

INAUGURAL LECTURE

Professional agency

A plea for revaluing professionals,
craftsmen and good work

Daniël van Middelkoop

Professor of Professional Agency



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A plea for the revaluation of professionals, craftsmen and good work

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Dr Daniël van Middelkoop

Professor of Professional Agency



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Preface

During the months that I was working on this lecture, I happened by chance to watch the documentary 'We are the thousand' on television. It showcases Fabio Zaffagnini's dream of getting a thousand rock musicians to play together to persuade his favourite band, the Foo Fighters, to play a concert in the small town of Cesena, Italy. Spoiler alert: it worked! The Rockin'1000 went on afterwards to play more such outdoor concerts together. The image on the cover of the published version of this lecture shows musicians at a concert they gave in Florence.

I was moved by the documentary, especially at the moment when the thousand musicians are playing together. That's partially because I got a solid education in guitar music while growing up, but even more because of the persistence of the initiators, as they worked to realise the goal of getting a thousand musicians to play a song in unison, and the unmitigated pleasure radiating from the musicians as they play.¹ It shows how fantastic producing good work together – or in this case playing together – can be. Coming together to produce good work, whether it's making music or delivering excellent teaching, youth care or a well-functioning power station, gives people a lot of energy and produces terrific results. Together you can solve problems that you tend to struggle with on your own, simply because your colleagues are there to help you with their insights or an alternative view. And when the crunch comes, and the deadlines at work are looming, it's nice to have colleagues that you can trust. The experience of the coronavirus pandemic taught us how important working together is; in a survey of colleagues at my home institution, what was most noticeable was that we all missed 'real' contact – with students, but certainly also with our co-workers.

The value but also the pleasure of delivering good work together forms the basis for this lecture, and I can't emphasise the importance of it enough. In recent years, we have, as a research group, conducted discussions with hundreds of professionals, craftsmen and skilled personnel – as individuals and in teams. What stands out is that pleasure and satisfaction are functions of the desire and ability to deliver good work. Working together is important, but as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. That's the reason that I often refer to 'working together' in this lecture rather than 'cooperation' or 'collaboration', to emphasise the shared goal of producing good work. In this lecture I will focus more on the *how* of working together rather than the *why*. With the *how* come the issues, problems and dilemmas in the way we have organised working together for professionals and craftsmen. Where working together has become an end in itself, or where the conditions enabling people to produce good work together are lacking, the pleasure of such work can turn into frustration and irritation.

At first glance, problems and dilemmas in working together look different for every professional and craftsman, and for every team or group. Early in our action research we were asked by a technician whether the dilemmas they were facing at work and within their teams were unique, or whether we encountered these problems everywhere. That question became the catalyst for our research group's further investigations, of which this lecture is the result. It's the question that inspired me to search for similarities in the *how* of doing good work together.

But to return to the documentary for a moment. The rebelliousness and self-confidence of the musicians also appealed to me. I think that we could use more of this when we are trying to achieve

¹ At the time of writing the documentary is unfortunately difficult to find or view online. The performance of the Foo Fighters' song 'Learn to Fly' in Cesena is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JozAmXo2bDE>

good work together. We can't create the conditions for good work by hashing out our problems around the water cooler or the coffee machine. These conditions can only be created by articulating what is and is not working well, and then searching for and experimenting with other, better ways of achieving good work together.

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Introduction: The value of professionalism and craftsmanship

The question of what a good job looks like – of what sort of work is both secure and worthy of being honored – is more open now than it has been for a long time.

- Matthew Crawford²

In this lecture I want to talk about professionals and craftsmen. It is a plea for the reevaluation of good work – the kind that these professionals and craftsmen deliver together day after day, in circumstances that seem to be getting increasingly difficult. But let me start this lecture with the people themselves who fill those profession, crafts and skilled trades. Who is it I am referring to here?

For me it's the technician who, with love and dedication, and based on years of experience, can hear in the sound of the machines whether everything in 'her' power station is running smoothly or whether it's time for maintenance. Someone who gets out of bed in the middle of the night if needs be if there is a power outage.

It's the lecturer who helps a student get back on the right track with a constructive conversation when he or she gets stuck. That same lecturer who did everything in his power during the corona pandemic to keep giving students good guidance and instruction – even when it demanded adjusting everything immediately to a new situation.

It's the nurse who, after years of experience, can see that a patient admitted a few days ago is deteriorating and warns the doctor on duty in time. The medical procedure that follows saves the patient's life.

Finally, for me it's also the shop assistant in a clothing store who is good at gauging your tastes when you tell him what you're looking for; who surprises you because he seems to know right away what size you wear, what looks good on you and what doesn't, and seems to intuitively find exactly what you were looking for.

I could give many more examples of people we recognise as professionals and craftsmen, and I think you could too. Craftsmen and professionals are hugely valuable to society; this is something everyone seems to agree on. When we are sick, we want to be helped by professional doctors and nurses. In our homes we like to have a 'well-crafted' table, and if we have a leak we look for one of the currently rare skilled tradesmen who can help us by fixing the problem.

In this lecture I usually talk about professionals and craftsmen in one breath. Also, when I talk about craftsmen, I often include those which might technically be in the 'skilled trades', or be called 'skilled workers'. I'm doing that because they have more in common with each other than what sets them apart – in their individual characteristics, in the social significance of their work, and in the challenges and obstacles they encounter in that work. There are of course significant differences between those in professions and those in crafts and skilled trades, for instance in the primary focus of the work, or the degree to which they have had practical training or a formal education. I will return to this point later in my lecture. But professionals, craftsmen and skilled personnel are intrinsically motivated to perform their work to the best of their ability because they believe that work is important *in itself*.

² Crawford, 2009.

The importance of professionals and craftsmen for good work

We attach great value to professionals and craftsmen because we assume that they will deliver good work – meaningful, high-quality work.³ These are specially trained people capable of solving specific and often complex problems. Their work has become so complex that it now frequently demands working together with others to perform it properly. Therefore, it is important that these professionals and craftsmen are able to work well together, so that they can bring together their insights while combining their talents and knowledge to deliver good work. Moreover, they have to be given the space and the trust to decide – within boundaries - on their own how to deal with or in a given situation. Their work cannot be codified in protocols or regulations, or only to a very limited extent.

We need these professionals and craftsmen now more than ever. We as a society are facing enormous social and economic challenges. The climate crisis demands an energy transition, while an ageing population and shortages in the job market demand different ways of working in healthcare, engineering and many other sectors. Digitisation and robotics are also changing the way we work and live. In our search for answers and a way to approach these huge social and economic problems, those in professions and crafts or skilled trades are seen as an essential link.

These transformations require new ways of working together. This in turn requires of professionals and craftsmen that they be willing to step forward and shoulder the uncertainty this entails, and to search for ways of delivering these transformations. What's needed now is professional dialogue, a critical perspective on one's own actions, and the courage to search for new ways of working. In order to keep delivering good work, we need highly competent professionals and craftsmen. We therefore also have to train sufficient numbers of professionals and craftsmen in order to perform the work those transformations demand. Finally, we have to create the conditions that enable professionals and craftsmen to do good work.

Professionals and craftsmen under pressure

It is worrying that, in many areas, professionalism, craftsmanship and specialised skills have come under pressure. We are not training enough people in the skilled trades, and we are currently confronted with the consequences of a shortage of craftsmen. In engineering and technology, for example, where it's hard to find skilled people to carry out the practical work of the energy transition.⁴ But also in hospital emergency and admitting departments, where waiting times have risen considerably due to a shortage of general practitioners, while practicing GPs complain that the administrative burden is putting the care they offer under pressure. Meanwhile, in professional and vocational training, we are placing increasing emphasis on learning generic skills, like creativity, inventiveness and problem-solving, while also emphasising the importance of flexibility. But that means that we are often missing the importance of specialised knowledge, not to mention the attitude and competences needed for professionalism and craftsmanship.⁵ Naturally, an ability to adapt, to innovate and to keep learning throughout life are of great importance and should be

³ Based on Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2009. Later in this lecture I will delve deeper into the notion of good work.

⁴ This is one of the reasons the chair of Techniek Nederland, Doekle Terpstra, last year called for the impending shortage of graduates to be addressed immediately, highlighting the need to start educating more practically trained workers.

⁵ In criticising the popularity of teaching generic skills, various authors stress the importance of specialised professional knowledge in enabling the performance of those generic skills, such as critical thinking (see for example Meester, Bergsen, & Kirschner, 2017; and Béneker, 2018).

attended to within the educational system. But those in professions, crafts and skilled trades must 'stand firmly in their own shoes in order to be agile'.⁶ Problems arise when the emphasis on flexibility and agility is delivered at the expense of a firm foundation in that professional know-how.

In many organisations there has been a creeping encroachment on the conditions that would allow professionals and craftsmen to act according to their own insights, as well as the trust placed in them. This originates in a perceived need to work ever more efficiently and a desire to manage and control output and quality from the top down. In our research we've talked to lecturers in higher education who feel restricted in how they can act, which in turn restricts the positive influence they can exert on their students' academic success.⁷ Technicians at a power station told us that when dealing with a power outage they sometimes spend more time on the paperwork⁸ than on the repair work. And finally, we ask professionals and craftsmen to work together, usually in teams, but we are hearing back from them that the conditions that would enable good teamwork are frequently absent. Some team members that we talked to feel formally responsible for different aspects of their work, with the exception of how the quality of that work will be decided.

Luckily, they're still around, these professionals and craftsmen. Together, they are delivering education, healthcare and a reliable energy transition for us. But in many workplaces they are under considerable pressure, performing their work under what are often difficult circumstances. The time they would like to spend meeting with students, interacting with patients or really fixing the structural problems at the power installation is, in their experience, often severely compromised. On paper and in policy documents we accentuate the importance of having constructive conversations among professionals and craftsmen about work. But in practice this is often something that gets shunted to the bottom of an overfull to-do list.

The observations above are – fortunately – generalisations. Craftsmen and professionals are not under pressure everywhere, or at least not everywhere to the same extent. There are hopeful examples from organisations like Buurtzorg Nederland and the mortgage provider Viisi in Amsterdam where trust in employees is given pride of place, and where control mechanisms and regulatory pressures are kept to a minimum. In addition, in many workplaces professionals and craftsmen are themselves successful in letting their voice be heard, or coming up with other, better ways of organising work, putting more focus on good work instead of on efficiency and managerial control.⁹

I'm certainly not the first to warn that the position of professionals and craftsmen, the autonomy and space given to them and the value we put on their work, are in decline. As long ago as 1974, Argyris and Schön wrote about the importance of increasing professional effectiveness.¹⁰ At around the same time, Freidson argued that professionals were under pressure, and in his later work advocated¹¹ for a method of thinking and organising where professional logic is given a central place.

⁶ Ruijters, 2021, p. 6.

⁷ Van Middelkoop & Meerman, 2014; Education Council of the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad), 2016.

⁸ In practice this mainly involves completing digital forms, but the technicians speak of paperwork as a collective term for all monitoring and registering of their work.

⁹ A pertinent example is the change in discourse around what constitutes student academic success in higher education, where there has been a conscious effort to break with the economic quantification of every aspect of teaching that has so strongly influenced the educational system over the last few decades. Although this change in applied terminology and theoretical approach is hopeful, thus far it seems to have led to only very minimal changes in practice (Glastra and Van Middelkoop, 2020).

¹⁰ Argyris & Schön, 1974.

¹¹ Freidson, 1973; 2001.

In the Netherlands, Tonkens wrote¹² about ‘uppity citizens and tame professionals’, while the Stichting Beroepseer has for years been striving to better the position of professionals. They stress the importance of professional pride and ‘good work’ as diametrically opposed to such loss of dignity¹³. More recently, Ruijters has advocated for a revaluation of good work and empowered professionals, and the importance of a clear professional identity when educating future professionals.¹⁴ In the work of Sennett¹⁵, but also in the work of a popular philosopher like Crawford¹⁶, we see discussions of the gradual erosion of the value given to craftsmanship defined as doing a job well for its own sake. All these writers advocate for a revaluation of the work performed by professionals and craftsmen.

In line with the words of this same Crawford, this lecture is not a plea to go back to the old days. I want to avoid as he does a romanticised, static image of craftsmen, who perform their work as it was taught to them with precision and endless patience, alone and without any outside interference.¹⁷ In addition, the status of the professional as expert must not lead to professionals deciding what a client needs without consulting with colleagues, and certainly not without listening to and considering the opinions and experiences of the client him or herself. Professionalism and craftsmanship demand the ability to be self-critical and an opposing force. Moreover, the transformations outlined above change how professionals and craftsmen perform their work and what challenges they will encounter. That requires an open attitude and a certain willingness to adapt in dealing with traditional concepts and approaches within a professional group.¹⁸ But it is the professionals and craftsmen themselves who must come forward to face these transitions and challenges; they themselves must decide about the changes to those concepts and approaches. It is up to employers and governments to give them the opportunity and create the conditions enabling them to act in a professional manner.

Looking ahead, the first three parts of this lecture are somewhat more reflective. I turn first to a classification and definition of professionals and craftsmen, good work and agency. Second, I want to consider what determines agency for professionals and craftsmen when working together. Thereafter, I return to the observation presented in this introduction, that professionalism and craftsmanship are currently under pressure. My discussion here relies on the application of three paradoxes in the way that we organise the work of professionals and craftsmen. Finally, I end the lecture with a plea for the revaluation of professionalism and craftsmanship, and propose how we can realise that revaluation together. When I say ‘together’, I mean employers, employees, along with the educational system, which together create the conditions for good work. But even more, I mean those professionals and craftsmen themselves, when I speak of ‘together’. The revaluation that I am advocating in this lecture starts with those cooperating professionals and skilled personnel themselves.

¹² Tonkens, 2008.

¹³ Jansen, Van den Brink, & Kole, 2009.

¹⁴ Ruijters, 2018; 2021.

¹⁵ Sennett, 2008.

¹⁶ Crawford, 2009.

¹⁷ Crawford, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁸ See, for example, Nachtigall (2021) for new forms of craftsmanship in fashion.

Chapter 1: Professionals, craftsmen and good work

The origins of the terms professional and craftsman or woman go back a long time and have been used widely.¹⁹ In the simplest sense, we are referring to someone who practices a profession, trade or craft. But as I suggested in the introduction, the idea of a professional or craftsman includes the notion of delivering high-quality work. Professionals and craftsmen do work that is important and complex, and they possess the knowledge and skills to produce good work with a high degree of competence.²⁰

At the same time, these terms – particularly the term ‘professional’ – seem to be subject to inflation. The positive connotations that are associated with the term have led to many people calling themselves professionals, and many occupations claiming to be professional groups. In practice, however, we can identify substantial differences between occupational groups. What are the characteristics of professionals and craftsmen?

Professionals and craftsmen

There are many similarities between professionals and craftsmen, and the terms are often used interchangeably; we might refer to craftsmanship in healthcare or education, or to the skills or training of professionals. Nevertheless, we can also identify differences between professionals and craftsmen.

The work of professionals is always in service of someone: a client, customer or student; a professional is intrinsically motivated to help that person. Additionally, it is up to professionals, within the unique and complex environment within which they operate, to determine what is necessary in any given situation to achieve high-quality work. The professional therefore requires a certain measure of autonomy when acting – including in relation to the client, customer or student – in order to achieve that quality. In the literature we can find various approaches in thinking about professions. These shouldn’t be taken as absolutes, but as indicators of the degree to which a given profession can be called a ‘strong’ profession. That said, a number of characteristics can be distilled from the literature:²¹

- Those in a profession make use of *systematic theory* (a body of knowledge). This gives a professional a repertoire for action based on a shared and protected view within the profession of what relevant knowledge is and which actions are effective in which situations. Just as important are the quality and ethical standards that govern the profession’s work – a shared view, in other words, of what is understood as quality work.
- Drawing up and protecting this systematic theory necessitates a certain degree of *organisation* within the profession, and the existence of a professional culture with its own values and convictions.
- In order to function as a professional practitioner, there is also a need for clients and society to *recognise* the importance and added value of the profession. Checks and balances are needed within the profession to ensure that professionals do not abuse their position at their clients’ expense.

¹⁹ Both the concept ‘profession’ and the concept ‘craftsmanship’ trace their origins back to classical antiquity. The word ‘profession’ is derived from the Latin word *profiteri*, made up of the prefix *pro-* (forth) and the verb *fateri* (to acknowledge, confess). Together they mean to declare openly (Roodbol, 2005). One of the first references to craftsmanship can be found in the Homeric hymn to the mythical god of craftsmen, Hephaestus (Sennett, 2008, p. 29), the god of metalworking.

²⁰ Van der Krogt, 2015.

²¹ Van der Krogt (2015) distinguishes between a characteristics approach, a functionalistic approach and a power approach to professions. The characteristics below are based on his work.

- Finally, the power approach to professionalism focuses on the importance of acquiring and maintaining the *status* of a profession – a status that bestows certain advantages and privileges that make it desirable to restrict the ‘monopoly’ of the profession to that group of professionals alone.

In contrast to professionals, the primary focus of craftsmen is not the client, customer or student. It is the work itself from which they derive their primary satisfaction. Craftsmen have ‘the desire to deliver good work for the sake of the work alone’.²² Naturally, they may also work for clients and may also derive their fulfilment from the client’s satisfaction with the final product. This fulfilment, however, is always coupled to the quality of the work delivered, i.e. the product (for example a piece of furniture or a beautiful new bathroom), and not primarily to the client. People in crafts and skilled trades work with their hands, but just as professionals, do not perform strictly routine work; what they do requires a combination of head and hand.²³ Think for a moment of the technician in the example I used in the introduction, or the furniture maker who works with seemingly endless patience on a table, for as long as it takes to bring it to his or her standard of perfection. What’s remarkable is that there seems to be less concern than among professionals for the degree to which craftsmen organise themselves around a certain occupation. Where professionals stress the importance of standards and the status of the profession, the literature on craftsmanship focuses more on the characteristics of craftsmen themselves.

Despite the differences, it’s the similarities between professionals and craftsmen that really stand out. The summary given above for professionals can, broadly speaking, also be applied to those who work in a craft. They are both driven by an intrinsic motivation to deliver high-quality work. Both professionals and craftsmen need training and experience to develop the knowledge, attitude and skills necessary to survey the working field and the motivation to perform complex tasks within it independently and achieve good results.²⁴ In addition, the emphasis for craftsmen is on the importance of practical experience, as opposed to the more substantial emphasis on systematic theory among professionals. Nevertheless, Ingold proposes²⁵ that craft is also characterised by observation and the transference of research to practice from within lived experience. Just like the professional, craftsmen test their actions against the operative standards and values in a community of fellow craftsmen as well as their own. The degree to which others share and respect the quality standards is of great importance to those in crafts and skilled trades.²⁶

Taxonomy of ideal types

The outline given above should be seen as a representation of ideal types that make it possible to determine the relevant degree of professionalism or craftsmanship. So, for example, the medical profession is often typified as a strong profession because of its strongly developed systematic theory and degree of organisation, which could serve as an example for other professions that are less strong. Teaching, on the other hand, is often typified as a semi-profession because of the fact that some of the above-mentioned characteristics are lacking or inadequately developed. Consider, for example, the degree to which this occupational group has organised itself, or the absence of unequivocal quality standards.

Taxonomies of ideal types run the risk of producing a static, unchanging picture, in this case of craftsmanship and professionalism. The requirements that are set for and by professionals and

²² Sennett, 2008, p. 17.

²³ Sennett, 2008.

²⁴ Petit, 2017, p. 23.

²⁵ Ingold, 2013.

²⁶ Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001.

craftsmen regarding the quality of work and their own actions, however, keep changing, under the influence of technological, economic and social developments. Perhaps even more importantly, the taxonomy of ideal types given above says relatively little about the main motivations and considerations behind the actions taken by professionals and craftsmen. I use the concept *good work* in order to gain more insight into these motivations and considerations.

As part of the work of the research group Professional Agency and its predecessors, my colleagues and I held dialogue sessions with professionals and craftsmen in over a hundred teams in various sectors – from higher education to healthcare, from the service sector to the energy sector. What we noticed was the shared striving of nearly all the people we talked to for professionalism and craftsmanship. Although it is interesting from an academic perspective to investigate the difference between the professional and craftsman or skilled tradesperson – the conditions and degree to which someone must satisfy them to qualify for one or the other – in this lecture I consciously abstain from making that distinction. The characteristics of any occupation and the nature of the work may demand different degrees of professionalism and craft, but what’s striking is the shared desire to produce good work, and the struggle to realise good work in what are often challenging circumstances. This applies just as much to a physician as to someone working in events management, who, with experiential knowledge about the hall and the best set up, ensures that the event takes place without problems.

Good work

Professionals and craftsmen are intrinsically motivated to deliver good work. They derive their satisfaction from the work itself, and/or from the added value that they can offer their clients, customers or students. Many are also motivated to contribute to the common good or the public interest.²⁷ Both elements are part of what Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon define as ‘good work’.²⁸

Good work can be defined by the contents, the benefits of the work for society or the rewards of that work for the craftsmen and professionals themselves in a more material sense. All three are important. Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon put the focus on the contents and benefits, and propose three criteria for determining whether something can be classified as ‘good work’:

1. It is technically excellent.
2. It is meaningful for the person carrying it out; that person feels involved (engagement).
3. It is carried out in an ethically responsible manner.²⁹

Gardner and his colleagues posit ‘good work’ against ‘adequate work’ or even ‘compromised work’, i.e. work that does not meet one or more of the criteria given above. Good work demands more effort than adequate or compromised work. The latter two variants are sometimes more attractive from the viewpoint of efficiency, by minimising the effort demanded of the work. The degree to which people choose to pursue good work, and therefore choose not to minimise their efforts, is determined by what the authors call an arsenal of control mechanisms.³⁰

²⁷ Jansen, Van den Brink, & Kole, 2009.

²⁸ Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2009, p. 51.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 60-61. The authors differentiate four categories of controls: personal standards (e.g. personal values); cultural controls in a specific domain (e.g. professional requirements); social controls (e.g. ethics boards); and outcome controls (e.g. the extrinsic benefits of work).

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR)³¹ summarises the view on good work of economists, sociologists and psychologists from a more material viewpoint: good work is having a good job, and being able to carry out your work under the right conditions. Their focus is less on the quality of the work produced than on the value of that work for the working person, while the satisfaction a working person derives from delivering good, high-quality work is only one of the contributing factors. The WRR posits that good work leads to ‘grip’ in three dimensions:

1. grip on money (such things as a good salary, but also job security);
2. grip on work (i.e. autonomy, but also meaningful work);
3. grip on life (i.e. a good work-life balance, manageable workload).

In this lecture I focus on good work as defined by Gardner et al., but the dimensions given by the WRR form, in my view, the necessary conditions that make it possible to achieve good work as defined by Gardner et al. When grip on money, work or life is lacking or inadequate, it puts pressure on the ability to deliver good work, and craftsmen and professionals may be placed in a situation where they are unable to deliver good work or unable to deliver it fully. They may be forced to deliver only adequate or compromised work in such cases. Craftsmen and professionals across various sectors and contexts tell us of their anxiety and expectation that delivering good work will become increasingly difficult.³²

The silver thread connecting our research across different sectors over the past few years is that, according to the professionals and craftsmen interviewed, the conditions enabling the delivery of good work are lacking or inadequate. In the energy sector, the events sector and the youth healthcare sector, workers told us about the impacts of the lack of sufficiently qualified personnel and the rising reliance on flex workers; of intense workload pressure and the lack of time for working together and learning from each other; and the increased protocolisation of work. Craftsmen and professionals that we interviewed spoke of how they are still trying to deliver good work, but also indicated that they were not always able to do so because of the conditions in which they have to execute the work. Many are anxious about the future of their work and the organisations where they work, as craftsmanship and professionalism are further eroded.

Good work also seems to be largely absent in some sectors and occupations. Various sectors, many of them crucial for the transformation to a more sustainable economy and society, employ practically trained skilled workers, often in physically demanding jobs, who have little security and are underpaid for their work.³³ We can’t speak of good work in such situations, since the conditions enabling the delivery of good work are lacking.

³¹ Engbersen, Kremer, Went, & Boot, 2020.

³² See, for example, Van Middelkoop et al., 2021; Hunkar, Zinsmeister, & Van Middelkoop, 2021; Glastra and Van Middelkoop, 2018.

³³ Consider, for example, workers in the gig economy, who are underpaid, lack job security and often perform physically demanding tasks – a development that threatens to create a whole underclass of ‘the working poor’. See Ballafkih & Hogenstijn, 2021; Ballafkih & Meulemans, 2022.

Chapter 2: Agency

Good work is created through the actions of professionals and craftsmen. They therefore must have agency: the ability to act. In line with the definition given by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, I define agency³⁴ here as the capability to act on one's will, based on one's own free judgements and decisions.³⁵ Agency has been much debated and is variously interpreted in the social sciences. Without any attempt to summarise the entire discussion, I here interpret the term in relation to work.

An important aspect of this definition is deciding on the direction of the action oneself, thereby embedding autonomy in agency. In essence, it's about the freedom of professionals and craftsmen to decide on the direction, intention and meaning of their own actions in their work, given the desired result of that work. That freedom in performing one's work is necessary because the situation or context in which a professional or craftsman works is complex, and achieving good work depends on having possible ways of responding to any specific context. The professional or craftsmen has to adjust his or her actions, often on the basis of moment to moment internal deliberations, to the specific context in order to achieve the desired result. Consider, for example, the GP who, during a consultation with a patient, is trying to figure out the medical causes or find the clinical picture that fits non-specific but serious symptoms. Or the technician who has to repair a complex malfunction without a clear immediate cause.

Agency or professional space?

In the debate in the Netherlands, the terms 'professional space'³⁶ or discretionary space are also frequently used. The assumption is that when professionals and craftsmen are given this space, they will be able to function optimally and that professional conduct will follow. I see professional space as an important precondition for agency, but not as a synonym. Professional space does not lead automatically to the use of agency, nor is it a guarantee for good work.³⁷

The difference between positive and negative liberty³⁸ can perhaps be useful to understand the differences between the two terms. Negative liberty refers to self-determination and non-interference. This is professional space: the area or domain within which professionals and craftsmen can act without the interference of others. The more professional space, the greater the negative liberty. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is about choosing the direction of one's actions in the definition of agency given above. It refers to the free choice to act in a certain manner, according to your own sense of professionalism, craft or expertise.

What determines agency?

The degree to which individual professionals and craftsmen can choose the direction of their actions themselves based on what is required in a specific context – and therefore possess agency – is determined partly by the individual (the agent) and partly by the culture and structure they act in. For the individual, it's about his or her competences, characteristics and background. Culture and

³⁴ I use the English word 'agency', which has also been used in Dutch by the Education Council of the Netherlands (2016). Other frequently used terms are 'actors', and in the context of the debate around Dutch education in particular, 'professional space'.

³⁵ Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015b, p. 19.

³⁶ In Dutch: professionele ruimte

³⁷ See Van Duijneveldt (2021) for an example of a situation where professional space does not ultimately lead to good work.

³⁸ Berlin, 1969.

structure are about the way in which work, the organisation and society have been set up. So on the one hand, for professionals and craftsmen to act, it matters which skills, knowledge, background and experience they possess. But on the other hand, these actions take place within the context of an organisation, which has been set up in a certain way; within a professional field or profession, with certain professional standards; and within a society, with certain demands and expectations.

It is important to realise that agency, structure and culture constantly influence each other.³⁹ Existing structures and cultures restrict and/or strengthen the agency of an individual, who can never act independently of those forces. But vice versa, individuals through their actions also influence these structures and cultures. They can change them, or perpetuate them.⁴⁰ There is a difference in the nature of such influences. The influence of structure and culture on the actions of individuals is more direct, while the influence of the actions of individuals on existing culture and structures is more indirect and gradual.

This continual mutual influence means that the agency of professionals and craftsmen is not a constant or absolute, and therefore cannot be exactly pinned down. The degree to which agency is present depends on the professionals or craftsmen who act, and the context in which they act⁴¹; it is always in flux. Agency is a capacity that only becomes real in particular situations that configure a certain space within which it is possible to act.⁴² A professional or craftsman may for instance, together with colleagues, have a great deal of agency in an environment where there's a lot of trust, and where a lot of space is given to improve certain work procedures. In a similar situation but with different colleagues or in a situation where work has been 'regulated to death', and colleagues do not work together well, he or she will only have very limited agency.

Repertoire of responses

The agency of professionals and craftsmen is partly determined by their knowledge, skills and values, which together determine their 'repertoire of responses'⁴³. For the professional or craftsmen, the issue is not the production of knowledge, but the practical application of that knowledge in the real world he or she operates in.⁴⁴ There exists within any profession, to a greater or lesser degree, a consensus about the above-mentioned body of knowledge – the expertise, skills and values that are important for practicing the profession. This knowledge is not static and also not univocal: there may be multiple conflicting opinions or paradigms within one profession that are brought forward for discussion by individuals, groups or sub-groups within the profession, and therefore change over time.

³⁹ See Giddens, 1979. The precise way in which these influence each other, and what the determining factors are, is a longstanding debate in sociology and the social sciences, as is the debate about how and through which lens agency or the ability to act should be viewed. I primarily apply the sociocultural approach to agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), which foregrounds the actions of individuals and groups within the context of structures and cultures. For an overview of the different schools of thought, see e.g. Hinostroza, 2020, or Eteläpelto et al., 2013.

⁴⁰ Archer (1995) calls this 'morphogenesis' and 'morphostasis'.

⁴¹ Hinostroza, 2020.

⁴² Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson 2015b, p. 19. Depending on knowledge, skills and values, professionals and craftsmen may therefore have different approaches or strategies available (in their repertoire). Consider, for example, a teacher in higher vocational education at the start of a new academic year weighing the different approaches to making the course materials, experienced as 'dry' by last year's students, more appealing by linking them to the students' experiential world.

⁴³ Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015a.

⁴⁴ Van der Krogt, 2015.

The professional and craftsmen has gained knowledge and competences from his or her personal background and experiences in life, which have been further developed in school and post-secondary education. In addition, experience in practicing the profession is essential to developing a repertoire of responses. Professionals and craftsmen have to know more than how to act theoretically; they have to 'embody' this in practice.⁴⁵ In sum, they act on the basis of scientific knowledge⁴⁶, but also on the basis of knowing 'what works' in their own practical experience. They develop routines at work that strengthen their capacity to act, but are also capable of relinquishing these when the situation demands.⁴⁷ Ideally, they are continuously refining and improving these routines by experimenting with them in practice in order to achieve the best possible results. The routines also bring efficiency to their work, and may offer the professional an opportunity to further develop existing routines, or to gain greater competence in handling more complex situations. Matthew Crawford⁴⁸, inspired by the more traditional crafts, speaks in this context of 'jigs': objects or procedures by means of which a professional or craftsman restricts their surroundings such that they can perform the same action smoothly each time, without having to think through what they are going to do. The jig ensures that the environment one acts in is an ordered one. Consider, for example, a carpenter who uses a jig to saw planks to the same length, but also the *mise en place* of a chef. By ordering all the ingredients in a logical way, the chef reduces the amount of mental work required.

Protocols may also increase the efficiency of professionals at work and hence function in fact as a kind of jig or mould. Following such protocols may even be essential, for example for air traffic controllers or in healthcare. But protocols may also be counter-productive. It is therefore important to differentiate between protocols that contribute to good work and protocols that operate in the interests of monitoring and accountability, which are often responsible for creating extra workload pressure.⁴⁹

Just as important for the actions of professionals and craftsmen are the values and beliefs that guide the way they act. Values are formed by someone's personal traits and background on the one hand (for example, the values that you form growing up), and on the other by the values that are dominant within a given occupational group, organisation and/or society. These values translate into a certain degree of self-efficacy - belief in one's own abilities - something that has a substantial influence on the agency of professionals and craftsmen.⁵⁰ For example, it influences the goals people set for themselves, and the effort they are willing to make in order to reach these goals.⁵¹ These values also translate into beliefs⁵² about, for example, the meaning of one's work, or the quality people endeavour to achieve in their work, and beliefs about what is ethically responsible in that

⁴⁵ Griffioen, 2019; Crawford, 2009. Grundy (1984) speaks in this context about 'Aristotelian praxis' as typifying the work of the professional: autonomous, intentional actions, within which 'practical judgment' (*phronesis*) is combined with theoretical wisdom (*sophia*).

⁴⁶ As mentioned before, for craftsmen the knowledge gained in practice has more significance, whereas for professionals the emphasis is more on theoretical knowledge.

⁴⁷ Griffioen, 2019, p. 23-24.

⁴⁸ Crawford, 2015.

⁴⁹ Adler and Borys (1996) stress that protocols can also contribute to the quality of work, and call this connection 'enabling bureaucracy', in contradistinction to 'coercive bureaucracy', which is geared to monitoring and accountability, and often, in the eyes of professionals and craftsmen, leads to extra work without having any clear benefit.

⁵⁰ Pajares, 1992; Bandura, 1997.

⁵¹ Bandura, 2000.

⁵² These values and beliefs are component parts of what is called 'professional identity' in the literature (see e.g. Ruijters, 2020). In the pedagogical literature, this is referred to as 'teacher beliefs' (see e.g. Fives & Gill, 2015).

endeavour. It determines, in other words, what a professional or craftsmen sees or defines as 'good work'.

I want to finish this section by exploring further the goals pursued by professionals and craftsmen. These goals emerge from the above-mentioned values of professionals and craftsmen. A teacher, for example, wants his lessons to contribute to educating critically-minded citizens, and dedicates much of his time at work but also in his private life to following social developments, with the goal of being able to discuss such topics with his students. Or a technician who is worried about climate change, therefore decides to shift focus to installing heat pumps. She takes evening classes to expand her expertise and asks her boss to be allowed to work together with colleagues who have practical experience in this line of work. These intentions can lead to action that is oriented towards, to paraphrase Priestley et al., a future that is different from the present or the past, but may also lead to action that attempts to hinder change, that is geared to perpetuating the present or to the recovery of a situation from the past that is seen by the acting professional or craftsman as more desirable.⁵³ Where professionals and craftsmen aim at achieving good work, resistance to change, for example, may eventually lead to a better quality of work. However, in workplaces where professionals and craftsmen deliver adequate or compromised work, agency is not always used to benefit the quality of work. It may then be used primarily to avoid any additional exertion that would be needed to adjust the way work is performed, while such an adjustment would in fact improve the quality of work.

In our action research among secondary vocational school teachers, the members of a certain team deployed their agency successfully to delay a planned change. This team operated in an environment where much had changed in the didactic and pedagogic theories applied in practice in recent years. The teachers put a lot of time and energy into mastering the resulting new approach, translating it into the curriculum and their interactions with students. As a result of a reorganisation, during the period of our study, a new and more far-reaching change was announced at the institution that would have caused another change in the work of these teachers.

In the team discussions we conducted with them, the teachers decided that this change would not improve the quality of their work. They wanted to master the previous changes first before thinking about any new changes. After a tense period, the teachers were able to at least put the planned change provisionally on hold by discussing it with the administration of their department.

Structure and culture

As stated above, the actions of professionals and craftsmen do not take place in a vacuum, but within certain structures and cultures that can either restrict or strengthen agency.⁵⁴ Both structure and culture are defined at the organisational level as well as at the level of the group or team. The cultural factors that influence the agency of professionals and craftsmen in the organisation or team refer to things such as social safety and inclusivity, the degree to which work is seen as something individual or collective, and the dominating view about the optimal division of power and control.⁵⁵ For the latter, the question of whether an organisation approaches work from a position of trust in its professionals and craftsmen or from a position of monitoring and accountability has a huge influence on agency. As I observed in the introduction, a management style heavily focused on output, with the associated accountability controls, is seen as a factor that restricts the agency of

⁵³ Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson 2015a, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Van Middelkoop, Portielje, & Horsseleberg, 2018.

⁵⁵ Pantić, 2015.

professionals and craftsmen.⁵⁶ At an even higher level, the status of a professional or occupational group is a significant cultural factor: the degree to which the interests of the profession or field are recognised and valued, along with the position of power that group holds in society.

Structure can be seen as the system of agreements and rules that have been made in order to direct or steer behaviour. This includes an organisation's agreements and rules pertaining to the division of tasks, responsibilities and authorisations; to the division of power and control; and to the way of communicating and working together.⁵⁷ An organisation's structure is, for many professionals and craftsmen, a major influence on how much 'room to manoeuvre'⁵⁸ they feel they have. In particular, leadership, as well as human resource and professional development policy and its implementation⁵⁹ play a role in enlarging or restricting of the agency of professionals and craftsmen. It's about choices in the structure that determine the time allowed, the resources and the right to consult on that division of time and resources; but it's also about conditions at work that determine, for example, the space and priority given to professional development, or the amount and types of accountability demanded in relation to work and the use of time and resources.

At the level above the organisation, the characteristics of the professional or occupational group and the organisational degree of that group are important, i.e. the degree to which the group is organised and trade associations prescribe such things as guidelines for work.⁶⁰ Wherever a strong occupational group, and its corresponding 'ethos', is lacking, 'the rules of the game' will be overwhelmingly determined by the government or organisation and much less by the professionals or craftsmen themselves.

⁵⁶ Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson 2015a, p. 32. See also Freidson 2001; Quené, 2018; Tonkens 2006.

⁵⁷ Education Council (Onderwijsraad) of the Netherlands 2016, p. 18-19.

⁵⁸ Leat, Livingston & Priestley, 2013.

⁵⁹ Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay, 2021; Kessels, 2012; Fruytier et al., 2010; Korver, 2007; Ulrich, 1997. The term 'human resource management' is widely used in most organisations and is a term that, to my mind, in itself says something about the way in which employees are regarded in too many organisations: as a resource to be used to achieve organisational goals, instead of as professionals and craftsmen who strive to achieve good work.

⁶⁰ The medical profession, with such things as its own discipline committees, can again be taken as an example here.

Chapter 3: Cooperating professionals and craftsmen

Cooperation oils the machinery of getting things done, and sharing with others can make up for what we may individually lack.

- Richard Sennett ⁶¹

For the vast majority of organisations, working together has become the norm.⁶² This is most commonly organised in teams.⁶³ The importance and the benefits of teamwork are broadly endorsed in both popular management literature and in academic studies on professionals⁶⁴ and craftsmen⁶⁵. But why do we work together? What are the advantages and the potential disadvantages? And what determines the combined agency of cooperating professionals and craftsmen?

What cooperation promises is in essence quite simple, as articulated by Sennett above. But at the same time, good cooperation can be terribly complicated in practice. In the previous chapter we saw that agency depends on the knowledge, skills, background and values of professionals and craftsmen. Everyone is unique in this, and in that diversity lies the added value of cooperation. In cooperation, the expertise and roles of professionals and craftsmen can come together such that high-quality work can be achieved. But that added value is far from being something automatic, as will shortly become clear. However, when cooperation does lead to strengthened agency of professionals and craftsmen, it empowers them to contribute to good work more effectively. This strengthened agency is particularly important in light of the required transformations of the economy and society, which have significant ramifications for that work. The complex problems these transformations have set in train demand professionals and craftsmen who can work together to find solutions for such problems.

At the same time, research shows that cooperation between professionals and craftsmen remains limited to coordinating practical issues in many workplaces.⁶⁶ Moreover, this cooperation is not always effective because it can lead to things like ‘groupthink’ and ‘social loafing’.⁶⁷ Cooperation and group formation at the level of the group or team can also cause isolation of the group from other groups or from higher levels within the organisation.⁶⁸ Consider, for example, the team that works very closely together but without taking into account the broader goals of the organisation or the dependence of other groups and teams around them. When the aim of cooperation in an organisation is imposed from the top down, it can also entail increased control of professionals or

⁶¹ Sennett, 2012, p. ix.

⁶² Decuyper, Dochy & Van den Bossche, 2010; Edmondson, 2013, in Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt, 2015, p. 18.

⁶³ Derksen, 2021.

⁶⁴ See for example Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018.

⁶⁵ In the literature dealing with craftsmen and craft, the focus is on ‘making’ and the desire to do good work for the sake of the work itself, while implicitly incorporating the notion of the individual craftsperson who performs this work (see also Crawford, 2009, p. 14). The cooperation of craftsmen – in order to learn or become more skilled in a trade, or to be able to solve specific problems and act in complex situations – is nevertheless seen as an important component of craft and craftsmanship. See for example Sennett, 2012; Petit, 2017; Kunneman, 2012.

⁶⁶ Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt, 2015; Vangrieken, Dochy & Raes, 2016.

⁶⁷ Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt, 2015; Derksen, 2021.

⁶⁸ Bovbjerg (2006) and Main (2007), in Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt (2015, p. 29), talk in this regard about the ‘Balkanisation’ of teams and groups.

craftsmen, or standardisation of the work they perform.⁶⁹ When cooperation is introduced into organisations on the wrong grounds, for example as a disguised cost-cutting measure, it can actually undermine professionalism and craft.⁷⁰ When the goal of cooperation is unclear, or when the preconditions are lacking, cooperation can feel like more work – a distraction that contributes nothing at all to good work, but instead leads to more meetings and ‘distractions’.⁷¹ In many workplaces, the space and preconditions for professional cooperation have come under pressure due to the desire and a perceived need for control and efficiency.

In this lecture I want to examine the benefits of cooperation as realised from within the realms of professionalism and craft. Hargreaves and O’Connor call this ‘collaborative professionalism’.⁷² In this context, cooperation is not an end in itself, but is deployed in the service of achieving good work together. Let me begin with the various forms of cooperation that we encounter in practice at different organisations.

Forms of cooperation

We almost automatically think of teams when looking at cooperation in the context of work. Teams are the most widespread method of giving form to cooperation in – but also between – organisations. I follow here Derksen’s definition of a team as a group of limited size, whose members are mutually dependent on each other in achieving a clearly defined collective goal or performing a clearly defined collective task.⁷³ In practice, in many organisations the word team is used rather loosely, which leads to confusion since the label ‘team’ is regularly stuck onto groups of employees that technically speaking don’t qualify as a team.⁷⁴

In our research practice we regularly encounter teams that do not satisfy the conditions for professional cooperation, or only satisfy some of them. One condition immediately springs to mind here. We see that for a surprising number of teams the collective goal or collective task is unclearly defined, and that there is little or no conversation on the topic. In teaching teams in higher vocational education, for example, people are often quickly in agreement about the collective task of offering the best possible education, to prepare students for professional practice. When we then ask what such an education should look like and what a student should know and be able to do in order to be properly prepared for that professional practice, the answers of team members often diverge considerably. Attending to explicitation of the collective goal and translating it into the work does take time, but the process helps teams achieve good work together.

In addition to teams, cooperation takes place in any number of other groups, both large and small, with a multiplicity of names, such as department, unit, professional learning community and

⁶⁹ Watson, 2007, in Vangrieken, Dochy Raes, & Kyndt, 2015, p. 29. See also Zinsmeister, Van Middelkoop, & Van den Berg, 2022.

⁷⁰ For reservations about the effectiveness of cooperation and teamwork, see Hackman, 2002; West & Hirst, 2005; Derksen et al., 2020.

⁷¹ Derksen et al., 2020.

⁷² Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018.

⁷³ Derksen, 2021, p. 21. In addition, many workplaces differentiate different kinds of teams, such as project teams, task teams, management teams, scrum teams, result responsible teams and self-managed teams. For the features of effective teamwork, see in addition to Derksen, 2021, also Salas, Reyes, & McDaniel, 2018; and with specific reference to teaching, Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015.

⁷⁴ Vangrieken, Dochy, & Raes (2015) make a distinction between ‘teams in theory’ and ‘teams in practice’. Because in practice teams often do not meet all the conditions that are advanced in the literature, they introduce the term ‘team entativity’, which means the degree to which a group of individuals possesses the characteristics of a group.

community of practice.⁷⁵ In order to achieve more clarity in this regard, it is worthwhile looking at the various forms or types of cooperation between professionals or craftsmen. I differentiate three types of cooperation:

1. Horizontal cooperation between professionals or craftsmen in the same occupational group. For example, a team of lecturers in higher education who are jointly responsible for teaching students a certain subject, or nurses who are jointly responsible for the day-to-day care of patients in a ward. This horizontal cooperation is predominantly organised in teams.⁷⁶
2. Vertical cooperation between professionals or craftsmen with other employees of the same organisation. This refers mostly to cooperation with management and one's direct manager, as well as cooperation with employees who support the work of professionals and craftsmen or that of management. I'm thinking here of staff in for instance human resources management/development, schedulers and controllers. Such groups influence the agency of professionals and craftsmen, and therefore it is often necessary to cooperate with these groups in order to achieve good work.⁷⁷
3. Interprofessional cooperation between professionals and craftsmen from different organisations and between different occupational groups. This type of cooperation is usually set up when dealing with large, complex issues, for example the energy transition, that go beyond the capacity, power, influence and/or decisiveness of the occupational group or organisation. These are challenges that demand 'collaborative organising'.⁷⁸ The names of these forms of cooperation vary greatly – from project team or task team, to community of practice or professional learning community.

The composition of teams and groups changes frequently and the 'lifespan' of teams and groups is usually not interminable. Depending on the nature of the work and the context in which the work is carried out, professionals and craftsmen in practice are also often members of not just one but many of such groups and teams.⁷⁹ Membership in these different cooperative groups requires professionals and craftsmen to develop collaboration skills.⁸⁰

The agency of cooperating professionals and craftsmen

Where in the previous chapter I discussed individual agency, and the factors that influence it, here I want to discuss the combined agency of cooperating professionals and craftsmen. This combined agency is influenced by the characteristics of individual professionals and craftsmen in the group or team; the characteristics of the team or group itself; and the way in which the structure and culture

⁷⁵ Types of groups and their nomenclature are practically endless, can vary by organisation, and wax and wane in popularity over time. Consider, for example, the department, cell, committee, taskforce and circle.

⁷⁶ In addition, there are differences in the degree of autonomy and responsibility granted to the team, the mutual interdependence of team members, and the required degree of cooperation between those members.

⁷⁷ On this point, Noordegraaf advocates taking a different view of professionalism, one where 'managerial logic' becomes a component of employee professionalism, something which requires 'pragmatic cooperation' within the organisation (Noordegraaf & Siderius, 2016).

⁷⁸ DiVito, 2022.

⁷⁹ Margolis, 2020.

⁸⁰ Studies of multiple team membership and collaboration skills are relatively new, but coordination, communication and adaptivity are defined as 'transferable skills', which can therefore be used when you are assigned to a different team or group (Salas, Reyes, & McDaniel, 2018).

of an organisation – consciously or unconsciously – influences and controls the agency of professionals and craftsmen⁸¹ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



- The added value of cooperation resides in the diversity – and tapping into that diversity – of those who are working together. That means that the make-up of the team or group, the individuals who are cooperating, matters. The background, talents, knowledge, skills and values that professionals and craftsmen possess and deploy in their work contribute to their combined agency. When specific knowledge or skills that are needed to deliver good work are lacking, it limits the combined agency of the cooperating professionals or craftsmen.
- The characteristics of the group or team itself also partially determine the agency of the cooperating professionals.⁸² Of first importance is the form of cooperation as discussed above. The form influences the ‘lifespan’ and size of a group or team, but often also the degree to which the team has been assigned a shared goal or shared task, the mutual interdependence of the cooperating professionals, and the mandate ‘granted’ to the team. These factors reside in the team, on the one hand, and in the structure of the organisation, on the other. Other characteristics have more to do with the interaction of the cooperating professionals and craftsmen, such as the degree to which social safety, mutual trust and recognition of each other’s talents and qualities is present.

⁸¹ In the previous chapter I argued that ‘higher’ levels, at the level of the occupational group or society, have an indirect significance for the combined agency of cooperating professionals and craftsmen. Consider, for example, government regulations and funding, but also the status of a profession or occupation, and more recently the rise of hybrid and virtual teams, which entered an accelerated phase as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay, 2021). For the sake of clarity, these indirect influences from the higher level have been omitted from the figure below and restricted to the discussion.

⁸² A great deal has been written on this topic, particularly in the literature about effective teams, and therefore my treatment here is rather limited. Derksen (2021) presents a good overview in Dutch based on theoretical insights, but with practical grips to give effective form to teamwork.

- At the level of the organisation, the agency of cooperating professionals or craftsmen can be both reinforced and restricted as a result of the choices and design principles that are applied. An organisation can, as ‘choice architect’⁸³, commit to do certain things, or conversely omit to do so, in order to strengthen the agency of professionals and craftsmen. These might include preconditions for effective cooperation, such as making time and resources available for working together. These conditions or preconditions vary, depending on the type of organisation, the type of team people are working in and the work that they are performing.⁸⁴

In our Experimental Learning Labs on Professional Teams, we offer teams guidance and coaching over an average period of six to eighteen months, with the goal of strengthening the combined agency of professionals or craftsmen. The team members work on strengthening collective functioning and realising the collective task in order to deliver good work. They decide on their own what actions and interventions are needed in order to realise this.

This a customised trajectory and offers no guarantee of success, but has often led to good and encouraging results. In one case, for example, we started off with a group of mainly individual professionals who worked individually, with disappointing results in the work they delivered and a difficult relationship with management. In a year and a half we were able to guide their development into a team that, while working on a shared task, actively came up with plans and implemented them, which improved the quality of the work delivered and did so by actively seeking connections with colleagues in other teams in the department.⁸⁵

Offering teams and groups good guidance and coaching is one of the ways in which an organisation can act as ‘choice architect’ to strengthen the agency of cooperating professionals.

⁸³ NSvP, 2017; Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2012.

⁸⁴ Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay, 2021.

⁸⁵ For more results from the Professional Teams Experimental Learning Lab for education, see Van Middelkoop, Portielje, & Horsseleberg, 2018; Van Middelkoop, Horsseleberg, & Van Maanen. 2019; Derksen et al., 2020; Horsseleberg, Hunkar, & Van Middelkoop, 2022.

Chapter 4: Cooperating professionals under pressure – three paradoxes

Agentic power lies in humans' capacity to reflect on and evaluate social contexts, creatively envisaging alternatives and collaborating with others to bring about their transformation.

- Nataša Pantić⁸⁶

Up to this point I have been speaking in a more reflective way about the importance of professionals and craftsmen, and the agency they need to be able to deliver good work together. Both agency and the corresponding potential of delivering good work have come increasingly under pressure in many workplaces. This is not (or almost never) because of malevolence on the part of organisations, supervisors or managers. Many organisations are struggling with the role of professionals and craftsmen, and the way that they work together. This uncertainty, and the corresponding shyness to act that comes with it, was revealed more clearly and became much more urgent because of what happened with work during the coronavirus pandemic. The issue translated into problems around workload pressure and work satisfaction, accountability, the powers granted to teams and the roles of management and the employer.⁸⁷

In order to understand this struggle in many organisations, and in order to arrive at a different view of and approach to the way we organise the work of professionals and craftsmen, it helps to think in paradoxes. A paradox is a statement that combines contradictory elements.⁸⁸ In order to handle paradoxes effectively, one has to accept multiple, contradictory forces and find a balance between them.⁸⁹ In this chapter I want to explore three paradoxes in the way work is organised in many workplaces that lay bare the source of the pressures on good work, professionalism and craftsmanship.⁹⁰ They form the structure of my concluding plea for another way of working together.

Paradox 1: The professional logic and the organisational and financial logic

The first paradox revolves around the question of whether we are doing the right things in our work, and who decides what those things are. In other words, it's about the logic governing the way our work is organised. Is it a logic built on the values of the professional or craftsman who is striving to achieve good work? Or the logic of the organisation, dominated by process management and control, and conceptualised in terms of returns and cost efficiency? The tension between these two kinds of logic is a central focus in the work of Eliot Freidson when he writes about professionalism as a 'third way', alongside the ways of the free market and bureaucracy. Freidson argues that professionalism has its own logic and integrity that could and should be leading when it comes to the way we organise work and society. He lays out an ideal type of system where control of work – and the quality and standards of work – are in the hands of professionals. He posits this against the current system where that control is in the hands of administrators and managers who are positioned above professionals in a hierarchy, and/or where that control is dictated by the market.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Pantić, 2015, p. 763.

⁸⁷ For an example of the impact in higher vocational education, see Van Middelkoop et al., 2020.

⁸⁸ Lewis & Smith, 2014.

⁸⁹ Derksen, Blomme, De Caluwé, Rupert, & Simons, 2019; Lewis & Smith, 2014.

⁹⁰ I didn't think up these paradoxes on my own, but together with Karin Derksen, in relation to the organisation of work in higher education; I worked them out in more specific detail for Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, together with Peter van Dijk. Here I apply these paradoxes to the wider field of cooperating professionals and craftsmen.

⁹¹ Freidson, 2001. Professional logic has received support in the Netherlands from those who argue against the management of professionals, or for a different way of managing professionals, (Weggeman, 2008), while arguing for ways of organising their work without or with much less hierarchy and control (see e.g. Droste,

Almost no one disputes the importance of professional logic, and yet financial and organisational logics are the ones that dominate many sectors and organisations. With the rise of New Public Management, the drive for control and efficiency that dominated the private sector in the 19th and 20th centuries⁹² was also responsible for organisational and financial logic becoming dominant in the public sector. This led the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), already twenty years ago, to speak of ‘institutional mistrust’ towards professionals.⁹³ In practice, in many large organisations the domination of these logics regularly translates into a gap between policy and support on the one hand, and the working practice of professionals in the primary process (‘in the workplace’), on the other. The complaint that we regularly hear in the workplace while conducting our research is that employees in policy and support departments concentrate their energy on constantly making new policies or implementing processes having to do with control, that do not contribute to that primary process in any material way. It is ironic that new ideas or policies oriented towards strengthening professional logic can also lose out because employees ‘have to’ meet the accountability requirements of existing policy and operative procedures.

The coercive presence of the organisational and financial logic is not something that only affects professionals and craftsmen in ‘the workplace’. Many supervisors, administrators and managers experience this paradox when they try, for example, to provide space for the professional development of ‘their’ teams, but are confronted with coercive frameworks that arise from the need for process management and control that restrict this space. The growth in the number and variety of managers is perhaps a result of the current dominant way of thinking according to organisational and financial logic⁹⁴, which can lead to thinking about and referring to professionals and craftsmen as ‘resources’. But these managers are not, as some believe, the major obstruction blocking professionals and craftsmen from doing good work, nor are they the cause of the pressure experienced by professionals and craftsmen. Managers come in all shapes and sizes, but most of them are sincerely trying to take proper care of ‘their’ people, and to enable them to produce good work. Many of them function as a ‘shield’ holding back undesirable bureaucracy and excess interference from entering the workplace. The problem is that they are part of the system, and that in many organisations they are not held accountable for achieving good work, but for control and efficiency of work. Because they are held accountable for the latter, that’s what they will ultimately – to a greater or lesser extent – aim at. This is not unique to managers and administrators. In our research in higher education, we observed that a part of the lecturers we interviewed had internalised ‘efficiency thinking’.⁹⁵

2017). There are also those who question whether too great an emphasis on professional logic is desirable or feasible. Noordegraaf (2007) is someone who queries this and argues for a form of ‘hybrid professionalism’, where professional logic is combined with organisational logic.

⁹² Weggeman, 2021, p. 143; Crawford 2009.

⁹³ WRR, 2004, p. 50. Ekman also says that employees are proud of their craftsmanship, but that this is nearly always followed by complaints about the current conditions under which they are reduced to practicing their work. Everything is dominated by the refrain of fewer resources and higher demands, and the tasks that employees would like to see as the core of their work account for a smaller and smaller percentage of the total number of tasks (2010, p. 109). The influential work of Graeber (2018) about the rise of ‘bullshit jobs’ can also be seen in the light of the dominance of organisational logic.

⁹⁴ Quené, 2018.

⁹⁵ Van Middelkoop & Meerman, 2014; Glastra & Van Middelkoop, 2018.

From our research in higher education⁹⁶ it was evident how strongly the striving for measurable results and efficiency determines the debate on student achievement. In essence, student achievement seems to come down to the quantification and justification of student records, such as the number of years it takes a student to complete the 'educational process'. For the 25 teams of lecturers that we spoke to about this issue however, the question of what higher education has to offer to its students and society took primary stage in their thinking on student achievement. Nevertheless, many lecturers indicated they experience a technocratic quantification and accountability exercise as leading in their daily work.

Paradox 2: Cooperation and individualism

The second paradox deals with the question of how and when we are engaged in good work together. This encapsulates the desire and need for working together⁹⁷, which stands in opposition to the individualistic culture in which professionals and craftsmen work in many occupations⁹⁸, and the individualised way that systems and processes are set up in many organisations. For example, we put a lot of emphasis on the individual development of employees and managers, but little or none on contextual collective learning. We expect teams to produce good results, but have set up performance reviews in most organisations at the individual level. In many workplaces, this leads in practice to 'working apart together': people are formally working together in teams, but in practice professionals and craftsmen are largely working on their own as individuals.

Not only are performance reviews usually focused on the individual, professionals and craftsmen may also be assigned individually formulated goals or 'targets' for their work. This can lead to a team that is a team in name only, which actually operates as a group of self-employed individuals under the same logo. The adoption of team goals and/or targets may in such a situation contribute to stronger mutual interdependence and cooperation, based on the desire and need to realise those collective goals.

Additionally, in many organisations there is a proliferation of beliefs about how professionals or craftsmen should work together, often without transparent frameworks or an understanding of what does and doesn't fit that type of organisation or the professionals employed by it.⁹⁹ This prevents the collective pursuit of good work and maintains individual work. There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. First, teams are the most commonly used way of organising cooperation, but what actually constitutes a 'team' has not been clearly defined in many organisations. In many organisations, too, the basic preconditions for good teamwork are not being met.¹⁰⁰ These basic preconditions are: teams of limited size¹⁰¹, a shared goal or shared task, and mutual interdependence.¹⁰² Professionals and craftsmen are also often members of many groups and teams, which reduces the effectiveness of their work.¹⁰³ This can make working together feel

⁹⁶ Glastra & Van Middelkoop 2018; Van Middelkoop & Meerman 2014.

⁹⁷ The issue here is not just working together individually in teams or groups, but also cooperation between teams and between professions and organisations.

⁹⁸ The degree to which this individualistic culture is present varies significantly from profession to profession. In education, for example, there is a history of 'solitary work' (Gotti, 2009; Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2020).

⁹⁹ We can also place other considerations in this category, such as the degree to which cooperation between teams and professions is required, and the number of teams professionals and craftsmen are members of (Margolis, 2020).

¹⁰⁰ Derksen, 2021; Derksen et al., 2020; Hackman, 2002.

¹⁰¹ Alnuaimi & Maruping, 2010; Hilst, 2019.

¹⁰² West, 2012; Van Middelkoop, Portielje, & Horsseelenberg, 2018.

¹⁰³ Margolis, 2020.

like 'more work' and lead to frustration.¹⁰⁴ Second, realising good work together requires good support systems and the possibility to learn with and from each other¹⁰⁵; but in many organisations we see that this is a low priority. Third, while the complexity of work in many sectors and organisations demands interprofessional cooperation, in practice this is scarcely realised because there has been insufficient recognition of the complexity that this type of cooperation involves.¹⁰⁶

Paradox 3: The need for change and time for reflection and dialogue

The last paradox addresses the question of how we deal with 'the many things that need to get done', both in the short and in the long term. This refers to the constant drive for 'newness' and innovation in opposition to the need to slow down in order to make space for reflection and dialogue, needed to anchor new changes durably in the work and organisation. Given the urgency of the larger societal issues we face, and the role assigned to professionals and craftsmen in addressing those issues, the call for innovation and change is understandable and in some part necessary. In practice in the workplace we see this translated into a multiplicity of issues that 'also need to be done' and fit into a schedule and working week many already experience as overloaded. The changes more often than not have to be realised within 'existing practice', with the existing resources and without cuts to or cessation of activities elsewhere. The desired changes are often not formulated by the professionals or craftsmen themselves and therefore do not arise from professional logic, but by board members, managers or support services¹⁰⁷, regularly in order to satisfy desires, demands or ideas that come from outside the organisation. The speed with which successive changes, or the desire for them, arrive is not seldom of such a nature that former innovations – or the reorganisations they gave rise to – have not yet been fully implemented when the next innovation is set in train.

The paradox here pertains to the fact that many economic and social changes really are desirable or even essential, but that professionals and craftsmen need peace and quiet, time and stability in order to reflect and learn.¹⁰⁸ These are the basic preconditions for achieving real, durable change. The proliferation of priorities and activities on the already overloaded to-do lists of employees and the strategic agendas of organisations are, in many cases, making such peace and quiet, time and stability rare commodities. When no choices are made in the method of working, or in the action points and priorities for that work, the focus shifts to maintaining the current system, and the automatic responses and implicit choices it contains, while real innovation in the way we organise the work of professionals and craftsmen remains absent.

¹⁰⁴ Derksen et al., 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay 2021; Edmondson, 2012; Hackman & Wageman, 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Edmondson & Harvey, 2017. Interprofessional cooperation can be obstructed by the fact that professionals and craftsmen work 'according to the culture, rules and ethics that fit their own profession' (Hofhuis et al., 2016), which causes risks of miscommunication and a reduced feeling of group identity. Something that endangers cooperation between professionals or craftsmen from different organisations is that they work according to various written and unwritten rules from within their own organisation (D'Amour et al., 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Quené, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Kessels, 2004.

Among the more than one hundred teams that our research group spoke to over the past ten years, we heard a constant refrain about the lack of time to meet together as a team for a meaningful dialogue on the objectives and ambitions of the work, for getting to know each other's qualities and for exchanging experiences. Too often we were thanked by teams for 'finally having a discussion about the content'. That space for reflection and dialogue seemed to get even scarcer during the coronavirus pandemic. The disruption caused by the crisis invoked a desire and expectation in many people that the way they work would change. Ironically, professionals and craftsmen in many workplaces seem to have been so busy maintaining 'the old system', or keeping it operational, that real innovation or change in the way professionals and craftsmen work was not realised, at least for the time being.

These three paradoxes have led to the situation I outlined in the introduction, where many sectors and organisations recognise the importance of professionals and craftsmen, but fail to create the conditions that would enable good work. Directors, board members and managers, but also craftsmen and professionals themselves have evidently been unable to deal with these paradoxes in an effective way, or only insufficiently, up to the present day. We have to change to a different way of working together in order to tackle the challenges arising from these paradoxes.

Chapter 5: A plea for a different way of working together

Even when those called professionals are something more than average people, few can be immune to the constraints surrounding the work they do. (...) If the institutions surrounding them fail in support, only the most heroic individuals can actively concern themselves with the ethical issues raised by their work.

- Eliot Freidson¹⁰⁹

You tell me it's the institution. Well, you know. You better free your mind instead.

- John Lennon¹¹⁰

In this inaugural lecture, the central focus is on craftsmen and professionals. The good work that they deliver together is crucial for tackling the challenges facing our economy, our society and our world in the years and decades ahead. The necessity of good work, skill and craft is recognised by most people, but is at the same time under increasing pressure due to the paradoxes that govern the way we organise work in many workplaces.

Getting past these paradoxes demands that we weigh things differently and make different choices when thinking about the way we organise the work of professionals and craftsmen. It asks for in the written and unwritten rules we apply to work, and the principles governing it. Such change demands something of board members, managers and support personnel, who create the conditions under which professionals and craftsmen work. But even more, it demands something of the professionals and craftsmen themselves. Below I will further discuss what, to my mind, has to change around these paradoxes and how we can realise these changes.

Put professional logic at the centre

First, in line with the thinking of Freidson and others, we have to organise work more strongly according to what professionals and craftsmen need to deliver good work. Enabling good work must be put at the centre of the way we organise work, and not efficiency, flexibility or the desire to innovate for the sake of innovation itself. The challenge this entails lies not in making an 'absolute' choice for one of the three logics, but in restoring professional logic to the central place it should occupy when we organise work. The other logics are necessary, but need to ultimately serve that professional logic.¹¹¹ We have to break away from organising work in such a way that control, efficiency thinking and an emphasis on 'quantifiable output' are central, and where these have been made an end in themselves rather than a means to an end.¹¹² This applies emphatically to the public sector, such as youth healthcare services, where it is practically impossible to standardise the work and where, given the nature of the work, efficiency improvements are only possible up to a certain point¹¹³; where for years the adage 'more is less' has been degrading the quality of work and leading

¹⁰⁹ Freidson, 2001, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ Lennon, 1968.

¹¹¹ As stated in the introduction, putting professional logic at the centre does not mean that the interests of the client, student or patient should be lost or will have no influence on the choices that have to be made when organising work. On the contrary, a strong and mature occupational group will always put the interests of the groups they serve in first place.

¹¹² Glastra & Van Middelkoop, 2018.

¹¹³ Evelien Tonkens cites Braumol's law in this regard, which is the theory that the more productivity rises in the market sector, the more expensive public sector services will become in relation because little or no increase in labour productivity is possible in those jobs (2006, p. 18). The call for more efficiency in the public

to abuses in the system.¹¹⁴ Return organisational and financial logic back to their right proportions – these are the preconditions that allow professionals and craftsmen to deliver good work.

But how do we do that? Prioritising good work and strengthening the agency of professionals demands more than simply stating its importance. It demands organising the actual work from a position of trust in professionals and craftsmen. This begins by giving them a voice: ultimately professional logic is their purview, as is how to achieve good work in their specific work situations. Board members, managers and support staff do not or should not decide what good work is, but have a crucial role in creating the right conditions for good work.¹¹⁵ This means, among other things, giving professionals and craftsmen space to decide what the best solution is for a specific situation, without wanting it to be controlled or standardised by top-down protocols, processes or other blueprints. This requires of professionals and craftsmen to develop and apply a transparent framework that defines what they think good work is, so that the ‘best solution’ rests on thoroughly thought-through professionalism and craftsmanship.

This is not a plea for what to my mind are often overly simplistic ‘solutions’ tending towards giving unstructured ‘space’ or autonomy to professionals and craftsmen, or disposing altogether with management and administration. It does not ask for professionals and craftsmen to be given *carte blanche*, but rather trust and mandate. It requires the organisation to focus on creating the right conditions for good work. Changing these conditions starts with the structure of organisation: the processes and actions, which often unconsciously and out of routine are directed at control and efficiency, and in which, in too many workplaces, the central place is given to the desire for accountability and control of processes and output. If the goal is realising good work and strengthening the agency of professionals and craftsmen, it is essential to translate this into the systems and processes within organisations. In many organisations, efficiency and control are so ‘baked in’ to the minutiae of systems and processes that, despite good intentions, these aspects remain dominant, even when there is a real desire to prioritise good work. Prioritising good work means, for example, having the courage to re-examine existing control and accountability rules and procedures, or the utility and necessity of the policy cycle (raised to an exalted level in many large organisations), with its ‘obligatory’ production of new objectives. Use the time and resources this frees up to support and encourage long-standing and new professionals or craftsmen in striving to achieve good work, and by doing so, strengthen their agency. Encourage learning more, for example, by allowing craftsmen who are just starting out to accompany and so learn from experienced senior personnel. Encourage the education of young professionals by making space for professional development and stimulate the debate about professionalism and craftsmanship within the organisation.

The instances given above are only intended as examples. Organising work differently does not have a standard approach or rules carved in stone that can be applied like a cookie-cutter in every organisation or every department. This new way of organising work therefore cannot, or only to a very limited extent, be concretised by means of the popular ‘round tables’, dedicated working groups or generic improvement plans that are popular in so many large organisations. Those approaches ironically enough often lead to processes and initiatives that are far removed from the work of professionals and craftsmen, and feel for them like extra work instead of something that

sector then leads, paradoxically enough, to further bureaucratisation. The latter is not, it must be added, restricted to the public sector alone, according to Graeber (2018).

¹¹⁴ Hunkar, Zinsmeister, & Van Middelkoop, 2021.

¹¹⁵ The classification of the WRR referred to above – grip on life, grip on money, grip on work – offers useful points of departure for thinking about these conditions.

contributes to good work. Organising work according to professional logic must take place in the workplace itself, with a leading role reserved for those very professionals and craftsmen. It requires experimentation and change in practice – from the teams of professionals and craftsmen, to the board room and the support services. Professionals and craftsmen need to claim and safeguard the space for those experiments in pursuit of good work.

Strengthen the conditions for doing good work together

In many places, the added value of cooperating professionals and craftsmen are inadequately utilised. Changing the status quo requires thinking through what form of cooperation and what conditions are needed for realising good work together. It starts with thinking through the goal of working together. Don't automatically organise work in teams according to an organisational logic, with teams as the lowest level of an organogram. Working together is a means to achieve good work and the choice of the form of cooperation will ideally emerge from the question of what is needed to achieve good work. Organise cooperation according to the task or ambition of the professionals and/or craftsmen who we look to in order to realise this good work.¹¹⁶ Interprofessional cooperation dedicated to large societal issue requires something different than coordinating practical matters for day-to-day work, and yet in many organisations this is now all lumped together under the heading 'teamwork'.

The agency of cooperating professionals can then be strengthened by providing favourable conditions for cooperation. Enough time for working together is quintessential, but it is also frequently underestimated; all too often organisations believe they have allotted sufficient time for cooperation, but in practice the cooperating professionals and craftsmen experience it as insufficient or completely lacking. Creating favourable conditions for working together also demands a critical view of the automatism that arise from the individualistic approach to work. Because working together is essential for good work, set things up in the organisation such that the work itself, but also learning and development, are not primarily oriented towards the individual, but much more geared to contextual and collective working and learning. Set up assessment and performance cycles in the organisation in such a way that they address the collective effort.

Doing good work together is not simple, and understanding what enhances and what undermines effective cooperation is important for professionals and craftsmen themselves. In addition, good support is an important condition at the organisational level for encouraging and improving that cooperation. Depending on the situation, such support may be offered by managers, HR professionals or specialised team and organisational coaches. Good support requires people who are knowledgeable and have an understanding of cooperation, as well as requiring that such support be tailored to that particular group of cooperating professionals. Thus, being attentive to the conditions governing the team or group, as well as the organisation as a whole, are of first importance.

Slow down in order to speed up

Finally, it is necessary to create time and space so that professionals can reflect on and act according to what they understand to be good work. It is more relevant than ever today that professionals and craftsmen be given the opportunity to figure out what the challenges and transformations facing our

¹¹⁶ This requires organising things differently, not extra organisation. In various organisations where in our research we were witnesses to reorganisations with the goal of working more strongly according to professional logic, these changes were introduced alongside existing top-down hierarchical structures. This quickly leads to additional meetings and structures, and a lack of clarity about accountability, mutual cooperation of individuals and teams, and strategic direction.

society mean for what they consider to be good work. The nature and urgency of these challenges are huge, and demand that we speed up. But realising meaningful change can only be realised by giving professionals and craftsmen a chance to slow down, in order to ultimately speed up¹¹⁷. Good work is not a starting point, but the result of meaningful dialogue and cooperation between professionals and craftsmen. Without time and space for those things, it's impossible or nearly impossible to achieve good work. In the long term, time is perhaps the most important condition for achieving good work.

This slow-down can be found by creating what the Dutch writer and philosopher Hermsen calls 'slow time'.¹¹⁸ She posits slow time against 'clock time', as something that is in essence not 'smart', nor can it be measured with exactitude. It's the time you can use to recharge, gain inspiration and discover new, unexpected insights. You won't find it during the hard-won extra hour for a certain task, or an hour for writing after a full working week. It demands calm and the space – sometimes alone and sometimes together – to reflect on what good work is and what you need to achieve it. As well as time to translate the outcome of such reflection into practice. Slow time to reflect and engage in professional dialogue forms the basis for craft and professionalism and is a condition for realising renewal and innovation.

How to create such time is a difficult issue. It means finding the space in organisations to try things out, to experiment and perhaps even to play around with different ways of working, so that change can really succeed. It means asking people at different levels in the organisation to let go or at least loosen their focus on efficiency and fast results.¹¹⁹ However, the emphasis on clock time and the scarcity of time are social and coercive phenomena, not things simply contained within the organisation. Creating and prioritising slow time therefore also asks something of craftsmen and professionals. It asks them to set priorities, to have the courage to make choices and the courage to claim the space needed to occasionally slow down. It is also a question of practice; and after realising that the pressures of the day were given priority over slow time again, making time for reflection, dialogue and experimentation with and in work.

Our contribution

As researchers in the research group Professional Agency¹²⁰, we work under the conviction that professionals and craftsmen form a determining factor in the quality of the (often complex) work carried out in organisations. We often adopt an action-oriented approach that allows us to conduct our research with and for professionals and craftsmen. We do this because we are not only seeking insights into their agency, but also want to make an active contribution to strengthening that agency. We do this at three levels: the level of the individual, the level of cooperating professionals and craftsmen, and the level of the organisation.

1. At the level of the individual, we are particularly interested in the questions of what it means to be a professional or craftsmen, and how their agency takes form. We link these responses to issues concerning transformations in work and the economy, and how these impact cooperating professionals and craftsmen. In our search for answers to these questions, we

¹¹⁷ Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay 2021.

¹¹⁸ Hermsen, 2009. These two kinds of time were differentiated in ancient Greece: *kairos* (slow time) and *chronos* (clock time).

¹¹⁹ Hermsen, 2009; Glastra & Van Middelkoop, 2018, in Van Middelkoop, Derksen, & Bay, 2021.

¹²⁰ And the previous members of this research group, which until 2018 was the research group on differentiated human resource management. The research group Professional Agency is part of The Work Lab. For further information please see www.hva.nl/theworklab.

are inspired by thinkers in philosophy and sociology, but also by the stories and experiences of professionals and craftsmen in practice. The central perspective in this search is therefore always theirs.

2. The focus of our work in strengthening the agency of teams is formed by the ongoing longitudinal research project Experimental Learning Lab on Professional Teams. It leads to insights into what does and does not work in the areas of team guidance and into the developmental needs and possibilities of teams. The large body of data that we have collected thus far through this form of action research lends itself for thorough-going analyses of how professional agency in teams is enabled and how it can be strengthened. Virtual and hybrid forms of working together form important extensions of our research into cooperation within teams in the coming years, as does the creation and strengthening of agency in temporary project teams and in other types of collaboration, such as professional learning communities.
3. The way that an organisation can strengthen, but also restrict, professional agency is the third level of our research. We investigate what the organisation, in its role as 'choice architect', can do and refrain from doing in order to strengthen professional agency. We translate these insights into recommendations that refine existing forms and invent new ways of realising and stimulating professional development. In doing so, we contribute to the creation of design principles for organisations who want to strengthen the agency of their cooperating professionals and craftsmen.

We don't do this alone, but together with organisations 'in the field' and based on the questions they face in practice, as well as with related research groups. We carry out our work as part of the Centre for Economic Transformation (CET) of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Within the larger topic of economic transformation, the research group plays a major role in pursuing research activities concerning the topic of good work and craftsmanship. In the years ahead, we at CET are going to be searching out best practices and promising approaches that will strengthen and enhance good work, professionalism and craftsmanship. We do this along with professionals and craftsmen from various sectors and organisations.

The work of the research group always proceeds from professional practice. In his work on professional reflexivity, Schön speaks¹²¹ of the 'swampy lowlands', where professionals (and craftsmen) are confronted with messy, complex problems and issues that cannot be solved with quick fixes.¹²² In these 'swampy lowlands' you will often run into the members of this research group. That's the terrain where we do our research, that's where we find our inspiration, and that's where – together with professionals and craftsmen – we try to come to or create the understanding, tools and tangible support that will lead to good work and strong professionals and craftsmen.

¹²¹ Schön, 1983.

¹²² Kunneman, 2012.

Concluding remarks

In this lecture, I have tried to show what we encounter in teams and organisations in our practice as action researchers. But this lecture is also about myself, and about us. It is about what we experience in our work, what we frequently have to deal with, and the solutions we try to find for these problems. I don't think we are alone in this quest – I deduce that from the many discussions I've had on this subject, within as well as outside of my own organisation. Sometimes in formal team sessions as part of our research, but much more often in for instance the informal discussions after a team session, or after a project meeting. This search for answers is also not restricted to a certain sector or position: I recognise the same issues, problems and talking points returning in our discussions with technicians, service department employees, researchers and lecturers, members of management teams and board members. The three paradoxes recur in all these discussions: are we doing the right things? how do we do good work together? and how do we deal with the multiplicity of things that 'have to be done'?

What strikes me, is that it is hard to find solutions that would allow work to really be organised differently. It also seems to be an individual quest mostly – something we attend to when we have the time, when the to-do list permits. For myself, and possibly also for you, it's means that I often end up thinking about how I'm going to approach things differently from now on when I feel I have the time: in the summer or under the Christmas tree. To then have to admit after a few weeks that the usual order of the day and the to-do list – with a suspect number of items that are urgent but not important according to my professional logic – once again seem to have gotten the upper hand.

We have to examine how we organise the work of professionals and craftsmen, how we can make it easier for them to deliver good work. If we fail to do that, Freidson's observation cited at the beginning of this chapter about the restrictions of the organisation making it hard to deliver good work will remain recognisable for many professionals and craftsmen. But personally, I get a lot more energy from this line from the Beatles' song 'Revolution': 'free your mind instead'. Therefore, I want to end by calling on professionals and craftsmen: achieving good work according to a professional logic starts with ourselves. It is tempting but doesn't make sense to wait until 'the organisation' creates the right conditions. Much too often in both the theoretical literature as well as in practice in our action research I discern a sense that the pressure on professionals and craftsmen is something that 'happens' to them, that lies outside their control and can't be influenced. It is true this is often hard to influence,¹²³ but it's not impossible. In this area, too, working together is important – professionals and craftsmen need each other to create better conditions to realise good work. For that reason, it's encouraging to see professionals and craftsmen in a number of workplaces speaking up more and having the courage to 'claim' what's rightfully theirs, as Roovers and Van de Ven put it so beautifully in their book about the efforts to create a stronger professional group culture in primary education in the Netherlands.¹²⁴

But just as important is making changes to one's own work, to daily routines and to the assumptions about how we organise work. Have the courage to claim time for professional dialogue, despite having a packed to-do list. Ask yourself and your colleagues critical questions, and think about how you can face the challenges at work together so you can deliver good work. Translate the results of that dialogue into practice, experiment and learn together, so that you get closer to achieving good work. When needed, enter into discussions with people in your organisation about the conditions

¹²³ Whether it is actually difficult and to what degree naturally depends on the team, the organisation and the sector you work in.

¹²⁴ Roovers & Van de Ven, 2021.

that would allow you to deliver good work in a healthy way. Bring things that don't contribute to or detract from achieving good work out into the open for discussion, and have the courage to make choices about what you focus your attention on. For example, choose to set up a meeting-free day for yourself, or better still, choose this together as a team.

Such changes to routines and assumptions are not simple, even when they sometimes seem to deal with small matters, and it might not always be possible to realise them immediately. But they are hugely important because they go right to the heart of the matter: arranging work in a different way so that good work is actualised in practice. See it as a type of constructive resistance. That doesn't mean opposing a certain group, like supervisors, management or an idea such as neoliberalism. It is constructive resistance in the sense that professionals and craftsmen have the courage to put their own professional logic in first place because they want to deliver good work together. This is not simple or 'less work': working according to professionalism, craft and expertise means setting high standards for yourself and the work that you deliver. It may well rub up against organisational and financial logic. Within an organisation, or more accurately as a board member or manager in an organisation, you need to foster and encourage constructive resistance as, rather than oppose it.

Acknowledgements

In this inaugural lecture, the central focus has been on the agency of cooperating professionals and craftsmen. I have given my view, my vision of it, but this lecture could never have been written without the help of, and the many stimulating conversations with, colleagues over the years. Their contributions to this lecture were therefore indispensable. But first I want to thank the hundreds of professionals and craftsmen who participated in our research and entered into discussion and dialogue with us. The insight we gained into your daily practice, your unceasing efforts and your struggle to deliver good work together are of inestimable value.

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