadership facilitating teams and organisations to develop and apply new routines.

4.4. Challenges for the future

Professionals need to function both as individuals, as team players and as team leaders, but also as students and as teachers. They need to shift between professional and organisational work. One challenge, therefore, is to educate and train professionals to cope with rapidly-evolving changes in their work.

As responsibilities are dissolved into collective entities or replaced by managerial responsibilities, measured results may be transformed into rigid routines – in order to improve measured results. One challenge may be to strike a balance between risk reduction and (collective) professional autonomy.

The main challenge for leadership in professional fields may be to develop a culture of organisational trust in professionals, while also maintaining the legitimacy of professional work to the outside world.

5. How do professionals deal with work pressure and remain motivated?

This concerns Performance

Coordinated by Wilmar Schaufeli & Maria Peeters

5.1. Main issue

Given the dynamic situation of changing work contexts, it is a challenge for professionals to maintain a proper balance between job demands and job resources in order to remain a healthy, happy, motivated and productive professional. New job demands may include ambiguity, administrative chores and job insecurity. New job resources may include performance feedback, learning new routines and competencies. Excess work demands or the lack of resources may not only have a negative impact on the professionals themselves, but also on their clients, patients, students or customers, their performance and the organisations they work for. The main issue is how professionals deal with work pressure and remain healthy, motivated and productive professionals.

5.2. Main questions

How can professionals cope with increasing work pressures? How can they maintain their well-being and contribute to service quality?

5.3. Key consequences

Professionals are personally involved in their jobs; many view their job as a ‘calling’. Their personal engagement that is crucially important for their professional performance is – paradoxically – also a major risk factor for job stress and burnout. Human services professionals show the highest prevalence of burnout symptoms compared to other occupational groups. On the other hand, levels of engagement are also relatively high among these professionals. Preliminary research among different professional groups has shown that burnout is negatively associated with job performance, while work engagement is positively associated with it.

5.4. Challenges for the future

Specific (combinations of) job demands and job resources have to be identified amongst various types of professionals. So far, job performance is predominantly assessed with self-reports or supervisor ratings, which are notoriously poorly validated. One of the main objectives is to include alternative performance measures, such as productivity and efficiency. By combining knowledge and expertise from various fields, such as psychology, HRM, business studies and economics, the focus area will further our knowledge of the individual and organisational processes that produce healthy, motivated and productive professionals. The key challenge is to guarantee healthy, motivated and productive professionals, even in challenging times.

6. Which competencies do professionals require to be able and capable to deliver?

This concerns Professional-Performance Coordinated by Wilmar Schaufeli, together with Marieke van der Schaaf, Olle ten Cate & Wim Kremer.

6.1 Main issue

Professional education is a prerequisite for a competent workforce, an internal quality-control mechanism within professions: educating new generations and preparing graduates for a rapidly-changing professional environment with continuously new demands. Professionals must individually adapt to new demands, which requires lifelong learning, and take up leadership roles to challenge and adapt contexts (Frenk et al. 2010). Professional expertise development throughout a professional career demands a transition from knowledge expert to professional expert, i.e. someone who knows how to combine knowledge and professional demands. The predominant model of professional education, i.e. theoretical preparation in the classroom with subsequent practical experience, may have to be rethought. Professional learning is shifting from an educational setting to a workplace setting. Two new concepts are important. One is ‘deliberate practice’, which implies that expert performance is acquired gradually and that performance improvement requires suitable training tasks that the performer can master sequentially (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich & Hoffman 2006). The other is the concept of ‘Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs)’, units of professional practice that can be entrusted to learners to be carried out unsupervised once they demonstrate sufficient competence. EPAs shift the focus of the education and assessment of professionals to what really matters in the workplace. They also shift the focus of assessment to a matter of trust, rather than grading. The use of EPAs may affect the transparency of educational objectives, certification and licensure for critical tasks. Although these effects need to be studied (O’Neill 2002), this may lead to restored public trust in the medical profession.

6.2 Main questions

Which skills, abilities and capabilities do empowered professionals need to be able to perform? How can professional expertise development be supported and assessed during the transition to a new form of professionalism?

6.3 Key consequences

Society has always depended on expertise and skill that most people do not have and that are confined to a select group of professionals. There are, however, signs of a decrease in public trust of professions. We need to study how to restore public trust in professions or at least halt any further erosion.

Accountability in professions is paramount because society depends on professional services. Accountability has been central to the discussions related to public problems. For instance, 23% of EU citizens claim to have been affected by a medical error (WHO 2013). The development of professional competence and assessment is essential to overcome these problems. Performance assessments are primarily meant as an internal control measure within

the profession, but may also stimulate professional development, especially when incorporated into professional training. That said, it is not known how and under which conditions assessment enhances the development of expertise.

6.4 Challenges for the future

In order to rebuild public trust in the professions, the professional world needs to guarantee adequate education in line with new professional demands. It needs to restore and guarantee the quality of feedback and assessment for (becoming) professionals and lifelong learners. It also needs to study how assessment impacts expertise development. New technologies and ICT may impact this process by providing adaptive feedback, monitoring and assessment.

V. Conclusion

Although it is too drastic to speak of a ‘crisis’ and too pessimistic to focus on the weakening and ‘demise’ of professionalism, professional work is changing, new challenges have arisen, new conceptualisations of professionalism are important, and practical innovations of professional work and development are needed. We pose a central research question:

To what extent and in what ways are professionals empowered to cope with the many pressures they face, which factors and mechanisms affect this, and how can professionals be helped to deal more effectively with the challenges?

Our Context-Professionals-Performance (CPP) model allows us to study the most critical themes linked to this question, while contributing to practical improvement. Related to the various axes of our model (Figure 1), we focus on the following six key themes and their interrelations:

1. Professional identities and images
2. Control and empowerment of professionals
3. Professional standards and routines
4. Organisation and leadership of professional services
5. Professional motivation and well-being
6. Professional education and assessment

Multidisciplinary research allows us to study each of these key themes, as well as the overall interactions between Context, Professionals and Performance. This is important for professionals, their fields and their well-being. It is also important for tackling real issues in and around real services, whether related to health, animal health, justice, education or accountancy. When contexts, work and effects are connected in an innovative and viable way, the result is empowered professionals as well as reconfigured professionalism and professional fields. Empowered professionals and new professionalism are vital for healthy, wealthy and inclusive societies.

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¹ In The Netherlands, these developments are called ‘vermaatschappelijking’, ‘participatiesamenleving’, and ‘eigen kracht’.

² Smith and Lewis (2011: 387) define a ‘paradox’ in management and organisation studies as: “Contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time; such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent, and absurd when juxtaposed.”