



Rethinking Expectations of Professionals

Coping with changing contexts and increasing pressures.
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The world is increasingly uncertain, unpredictable and insecure. It is rapidly changing with consequences for decision makers and those who advise them. Issues and global risks confronting directors, boards and contemporary leaders are becoming more complex and inter-related¹. Geopolitical, environmental and technological shifts are occurring. Developments are becoming more difficult to foresee, predict and/or prepare for. What are the implications and consequences for professionals and the professions? Management services and other practitioners are often in the front line when system, process and organisational changes occur. How might they be affected by possible scenarios?

Global conflicts were once thought less likely due to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. Prudent and responsible leaders now prepare for them². Overt disputes, hot wars, deniable assaults and active hybrid warfare are underway. The values of liberal democracy are increasingly challenged

by autocratic states and western leaders with authoritarian tendencies whose rhetoric may also seek to undermine past principles and entrench their own power³. A declining liberal international order faces growing challenges. Leaders of certain authoritarian states are emboldened. In the US, power is increasing consolidated and concentrated in the executive and President Donald Trump, supported by vested interests such as US oil majors and high-tech companies. Is a new neo-royalist era of contending cliques emerging in place of nation states⁴?

Increasing Unpredictability and Fragility

Given evident and latent issues, danger points and tensions, boards and their advisers should continue to expect the unexpected⁵. Changes of allegiance, behaviour and commitment may become more frequent, as people try to avoid grasping nettles or falling out of favour. Will business and professional leaders have to focus more on accommodating the changing

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Adjusting to Uncertainty and Changing Realities

History and recent events suggest worse may be yet to come⁸. With multiple indicators showing global risks and existential threats at record levels, almost every indicator suggests diminishing prospects of the continuing existence of contemporary human civilisations. The survival of humanity and many other species now depends upon collective action to prioritise wellbeing and planetary health over perpetual growth⁹. One suspects far more professionals are concerned with the latter than the former. They do not wake up each morning eager to degrade ecosystems, reduce biodiversity and eliminate other species, yet such consequences result from collective human activities.

Many professionals are responding to corporate and national ambitions for further growth. They support practices such as built-in obsolescence, the premature ending of product lines, and sales commissions that encourage over-selling. Rather than enhancing demand, seeking ever more, and over consumption, could satisfying, sufficiency and producing just enough to meet a minimum requirement or core need be a more sustainable strategy¹⁰? How many professions have initiated reviews of the impacts and unintended consequences of the collective activities of their members? If they were engaged, and if adverse consequences and negative externalities were better understood and discussed, might more investors be prepared to accept lower profits and customers pay a premium to reduce them?

Existing beliefs and values, legal and regulatory requirements, and criteria for determining accountability and responsibility could all be based upon past aspirations, priorities, assumptions and practices. They may need to be reviewed. Prevailing approaches across many institutions, including professions and business, educational and legal systems, assume a degree of continuance in terms of what might be expected. People and organisations seek enough continuity and sufficient stability to plan their futures, invest or decide what to study, teach or acquire. Contracts may also need to be for a minimum term to be viable. Are such preferences and requirements ill-suited to current unpredictability, volatility and uncertainty over various deal outcomes? Multiyear investments may be required where government funding is annual, and a decision maker may lose an election or be replaced in a reshuffle.

Determining Responsibility and Accountability

Arrangements may also be in place for a periodic enquiry, consultation or review with sufficient intervals between changes to allow implications and consequences to be considered, and for them to be bedded in. As changes multiply and speed up, the frequency of these might have to be increased. Directors are expected to work for the long-term success of companies upon whose boards they sit, while professionals may claim to serve the best interests of their clients. However, the future may be uncertain and unpredictable. Views and decisions of accountability, responsibility and what is considered acceptable and reasonable may be heavily influenced by assumptions formed in a bygone age when periodic re-organisations and re-engineering exercises were undertaken and formal planning occurred.

In a previous era, accountability and responsibility were

whims of autocrats, keeping in with centres of power, and endeavouring not to alienate them? Will adherence to principles increase vulnerability? Professional practice can establish and entrench certain perspectives and approaches. Success, recognition as a specialist professional and expert, along with the defence of others, can re-enforce a person's existing positions⁶. Have adaptability, creativity and openness to new ideas, possibilities and alternatives become more important in the contemporary era?

Shifts are underway, causing a rethink of what is considered reasonable and responsible by some stakeholders, regulators, the media and local communities. The persistence of negative externalities and other adverse impacts suggest many areas in which activities are socially and environmentally irresponsible⁷. Systems, processes and infrastructures and the approaches, knowledge bases and practices of professionals and the professions may all reflect previous estimates of what could or is likely to happen, projections of past trends, and possible developments. Many processes and practices are relatively lean. There is limited headroom for coping with unexpected developments. Various exercises may have been undertaken to slim down, cut costs and/or reduce waste. With pressure on resources and affordability constraints there may now be little redundancy and limited resilience to cope with unexpected developments and/or unintended consequences.

Many contemporary institutions and infrastructures and public finances are fragile. Multiple points of failure could also be encountered at the same time as global risks accumulate and existential threats loom¹. In a transactional era, dramatic policy shifts can and do occur on sanctions, tariffs and the use of force, as deals are done and hard power is exercised. Preparations for certain events are often discussed and implemented individually. Little may be done to be ready for a combination of them occurring simultaneously. Past assumptions and expectations of requirements, actions and responses may no longer apply. Previous precedents might not be helpful when situations, circumstances and contexts change in unexpected ways. Previous norms and practices may no longer influence or constrain.

often easier to determine. Processes and structures might have existed long enough to be bedded in and properly documented. Job descriptions and formal statements of roles and responsibilities may well have indicated who should have acted, been responsible or done something different. Looking for a scapegoat, primary cause or someone to blame was often easier when individuals could be traced who took decisions that led to certain outcomes. Today, unwelcome outcomes such as extreme weather events can appear as unpredictable acts of God resulting from the impacts of global warming on eco-systems that are caused by collective human activities rather than certain individuals who could be held responsible.

Malevolent actors are also unwelcome. AI tools are being used by malicious state-sponsored and cyber-criminal hackers to autonomously crack passwords, exfiltrate data and mount sophisticated attacks¹¹. Past issues often related to a particular function or activity. They could be separately discussed and dealt with. In recent years, more of them, including cyber risks, seem to affect most or all aspects of corporate activities. Challenges, risks and existential threats also increasingly impact each other, rather than being self-contained¹. Issues such as climate change remain on board agendas because they cannot be easily delegated to one business unit, department, function or profession. Groups that consider behaviour and conduct may once have been less diverse and more homogenous than today. Consensus might have been easier to achieve. Changes and developments were often incremental as people built upon what had gone before.

Moving Into an Insecure and Transactional Era

Preparation and planning for a professional career have become more problematic and uncertain. New appointees in a variety of roles would often share certain expectations and norms or 'rules of the game' with their predecessors. Courses and programmes of educational institutions and professional bodies were reviewed and updated less frequently than today. Will multipolarity and transactionalism lead to smaller players being sidelined as bigger powers make deals over their heads? Might this result in disorder, conflict and the pursuit of perceived national interests at the expense of a common good and previously shared values¹²? Multiple changes now occur simultaneously. In many cases, they are more fundamental and introduced by disruptors who despise rather than respect those they succeed.

Autocrats and disruptors may reject what has gone before. They might seek to play different games and eliminate opposition rather than seek an orderly transition. Those coming to power may have supporters to reward. In a transactional era, benefitting one's base and financial backers may take priority over maintaining a level playing field for supporters and opponents alike. Supporters can include high tech companies lobbying for less regulation to encourage innovation and rapid growth, and others seeking to benefit by staying close to a centre of power. When cases involving AI are considered, it may increasingly be found that outcomes which disadvantage individuals result from an automated process powered by an evolving application that may hallucinate and is influenced by biases, and data from a previous age. Fragmentation, polarisation and the lobbying of special and vested interests can magnify extreme views and increase inputs of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Keeping in with autocrats and centres of influence can



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be wearing where there are uncertain boundaries between contending powers, and uncomfortable when practices may be encountered that are felt by professionals to be unpleasant if not repugnant³³. Regulatory requirements and local practices may vary across jurisdictions. An alignment of values across professional associations and firms that operate internationally may become more difficult to achieve. They may also be challenging for individual professionals facing pressures to conform when there is a change of regime, or on moving from a liberal democracy to a hostile autocracy. An important client might expect senior partners to keep in with whoever is in power when seeking to further their local interests.

Coping With Complexity and Increasing Demands

The range of changes occurring simultaneously in multiple areas can be bewildering for many citizens, especially those who grew up, were educated, and whose early careers were in a previous era. They may now find themselves dealing with automated systems, about which those in a call centre they are queuing to reach, might not know enough to resolve their queries. They may join the ranks of those who feel excluded. Aspects of modern life, complexity and a growing burden of changes of regulations and legislative requirements can seem ever more intimidating. Compliance and reporting requirements ratchet upwards. They can become a proportionately higher burden for small and start-up businesses and those expanding internationally and encountering differing overseas requirements.

Regulation, reporting and other demands thought to be excessive can deter innovation and initiative. Some boards consider de-listing to avoid some obligations and requirements. The privilege of limited liability comes with certain obligations, but these should not be so onerous as to deter enterprise and entrepreneurship. Legislators and regulators should endeavour to safeguard and protect while making it easier for people to engage in business activities. Excessive requirements can add to workloads. More individuals, including directors and senior executives, are running out of bandwidth as pressures upon them increase. Some are overloaded. They feel unwell and experience mental health issues³⁴. Some professions may be more affected than others.

Facing complex issues, difficult trade-offs and pressure to act ever more quickly, the lack of time for reflection, thinking, living with a decision and considering different possible outcomes adds to anxiety and the risk of burn-out³⁴. What steps should professional bodies take to help their members to navigate dilemmas and handle pressures they face? Fragmentation, polarisation and the algorithms of social media can also increase the number of people whose views have become more entrenched and who are willing to object and challenge. More individuals, members and groups may take direct action and/or initiate legal action against companies and their boards. Are the professions ready to face growing concern about a lack of action in the face of climate change?

Unwelcome Consequences and Disruptors

Countries vary in their greenhouse gas emissions and commitment to net zero. Global warming is accelerating and voluntary pledges are unlikely to achieve climate objectives



without coordinated collective action^{15,16}. Warming of 2–3°C, more extreme weather events and other unwelcome outcomes are likely, with some regions facing extreme increases of 8–10°C¹⁵. Consequences could be especially significant for some areas of professional practice. For example, worker productivity drops by 2–3% for every degree above 20°C¹⁷. How should professional bodies and practices monitor the impacts of climate change and other developments and trends upon areas of work undertaken by their members? Are there new services that could be offered? What more could the professions and their members do to address climate change?

Waves of ‘push back’ from some directions may be followed by others. More entities and groups may find themselves ‘under the spotlight’ or ‘in the line of fire’ of a particular lobby. Some directors may also face calls for a company to become an ‘activist’ and adopt a certain policy or take a stand or become a force for the common good¹⁸. Some climate and environmental campaigners become active disruptors to draw attention to their concerns. Disruptive forces also include criminal gangs, malign influences and hostile countries seeking to steal or undermine an existing world order and/or current ‘rules of the game’. Their purpose may be to discredit and sow division. Hostile hybrid warfare attacks could include recruiting individuals to carry out deniable acts of sabotage.

Those disadvantaged by complexities, events and technological developments can be attracted to those who portray them as victims and offer to protect them and advance their interests. The marginalised may no longer look for continuity and seek a safe pair of hands. They might have had enough and prefer someone who is a disruptor and ready to tackle ‘enemies’ who are portrayed as responsible for their misfortune³. Given a trend towards fragmentation and polarisation, will some professional bodies and practices find it more difficult to maintain a consensus and sufficient unity to avoid splits? What mechanisms may be required to manage disruptors and handle greater diversity?

Confronting Technological Challenges

Uncertainty, insecurity and being expected by colleagues to

be positive can take its toll, when accumulating evidence is suggesting what more needs to be done to cope and survive. The time required to reflect, consider and discuss what to do or how to respond is being further eroded by fears of being left behind when others are making massive investments in mega data centres required to power AI adoption, with consequences for already stressed locations and ecosystems. Increasingly boards and professional firms have to ensure that innovative adoptions of evolving technologies are ethical, responsible and sustainable and enhance organisational resilience¹⁹. Are the professions and individual professionals equipped and ready to offer authoritative, current, relevant and tailored advice?

Whether technology is helpful or harmful can depend upon how it is used, by whom for what purpose, and in which context with what support. Already developments in certain areas of technology, including AI, are occurring more quickly than corporate arrangements and regulatory frameworks to ensure their ethical and responsible application and use can be updated. Generative AI represents a threat to white collar and junior professional jobs. How will people acquire the experience needed to monitor evolving AI applications? For many people their profession is an important element of their identity and sense of who they are. How can professions best monitor developments and keep their core body of knowledge up to date? Are those responsible for the learning and development of future professionals involved in the design of generative AI applications? These can be harmful if users outsource their thinking and if any learning difficulties they may have are disguised and not addressed.

Overall, technology and AI adoptions and developments are consuming scarce water, energy, metal and critical mineral resources and generating growing amounts of e-waste²⁰. What if any contributions are the professions making to reduce negative externalities; innovate to reduce data centre and other technology water, energy and resource requirements, and seize related opportunities, before remaining tipping points are breached? Are some practitioners supporting clients whose activities are socially and environmentally irresponsible? Might some professionals have ethical concerns? Is

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confidential ethical advice available to individual professionals who might seek it?

Ensuring Scope for Innovation

The confining and environmentally damaging use of the large language models of major corporations supported by mega data centres, might be followed by a greater variety of more distributed, diverse and flexible AI adoptions on personal devices that more creatively use local data relevant to each task²¹. While giving individual professionals greater freedom to experiment and innovate, greater diversity and more localisations might challenge those professions seeking to preserve enough alignment and standardisation for clients and the public to know what to expect from their members. Is enough thought being given to what being a member of certain professions might mean in different future scenarios?

As developments and shifts occur, and with an agreed knowledge base and relatively entrenched practices, how easy is it and will it be for some individual professionals to do things differently? Creating space for innovation relating activities within organisations can be challenging when there are purpose, priorities and other considerations to navigate and structure, support provided needs to preserve spontaneity, and political and tactical skills may be required²². How might professional bodies and firms protect and extend the scope for exploration, creativity, enterprise and innovation within communities of practice? Are there particular barriers and inhibitors to be overcome?

Climate change measures are being limited by behind-the-scenes anti-climate lobbying by an emboldened fossil fuel sector following the election of Donald Trump for a second time as US President²³. How is climate related innovation affected? Questions about the rationale, justification and incentives for taking on the duties and responsibilities of a company director or other professional and how to attract and recruit suitable candidates may become more acute. Not all professionals easily avoid or resist autocratic demands, are climate change deniers, or support policies of questionable legality and morality.

Implications for Directors and Boards of Professional Bodies and Practices

With growing scientific evidence of the harm caused by many corporate operations and human activities it may become more difficult for directors to claim they were not aware of looming global risks and existential threats¹. Dramatic policy shifts can and do occur on sanctions, tariffs and the use of force. Hybrid conflicts can quickly become hot wars. Changes can have implications for people, organisations and fragile institutions and

how they prepare for the future. Cause and responsibility may be more difficult to establish in insurance and legal cases. The terms of directors' and officers' insurance cover may need review. Are the professions doing enough to ensure their members have the insurance and other protection they need to maintain their independence and the integrity of their advice?

Accountability and responsibility challenges and shifts underway have implications for corporate and professional boards, and their core activities such as formulating strategy, intelligent steering, establishing risk tolerance and putting in place arrangements for the governance of risk. More events and risks may become uninsurable and there may be further roles that people may be reluctant to assume and contractual commitments they avoid. Many changes are occurring simultaneously in a variety of arenas. Events are often unpredictable. What future enquiries, legislators, regulators and tribunals might consider reasonable and acceptable is uncertain. Could the provision of strategic direction become increasingly problematic? Systems, processes, people and governance arrangements may all have limits.

With demands upon them, challenges, existential threats and potential liabilities increasing, and consensus more elusive, being a leader of a business or a professional body or practice can seem like riding a tiger with potential poachers lurking. Senior professionals may be familiar with the political and networking skills needed to retain important clients targeted by rival firms. Business and professional leaders facing major disruptions and geopolitical shifts increasingly require political awareness and diplomatic skills to navigate between the contending aims of competing states and fragmenting interests within some of them²⁴. Are the professions ready for the many challenges they currently face?

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Management Services Journal, Spring 2026

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