# Responsible Leadership and Decision Making

## Desirable arenas of awareness for contemporary professionals.

Professor Colin Coulson-Thomas.

People, organisations, communities and societies face multiple and inter-related challenges, risks and threats[1]. Many of these are common, shared and affect many other species, critical ecosystems and the natural world. Our planet with its finite resources struggles to cope with them, an expanding human population and unsustainable growth ambitions. Individuals vary greatly in their awareness and assessment of them, their impacts upon themselves, and their families, livelihoods and prospects. They differ in how concerned they are, their emotions, how they react, and what if anything they do in response.

Some are distracted and hesitant. They sit on the fence, look the other way, or endeavour not to get involved. They may feel a lack of agency, bandwidth or capacity to act. When people other than themselves are affected, they may not feel a connection. Certain changes and developments may be perceived as an inconvenience rather than a threat. Responses may be left to others. What are the various things that leaders and today's professionals who advise them, and their employers and/or clients should be aware of that can affect their understanding, decision making and activities, and influence impacts and outcomes?

Professionals should be aware of looming challenges and gathering storm clouds, including those deriving from the attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of people, and how best to address them. They and events should be seen as they are, not as we would like them to be. Current signs are ominous and suggest a sense of foreboding. Accumulating signals are harbingers that worse is to come. Current aspirations, activities and lifestyles of many sectors, communities and societies are not sustainable. They are degrading eco-systems, reducing biodiversity, and depleting natural capital and scarce resources future generations will need.

## Situational and Contextual Awareness

Hitherto, some professionals may have viewed certain events and situations as primarily the responsibility of some other group. However, increasingly developments and trends, from global warming and related extreme weather events or the consequences of conflicts, hot and hybrid wars and disputes over limited resources, seem to impact them and many more people. When multiple risks, challenges and existential threats are the result of human activities and contemporary lifestyles, responsibility and complicity become more difficult to avoid. More of those now affected may face internal and social pressure to engage and become involved.

Global warming and rising temperatures are now difficult to avoid. Heat waves resulting in excess deaths and consequential wildfires are ravaging Europe and other locations, reducing productivity and challenging infrastructures. Awareness of what is possible or attainable in a particular situation or context and how it, and especially productivity and performance might be impacted by events, trends and developments, is important in practitioners. Concerned people may need help in navigating a way to become involved in climate action that is most appropriate for them[2]. Aware professionals might be able to help.

In evolving, fluid and unpredictable situations and contexts, mindfulness or awareness of the present becomes more important when considering what advice to give to an employer or client in the light of available options and choices. Individual judgement may be required in addition to, or in place of, reliance upon previous assumptions and understanding. Governments, laws and regulations, and aspirations, requirements, taxes and priorities can and do change. When they do, practitioners should monitor the implications for those they serve and the relative attractiveness of different business models and alternative approaches.

A range of geopolitical, economic and technological factors can have consequences for a company and its stakeholders. In an era of misinformation, disinformation and pressures to conform, whitewash or ignore, professionals should confront and respond to changing geopolitical realities[3]. Situational changes may affect relative competitive advantage and alternative ways of allocating responsibilities, tasks or costs, and determining who does what and where within processes and supply and/or value chains. What is expensive in one context may be cheap elsewhere.

Awareness of economic conditions and prospects, and vulnerabilities and dependencies, can be especially important. The latter might be weaponised or taken advantage of in negotiations. Cost of living pressures and reductions in after-tax incomes could result in an offering previously regarded as a staple product becoming an unaffordable luxury. Smart professionals consider how others might be affected by changes, developments and trends. They may be prepared to do either more or less for themselves. Awareness of areas in which liabilities such as those for environmental and other damage could increase can be helpful.

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## Awareness of Constraints and Limitations

Many productivity practitioners are used to working with constraints and considering limitations on what is possible, as well as alternatives and fall-back options. Constraints and limitations can be real or imaginary and lasting or temporary. They can include the aspirations and ambitions of professional, executive or board colleagues, excuses, ploys and vested interests. Too few questions may be asked about what is missing or might make the difference. Complacency, mediocracy and resignation can lead to underperformance, stagnation and irrelevance. Some players are themselves significant obstacles to growth.

Authoritarian and unscrupulous governments may act to make people unaware of developments with significant environmental, financial or social consequences. In the US, Trump leadership strategy embraces ignoring conventions and norms that constrain others, confrontation, disruption and repetition. He has been prepared to push the limits, question and test, and exploit vulnerability and legal loopholes[4]. Research, monitoring and other activities concerned with climate change which he considers a hoax have stopped. Data sets that concerned professionals could not save have been deleted.

Professionals should be open about limitations applicable to their counsel. How long a situation may last can also be an important factor in decision making. Uncertainty and the fluidity of multiple situations may prevent the taking of decisions that represent more than a temporary accommodation with shifting realities. Planning and definitive decisions may have to be replaced by incremental steering as changes occur. Finally, directors should be aware of their duties and exposure. They can receive advice and counsel from experts, professionals and vested interests, but they and not their advisers may be liable, sued and incur penalties.

## Holistic Awareness

In an era of uncertainty, insecurity and flux, in which previous assumptions and expectations may no longer apply, expectations of professionals may be changing[5]. As dangers and threats loom, many people might not be aware of or foresee connections between different but inter-related events and developments. A water shortage hosepipe ban can be inconvenient for one's garden, but a lack of water for cooling a nuclear reactor could cause a shut down or worse. Professionals increasingly need to be alert to inter-relationships. They may require a more holistic awareness of such connections.

Holistic awareness is not easy. It can involve looking at all facets of an issue and various inter-relationships. Implications and the consequences of impacts and responses can be positive or negative. The same AI model or tool could be used by one person or team to increase resistance to a negative pathogen and save life, and by another to supercharge the harm it causes, by creating a biological weapon that is difficult to control and endangers life[6]. Trade-offs, unwelcome side effects, and unanticipated consequences can arise. Professionals should be aware of them. Responsible ones look for them.

Holistic awareness can extend beyond a brief and what an employer or client is willing to pay for. It may cover areas they would prefer to ignore. Many infrastructures and buildings were designed for a past era. Renovation and restoration or repurposing could be a more economic, practical, and responsible option than replacement with new builds. Reuse may be quicker and involve fewer planning and other obstacles. Responsible professionals and entrepreneurs look beyond impacts upon themselves. They consider how clients, their employers, customers and others might be affected by events, trends and developments.

## Widening Rings of Awareness

Expanding concentric rings of awareness can develop as professionals become more engaged, experienced and senior, and the scope of their responsibilities increases. As they encounter problems, they may become more aware of challenges, risks and threats[1]. Experience of coping may build resilience. In due course, those who are curious, more entrepreneurial and who probe, investigate, explore and reflect may realise that many of the challenges that arise or loom are accompanied by opportunities. They can give rise to new possibilities for individual, corporate and collective responses and collaboration.

As businesses and entities grow, their activities can have more impact upon others, whether positive or negative. Responsible professionals and directors should be aware of externalities, probabilities and uncertainty, and their implications and consequences. Outcomes could affect various stakeholders, including the environment, eco-systems, future generations and other species. There may be unwelcome costs that a business imposes upon others that are not captured by its internal records. Efforts may be made to conceal their extent. In time, an entity may be held accountable for them.

Challenges, risks and threats can have legal consequences for those who are held responsible for them. In due course, these can escalate and may rise exponentially. They could give rise to both direct and indirect financial and reputational costs. Global warming and climate change have been dismissed by President Donald Trump as a hoax. However, the costs of the damage caused by extreme weather events are often considerable. Unless drastic action is taken climate change could cost London up to £15 billion a year by 2050[7].

Knock-on expenses such as increased premiums on available insurance and disruption, adaptation and mitigation costs can be significant. Consequential impacts could include loss of trust or revenues and missed opportunities. Unexpected social and infrastructure costs of public and other services can arise to be paid for by higher taxation. Funding recovery, prevention, increased resilience and preparation for environmental, social, technological and other challenges may create business opportunities. However, any gain for those responding to them may mean less is available to purchase offerings of other entities.

## Technological and Cyber Awareness

Employers and clients may expect professionals to have a level of digital, cyber and technological awareness that is appropriate for their roles. Areas to be aware of could include cyber resilience, AI and data governance, digital and vendor dependency, and associated risks. The latter could include loss of control to algorithms, agentic AI applications and/or 'big tech'. Professionals should be alert to exaggeration, hype and the consequences of others throwing caution to the winds because of not wanting to be left behind. They should avoid groupthink and be ready to ask awkward questions about deficient human oversight and control[6].

Professionals should be aware of the nature, extent and impact of bias and misinformation, and help people to recognise them when they occur and understand their different forms, why they are used and by whom, and for what purpose. While aware of the potential of AI, they should recognise it as an existential threat. The mega data centres that enable its increasing use are heavy users of energy and water upon which all life depends. As more of them encounter opposition, one could question how much economic, informational, and political power should be concentrated in a small number of technology firms[8].

The UN Secretary General has called upon every major AI company to measure and publicly disclose the full environmental impact of its systems – carbon, water, and land footprints – and to commit to power every data centre with renewable energy by 2030[9]. Powerful forces support a continuation of what has the makings of an AI bubble. Professionals should be aware that people, including vested interests, fossil fuel lobbies and climate change deniers, may put more weight on evidence and views that agree with, reflect or reenforce their existing beliefs, perspectives, values and views that are harmful for others.

## Directorial Awareness

Those running major organisations and professionals serving on corporate boards need to be especially aware of budgetary, financing and solvency considerations, constraints and concerns. Events, developments and trends can have multiple implications, but these generally involve financial consequences. Productivity, quality and other management services professionals, and especially those in senior and project management roles, may not be expected to prepare accounts and arrange finance. However,

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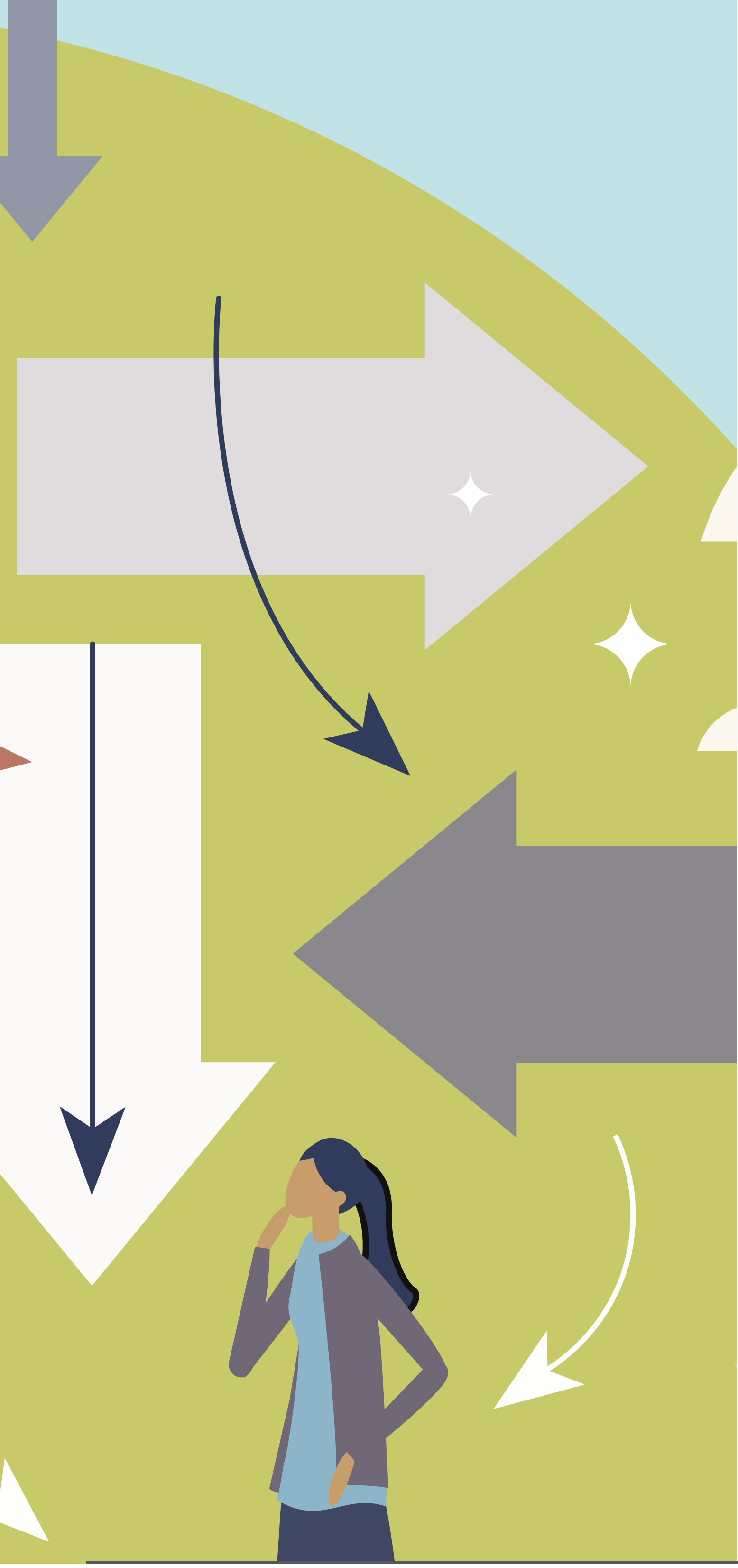

it may be helpful for them to understand enough to know what questions to ask of accounting and finance specialists.

The awareness expected of company directors is an aspect of their development requirements and perception of aspects to focus upon which can change over time[10]. In the early stages of a business an entrepreneur may have to use resources wisely and closely watch cash flow to ensure an entity is still able to meet its financial commitments as they fall due. Success requires awareness of the value sought by prospects and the customers of a business's offerings. Income will need to be greater than the cost of their creation or production and any finance required and also deliver a return to investors.

Professionals vary in their consciousness, perception and comprehension of themselves, events, people and situations they encounter. These may affect them, others and entities for which they are responsible and their stakeholders. Views, opinions, feelings, perspectives and priorities will often reflect their backgrounds, experience, observations, interactions and exposure to motivated and biased communications, including gossip, misinformation and disinformation from a multitude of sources. A degree of balanced and objective scepticism without being negative can be helpful. Awareness can broaden and deepen over time.

## Risk Awareness and Reaction

Many seem unprepared for acknowledged global risks[1]. On appointment, some directors may be unaware of efforts and practices devoted to the presentation of situations and circumstances in a more favourable light. Concerns and risks are sometimes downplayed, re-positioned as appendices, or expressed in small print. In comparison, advantages and other positive factors may be presented more prominently and high-lighted in an executive summary. In an era of economic uncertainty and warfare, risks can evolve and be difficult to price. Professionals should confront reality, expose spin and encourage veracity.

Directors should be aware of the risk appetites and uncertainty tolerance of customers, investors and other stakeholders. Risk and returns are often related, in that to obtain a greater level of return one may have to accept a higher degree of risk. Professionals might wish to reflect or question whether limits are appropriate. Awareness, estimation and judgement may be needed regarding the minimum level of benefit, return or value, and the maximum amount of risk or uncertainty those targeted are prepared to accept, and how demand for different versions of an offering and margins or returns might vary with price.

There is also an arena of awareness relating to options for reducing or off-loading risks, and practices such as hedging, taking options or positions, and related market trading. Some activities can involve complex models and tools, which like AI, might not be fully understood by those who utilise them. In some situations, and under certain conditions, their adoption and use might be disastrous and even lead to a financial crash, such as that in 2008. Self-awareness and knowing the limits of one's own and colleagues' understanding can be important. Professionals should seek clarification rather than wing it or hope for the best.

## Financial Awareness

For professionals, financial awareness can be more than a knowledge of accounts and financial reports. These represent a snapshot at a moment in time, according to certain assumptions and the result of applying particular accounting practices. They may summarise past transactions and present a view of the past rather than a vista ahead. Some board decisions, such as determining the rate of dividend to be paid to shareholders may be largely based upon past performance, awareness of expectations and what is considered affordable. Professionals should not assume that appropriate lessons are being learned from past events.

Many board decisions can require forward-looking estimates, forecasts or predictions. Directors should understand the requirements of long-term value investors such as a resilient balance sheet and recurring cash flow. Awareness of alternatives, substitutes and complements can all be helpful. A market could be segmented to realise more of the surplus value area under a demand curve. Emissions created by producing electric cars or heat pumps are such that to reduce them perhaps a focus should switch from consumption to sufficiency, down-scaling or living more modestly by seeking just enough[11].

Concerned professionals may have more interest in shaping the future rather than reporting the past. Awareness should include openness to possibilities and being alert to signals that executives or board colleagues might not fully understand. It might cover a practice, model or tool they are considering or using. Ideally, it should be active rather than passive and lead to enquiry. Warning signals could include board colleagues who are not asking questions, or a CFO and team who seem unable to provide a simple explanation or an adequate response. Saying that something is too complex to explain should be a red flag and raise concerns.

## Awareness of Assumptions and Conventions

Members of highly regulated professions, whose work is covered by detailed standards and codes which they are expected to comply with, are more likely than others to be affected by AI adoption. More junior members who are expected to follow practice manuals, implement certain procedures, comply with regulations and observe reporting standards may be at risk. Being impacted by AI use is different from being replaced by it. While the ability to process large volumes of data might increase the scope of some checks and reduce the requirement for junior staff, judgement calls may require human involvement at a more senior level.

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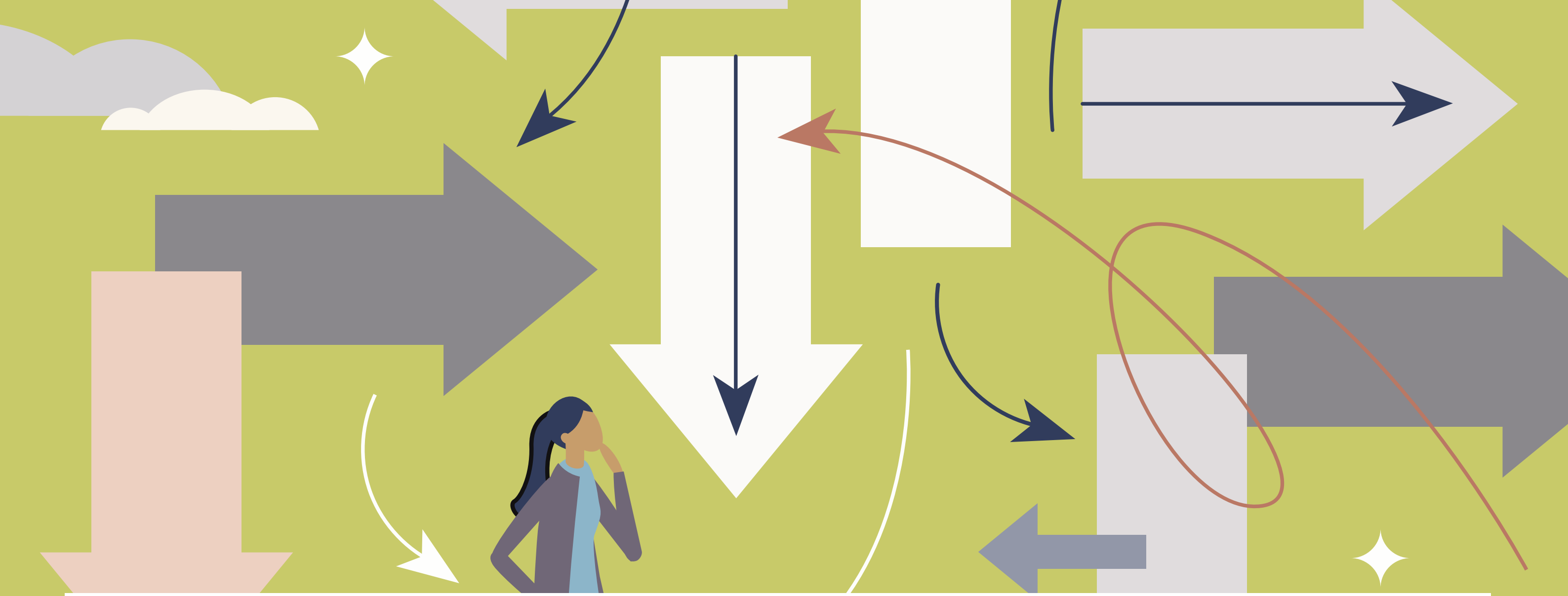
Awareness of accounting assumptions, conventions, policies and reporting requirements, alternative practices, and the extent of authority and how it might be exercised can all be helpful. Entities can vary in the discretion given to apply group policies and/or practices differently across business units, territories, jurisdictions, subsidiaries and joint ventures according to local conditions, requirements, competition, lifecycle of an offering, or the stage of development of an entity. Environmentally responsible professionals should encourage practices that protect nature, biodiversity and critical ecosystems[12].

Efforts may be made to re-write narratives and/or revalue line items and/or their make up to meet certain expectations or requirements. There may be a threshold as to the level which a potential customer might find acceptable. Negotiation practices vary from market haggling to on-line auctions. Trust should be earned rather than assumed. While executives could be focused on achieving targets and priorities allocated to them, the better directors and professionals are inwardly directed and curious self-starters with a holistic perspective who query, enquire, initiate, investigate and influence agendas to protect public and planet.

## Behavioural and Social Awareness

While professionals may endeavour to be dispassionate, objective and offer evidenced based advice, they should recognise and allow for subjectivity, emotion and bias in others. People can experience different emotions in terms of how they feel about shared experiences such as the changing climate[13]. Corporate cultures, shared assumptions and how people behave, can affect priorities, focus and timing. Built in biases when decisions are taken may enable those in a position to do so to advance their own interests, while the interests of other parties and those affected may be overlooked, downplayed or not considered.

Various people might seek to influence the views and perceptions of others in favour of their own interests. Motivations of colleagues may range from absorbing, reflecting and keeping in with colleagues, to proactively challenging and making a difference. Professionals should be aware of the attitudes, preferences and responses of colleagues, whether positive or negative, proactive or reactive, cautious or bullish, resigned or non-committal, and of the games they play. 'Over-performance' might be avoided to just achieve unambitious targets. Under-reporting could be used to hold back potential so that this might benefit a subsequent year.



Similar and different games may be encountered in public sector organisations. Effort is likely to be given to showing compliance with ministerial direction and progress in meeting targets. Major projects can often benefit from scrutiny. On longer-term programs, the re-profiling of expenditure and income using practices such as back-ending may be undertaken to match the availability of funding, even though this might increase risk and lead to later over-runs and higher eventual costs. Experienced professionals may be aware of such gambits and ploys. Challenging can require courage where it could lead to sidelining or worse.

## Awareness of Value and Relevance

Sustainability remains a critical issue while environmentally damaging policies and priorities are pursued. Many of the consequences cannot be effectively addressed until there is sufficient awareness of their drivers and how the natural world might help. Environments such as threatened underwater kelp forests that play an important role in sustainability can be out of sight and out of mind to policy makers[14]. Knowledge and understanding can quickly become dated or less fashionable and relevant. Their use may be dangerous or counterproductive if pressure to comply inhibits, discourages or prevents critical thinking.

Value for some might disadvantage others. Perceived and eventual value for various customer and stakeholder groups, can differ from a purchase or sales price paid. Hence, priority may be given to value for money when selecting proposals. Considerable potential benefit can lie in what is relevant but unfashionable or overlooked. Questions could be asked about unlocking hidden value through arrangements with other players and strategies such as divestment. Where discretion exists to value assets, some entities are more cautious and prudent than others when exercising it. Dangers can lurk in the treatment of sunk and incremental costs.

The value given to goodwill and price/earnings ratios can fluctuate up and down according to herd expectations and perceptions of future potential and technological breakthroughs. Valuations can soar, peak and trough in boom-and-bust succession. The value of a company may be a fraction of what others might obtain by licensing its intellectual capital. Crises such as pandemics, technology outages, wars and associated supply chain disruptions can have multiple and inter-related consequences and impact value and priorities. Awareness of vulnerability to them could lead to questions about preparedness and mitigation measures.

## Ethical Awareness

Not all, but some people and organisations are constrained to a degree by ethical, moral and/or religious constraints, especially where it is convenient, expected and could be beneficial or not involve much in the way of sacrifice. While less may be made of them today, with perhaps more emphasis placed upon competence, many professions retain ethical codes and operate professional practices committees or their equivalents. Members of the public may still have ethical expectations of professionals, and especially members of chartered bodies whose charters require them to act in their best interests.

Professionals should be aware of contemporary ethical concerns and debates. Responsible vendors, UNESCO and some governments have issued guidance, principles and guard rails to cope with certain challenges, such as ensuring human control of AI which in arenas such as agentic AI is becoming increasingly problematic. AI is evolving so rapidly that if its regulation is to catch up, more future regulations may need to be drafted to address possible scenarios and situations in terms of where AI development trajectories might lead[15]. Professionals may need to advocate, instigate or create safer approaches.

Integrity remains the hallmark of some professions. Where there is a potential to cause harm and/or lose control as with the medical professions, or uses of AI, observance of ethical principles and practices can be critically important. Professional purpose should embrace acting in the best interests of people and the planet. Activities, buildings and infrastructures could be designed, modified and operated to minimise negative impact upon wildlife and the environment[16]. Professionals could champion healthier, less stressful and more sustainable and satisfying lifestyles in harmony with the natural world.

*A reference list is available for this article. Please email Mel Armstrong at imsjournal011@gmail.com*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