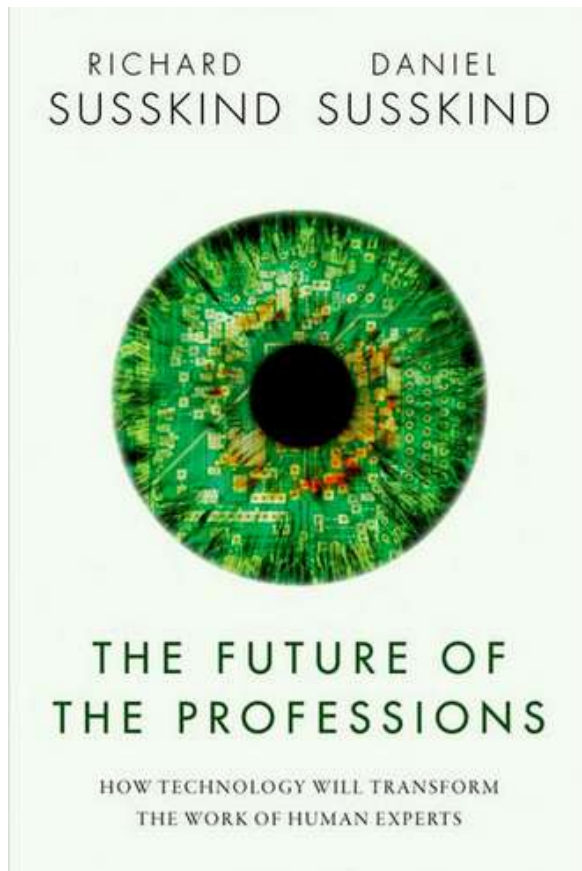


'Future of the Professions' is excellent

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"The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts" by Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 256 pages, \$29.95.



“There are two possible futures for the professions,” Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind assert near the beginning of “The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts,” their compelling new treatise on a topic ultimately affecting us all. “The first is reassuringly familiar. It is a more efficient version of what we already have today. On this model, professionals continue working much as they have done since the middle of the 19th century, but they heavily standardize and systematize their routine activities. They streamline their old ways of working.”

“The second future is a very different proposition,” they continue. “It involves a transformation in the way the expertise of professionals is made available in society. The introduction of a wide range of increasingly capable systems will, in various ways, displace much of the work of traditional professionals. In the short and medium terms, these two futures will be realized in parallel. In the long run, the second future will dominate, we will find new and better ways to share expertise in society, and our professions will steadily be dismantled.”

The Susskinds are among the first social scientists to seriously challenge the future of the professions in light of the tremendous changes taking place in society. While most of their contemporaries acknowledge the sweeping repercussions the technological transformation taking place over the last few decades has had on the way institutions function, the vision articulated in this volume is somewhat unique in the sheer magnitude of its scope. As information has become more instantly accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, the reverence we once ascribed to “experts” has steadily declined.

Drawing from a vast reservoir of some 30 years of studies published in a variety of disciplines, they make a convincing case we are only now beginning to understand the immense role artificial intelligence will play in how professional services are provided. And taking it a critical step further, this father-and-son team outline the emerging systems that will ultimately lead to the demise of the professionals and what we will be doing when we are free from our dependence on them. As a

teacher, I also have a personal interest and stake in the prospects they describe for my chosen vocation.

The book is extensively researched, with a 28-page bibliography at the conclusion of the introduction and seven fairly lengthy chapters comprising the main text. Among the various professions discussed at some length are health, education, law, journalism, consulting, accounting and architecture. Also included was divinity, and what the Susskinds have to say about this integral part of many of our lives was both intriguing as well as a little disconcerting.

“The profession of the clergy is also in turmoil as a result of technology,” the authors assert in the second chapter, one of the most enlightening from my vantage point. “Like other professionals, they stand as gatekeepers. They are the interface between worshippers and their scriptural texts. Depending on the faith, they may also be the intermediary between worshippers and their God. Most sacred texts, if not all, are now online. In the past, many worshippers would have considered this depth of access to be blasphemous.”

Richard Susskind is president of the Society for Computers and Law, IT adviser to the lord chief justice of England, and chair of the advisory board of the Oxford Internet Institute. His previous books include “Tomorrow’s Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future and The End of Lawyers?” and “Rethinking the Nature of Legal Services.” Daniel Susskind is a lecturer in economics at Balliol College, Oxford. He also spent some time at Harvard University as a Kennedy scholar. A graduate of Oxford University, his resume includes extensive work for the British government, both as a member of the prime minister’s strategy unit and as a senior policy adviser at the cabinet office.

It is hard to deny the social contract has not been under relentless assault – and the pace of the makeover seems to be gaining momentum with each passing year. As is made abundantly clear, we are on the cusp of a paradigm shift capable of potentially shaking civilization to its core. Under most circumstances, I tend to be somewhat skeptical when these kinds of larger-than-life claims are made, but within the context of the present argument, I believe this assessment is entirely appropriate. The times are indeed a changing.

“As the boundaries of the professions blur and service becomes more focused on meeting clients’ overall needs, it is probable that multi-disciplinary practices will be formed and re-establish themselves as commercially viable,” the Susskinds conclude in the third chapter. “The long-standing view of many human experts is that their work is a sort of craft and not reducible to, say, checklists or pre-articulated procedures. However, our research suggests that this view is mistaken, and that much of what professionals do can indeed be expressed as standard process. Three core trends reflect this move from handcrafting to process: routinization; disintermediation and reintermediation; and decomposition.”

If you had trouble following that last quote, I encourage you to pick up a copy of “The Future of the Professions” at our local Barnes & Noble Booksellers. What they are describing is not quite as complex as it sounds on first blush, and they do an excellent job of making the connection between these hard-to-pronounce terms and what is actually happening in the world at large. In a nutshell, the professions, if they are to exist at all, are going to have to shift from a reactive to a more proactive posture – and this will not be without considerable pain. Ultimately, the evolution they describe in such vivid detail will affect us all.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.