

# Social Work Futures

Exploring how social workers can increase their impact through futures frameworks – All content developed by Laura Burney Nissen, Ph.D., MSW, Portland State University School of Social Work, Portland, Oregon, USA, Email: [nissen@pdx.edu](mailto:nissen@pdx.edu), Twitter: [@lauranissen](https://twitter.com/lauranissen)

[About Laura](#)[Background](#)[Recent Presentations and Talks](#)[Some Favorite Futures Voices](#)[What is Futures Thinking?](#)

January 13, 2019 • Futures Books, Other Reading and Online Resources

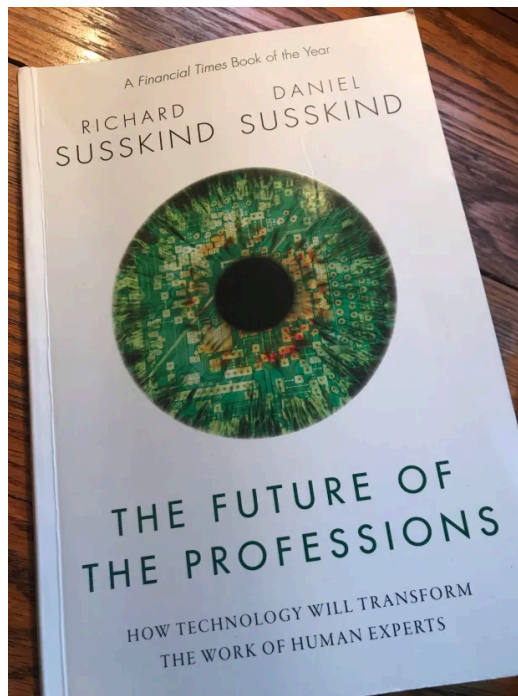
**Follow me on  
Twitter**

## Reflections and Takeaways from the book "The Future of Professions" by Richard and Daniel Susskind



Posted by

[lauraburneynissenvsocialwork](https://twitter.com/lauraburneynissenvsocialwork)



This is a timely and important book. Every professional (everyone else too) knows and feels that change is accelerating and all around us. I'll offer a couple of my favorite passages from the book and offer a few of my favorite takeaways. As a dedicated social work professional for more than 25 years now...I was truly transfixed by this scholarly book. It challenged and stretched my thinking...and I found myself alternately cheering and worrying in different parts of the volume. One cannot read the book without a truly expanded and clear sense of the reality that as the world changes, so will (or more to the point – are) the professions. How we change, will at least in part, be something we participate in, hopefully. And that is the great challenge of the book – are we taking stock of the changes in a way that affords us the chance to insert ourselves into the process of change?

Before they jump into the future, however, the Susskinds do an admirable job of

**P** Follow on X  
**o**  
**s**  
**t**  
**s**  
**f**  
**r**  
**o**  
**m**  
**@**  
**I**  
**a**  
**u**  
**r**

## Categories

- [Afrofuturism](#) (1)
- [Artificial Intelligence](#) (5)
- [Children and Families and the Future](#) (1)
- [Covid-19](#) (1)
- [Ethics](#) (4)
- [Event opportunities – calls for participation](#) (1)
- [Future of cities](#) (1)
- [Future of Higher Education](#) (4)
- [Future of Work](#) (2)
- [Futures Books, Other Reading and Online Resources](#) (17)
- [Futures Events Downloads](#) (4)

helping to ground the reader in the fundamentals of what being a professional is all about, its history and a brief social theory round up of the sociology of professions. This review contains a couple of excerpts I considered so rich and valuable...I just included them directly.

“Our main claim is that we are on the brink of a period of fundamental and irreversible change in the way that the expertise of these specialists is made available in society. Technology will be the main driver of this change. And, in the long run, we will neither need, nor want professionals to work in the way that they did in the twentieth century and before” (p. 1).

“In what we term a ‘print-based industrial society’, the professions have played a central role in the sharing of expertise. They have been the main channel through which individuals and organizations have gained access to certain kinds of knowledge and expertise. However, in a ‘technology-based internet society’, we predict that increasingly capable machines, operating on their own or with non-specialist users, will take on many of the tasks that have been the historic preserve

我们在社会中生产和分配专业知识的方式将发生“渐进式转变”。这最终将导致传统专业的瓦解。

of the professions. We anticipate an “incremental transformation’ in the way we produce and distribute expertise in society. This will lead eventually to a dismantling of the traditional professions.

For the current recipients and beneficiaries of the work of the professions, we bring good tidings – of a world in which

- [Futures Leadership](#) (3)
- [Futures Practice](#) (7)
- [Futures Quotes – Inspiration!](#) (1)
- [Gender and Queer Issues](#) (1)
- [Governments and the future](#) (1)
- [Health Futures](#) (3)
- [Homelessness and the Future](#) (1)
- [New Words in Futuring](#) (15)
- [Presenations](#) (2)
- [Presentations](#) (3)
- [Recent Ideas from Twitter](#) (37)
- [Regenerative Design](#) (1)
- [Social Work and the Future](#) (22)
- [Social Work Education](#) (3)
- [Trends Coverage](#) (2)
- [Uncategorized](#) (35)
- [Welcome and Overview](#) (1)

## Subscribe to Blog via Email

Enter your email address to subscribe to this blog and receive notifications

expertise is more accessible and affordable than ever before. For professional providers, although our thesis may seem threatening, we anticipate that a range of new opportunities will emerge. These are our hopes. But we also recognize that the new systems for sharing expertise could be misused, and we are troubled by this possibility. In any event, increasingly capable systems will bring transformations to professional work that will resemble the impact of industrialization on traditional craftsmanship (p. 2).

So what is a profession? These authors crafted a definition based on the intersection of numerous dynamics:

“...members of today’s professions, to varying degrees, share four overlapping similarities: 他们拥有专业知识 (1) they have specialist knowledge; (2) their admission depends on 入职取决于资历 credentials; (3) their activities are 活动受到监管 regulated; and (4) they are bound by a common sense of values” (p. 15).

受共同价值观的约束

Susskind and Susskind suggest that a “grand bargain” is at the center of understanding the relationship between professionals and society. They quote the well-known educational theorist and writer, Donald Schon (1987) who describes this bargain as:

“In return for access to their extraordinary knowledge in matters of great human importance, society has granted them a

of new posts by email.

Email Address

Subscribe

Join 4,390 other subscribers

Categories

Select Category ▼

- Afrofuturism
- Artificial Intelligence
- Children and Families and the Future
- Covid-19
- Ethics
- Event opportunities - calls for participation
- Future of cities
- Future of Higher Education
- Future of Work
- Futures Books, Other Reading and Online Resources
- Futures Events Downloads
- Futures Leadership
- Futures Practice
- Futures Quotes - Inspiration!
- Gender and Queer Issues
- Governments and the future

mandate for social control in their fields of specialization, a high degree of autonomy in their practice, and a license to determine who shall assume the mantle of professional authority” (p. 7).

The Susskinds revised this idea to their own 21st century iteration of this arrangement as follows:

“In acknowledgement of and in return for their expertise, experience and judgement, which they are expected to apply in delivering affordable, accessible and up-to-date, reassuring and reliable services, and on the understanding that they will curate and update their knowledge and methods, train their members, set and enforce standards for the quality of their work, and they will only admit appropriately qualified individuals into their ranks, and that they will always act honestly, in good faith, putting the interests of clients ahead of their own, we (society) place our trust in the professions in granting them exclusivity over a wide range of socially significant services and activities, by paying them a fair wage, by conferring upon them independence, autonomy, rights of self-determination, and by according them respect and status,” p. 22.

They include a terrific section on the influence of Karl Marx – particularly relevant to the profession of social work. As capitalism increasingly impacts the economic systems in which professions

[Health Futures](#)
[Homelessness and the Future](#)
[New Words in Futuring](#)
[Presentations](#)
[Presentations](#)
[Recent Ideas from Twitter](#)
[Regenerative Design](#)
[Social Work and the Future](#)
[Social Work Education](#)
[Trends Coverage](#)
[Uncategorized](#)
[Welcome and Overview](#)

## Pages

- [About Laura](#)
- [Background](#)
- [Recent Presentations and Talks](#)
- [Some Favorite Futures Voices](#)
- [What is Futures Thinking?](#)



Sort by

Relevance



practice, fewer individuals can survive as professionals outside of organizations, and pressures to produce revenue and survive in increasingly competitive economic spaces – this “grand bargain” has potential to be compromised.

Rounding out their analysis of the social context of the professions, the Susskinds suggest that professions themselves are resistant to changing themselves AND there has really historically been little in the way to any alternative to our current way of organizing and deploying professional expertise.

They suggest that there are four fundamental questions for 21st century professions:

1. “Might there be entirely new ways of organizing professional work, ways that are more affordable, more accessible, and perhaps more conducive to an increase in quality than the traditional approach?”
2. Even if we concede, at least for now, that human beings are indispensable in professional work, does it follow that all the work that our professionals currently do can only be undertaken by licensed experts?
3. Bluntly, to what degree do we actually trust professionals to admit that their services could be delivered differently, or that some of their work could responsibly be passed along to non-professionals?

#### 4. Is the grand bargain actually working?

Are our professionals fit for purpose?

Are they serving our societies well?" (p. 32)

The book then proceeds to deliver analysis of six major ways in which the authors (and a great deal of literature) suggest that the professions are not working and are falling short of the grand bargain. The next section of the book then dives into reviews of eight different professions including health, education, divinity, law, journalism, management consulting, tax and audit, and architecture – describing and giving examples of the ways in which these professions are being stretched, expanded, transformed and beginning to intersect with artificial intelligence and/or other models of deployment of expertise. Patterns are discussed across all of these challenges and experiences among professions reflecting the simultaneous evolution of each group, the presence of increasing amounts of information in the form of technology (thus increasing demystification of professional activities), increased scrutiny and expectations towards professions and more.

The middle section of the book is dedicated to theoretical analysis of information and technology itself. The history of how information is shared is deeply related (as noted previously) to the emergence and evolution of the professions themselves and various aspects of this are analyzed in future

scenarios. Shifting to the future of production and distribution of knowledge, the Susskinds offer various ideas about how the professions may seek to sustain in an increasingly complex practice ecosystem and touch on some of the benefits of societies that are more "knowledge democracies" than "knowledge controlled." That said, they are also attentive to the risks as well as the benefits of this shift – and explore each in great detail.

The last section of the book dives into the implications for the professionals themselves – focused on issues of trust and anxiety.

The end of the book suggests not an altogether dire though certainly uncertain and rapidly evolving picture for professions. They say:

"We argue that the professions will undergo two parallel sets of changes. The first will be dominated by automation. Traditional ways of working will be streamlined and optimized through the application of technology. The second will be dominated by innovation. Increasingly capable systems will transform the work of professionals, giving birth to new ways of sharing practical expertise. In the long run, this second future will prevail, and our profession will be dismantled incrementally" (p. 271).



"We found that technology and the internet are not just improving old ways of working; they are also enabling us to bring about fundamental change. They are providing new ways to make practical expertise far more widely available. And so, what is coming over the horizon are not just better ways of handling the work within the current remit of the professions, but systems that are greatly extending our capacity to sort out problems that arise from insufficient access to practical expertise" (p. 270).

In this environment – clear questions will remain about the role of humans in an AI-rich (if not dominated) environment. Clearly, they say, AI will reach a point of being able to solve problems more accurately, with greater speed, and with more accessibility than our human bevy of professionals...so what then will be the role of humans? The Susskinds suggest that a great deal of work in terms of sorting the acceptable moral limits of what should remain in the realm of human responsibility and work. This, they go on, is the work that should be being addressed now. Additionally, they describe real fears about "technological unemployment" of the future – simply put that new technologies will displace current workers (but they suggest this may be a multi-decade not overnight phenomenon). To begin to think this through – they contend there are three basic questions that will dictate the progression of decisions in this area:

1. "What is the new quantity of tasks that have to be carried out?
2. What is the nature of these tasks?
3. Who has the advantage in carrying out these tasks?" (p. 287-288).

All that said, the Susskinds suggest that even as certain professions may wane, others may indeed emerge – so the longstanding framework whereby groups of people have to reskill from one era to another may apply.

The book ends with the authors' suggestions that "how we use technology in the professions, is very much in our own hands" (p. 304).

They go on "it is not simply that we can shape our own future, more than this, we believe that we ought to, from a moral point of view. Two major moral questions arose in this book. The first is whether there are any likely uses of technology – by the professions or by those who replace them – that we regard as morally unacceptable. Should we seek to impose moral contain on the march of technology across the professions (for example whether to turn off a life support system, to be handed over to a machine, no matter how high performing it may be. We call for public debate on the moral issues arising from models for the production and distribution of practical expertise that do not directly involve professionals or para professionals. And we ask that this debate

我们是否应该试图对技术在各行业的进步施加道德约束（例如，是否关闭生命维持系统，将其交给机器，不管它的性能有多高）

be held sooner rather than later, before our machines become much more capable.

The second moral question is this – who should own and control practical expertise in a technology-based internet society? Although this question belongs to the field of political philosophy, it also raises intensely practical issues. The future of the professions resets largely to the answer we prefer. In print-based industrial societies, the professions generally own and control practical expertise, a state of affairs that is supported by the grand bargain. But if we imagine a future in which much practical expertise can be made available online, it is less obvious that the professions, or indeed anyone, should be entitled to act as its gatekeepers?" (p.304).

"Beyond the professions, there will lie a fork in the road, with two possible routes stretching out. One leads to a society in which practical expertise is shared as an online resource, freely available and maintained in a collaborative spirit. The other route leads to a society in which this knowledge and experience may be available online, but is owned and controlled by providers, so that recipients will generally pay for access to this resource and our collective practical expertise is enclosed and traded, mostly likely by new gatekeepers. The first route leads us to a type of commons where our collective knowledge and expertise, in so far as is feasible, is nurtured and shared

without commercial gain, while the second takes us to an online marketplace in which practical expertise is invariably bought and sold. From behind the veil of ignorance, which route would leaders take?” (p. 307).

After reading the book – I’m especially motivated to challenge my own profession to actively engage with doing the self-reflection, the foresight, the requisite imagining and scanning to understand and position ourselves in ways that maximize our impact while protecting our values. The greatest challenge will be to balance this self-reflection with a need to avoid self-protectionism. We will have to be smart and brave as we endeavor to navigate an uncertain future for ourselves and the often most vulnerable to whom we are so dedicated.

Susskind, R. & Susskind, D. (2015). The future of professions: How technology will transform the work of human experts. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

---

« Previous Post

Next Post »

**Recent ideas from  
Twitter – Social  
Work Futures –  
January 15,  
2019 Edition**

**A Walk in the  
Future at Portland  
State University –  
January 2019**

### 3 comments

Pingback: [Recent Ideas from Twitter – Social Work Futures – August 28, 2019 – Social Work Futures](#)

Pingback: [The Future of Organizations and Work – Social Work Futures](#)

Pingback: [Recent Ideas from Twitter – Social Work Futures – January 15, 2020 – Social Work Futures](#)

### Leave a comment

Write a comment...

Log in to leave a comment.

Comment

---

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)