



## THE END OF EXPERTISE

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE IS BECOMING COMMODITIZED

By IMD Professor Bill Fischer

**IMD**  
Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11  
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07  
info@imd.org  
www.imd.org

What if what you know didn't matter anymore? What if knowledge became a commodity? What if everyone could be an expert?

Far-fetched, you think? Well, in fact, the "what if" is no longer speculative; it is here already. Talk to people in such professional service industries as private banking, auditing, consulting, even engineering, and you begin to hear concerns about the commoditization of professional knowledge.

A consulting civil engineer (the field in which I was first educated, and still find so deliciously complex) admitted to me that much of what you need to know in that field is online, and that their corporate clients were a new breed who didn't so much want what he and his colleagues already knew (since that was easily available), as what they didn't know. Increasingly, tax preparation is being automated, and even auditing is going the way of algorithmic review and big data "sweeps" instead of sampling. [Artificial intelligence is writing much of the content that you're reading \(although not this!\)](#), and Jancis Robinson, the wine expert and writer, recently wrote that she has ["gone from being a unique provider of information to having to fight for attention."](#)

Increasingly, expertise is losing the respect that for years had earned it premiums in any market where uncertainty was present and complex knowledge valued. Along with it, we are shedding our reverence for "expert evaluation," losing our regard for our Michelin guides and casting our lot in with the peer-generated Yelps of the world.

Not only is the character of expertise changing, but at the same time, new client needs are emerging. Firms are fearful of being vulnerable to an unknown (not uncertain) future; and at the same time, conditioned by living in an internet world, they expect instant knowledge responses at reasonable prices. Expertise providers are finding that the models that they have long relied upon (e.g., the familiar five forces model) are losing some of their potency, as they are based upon assumed knowledge that is increasingly difficult to determine (What industry are we in? Who are our competitors? What are our core-competencies?), and are more like time-lapse photography in presentation than the customer's contemporary expectations of real-time, virtual streaming engagement.

If genuine expertise is no longer commanding its traditional premium in the marketplace, and if the old ways of conveying expertise are also in upheaval, what then do experts have to offer? An answer might be found in David W. Maister et.al.'s trust equation for the professional service firm:

If trustworthiness is the coin of the realm for business advisors, and if Maister and his colleagues are correct in describing the factors that determine trustworthiness, then it would appear that while *credibility* is being commoditized via popular access to expertise and artificial intelligence, and *reliability* is the attribute that could actually be increasing for all, thanks to AI, then Intimacy and Self-Orientation are the two remaining variables that are independent of algorithmic thinking and ubiquitous availability. They must be exactly what Richard Straub, President and founder of the Peter Drucker Society Europe, had in mind [when we he observed](#):

Being human is consciously to bring judgment, intuition, creativity, empathy and values into play. In business, it is the domain of entrepreneurial thinking and innovation, of weighing decisions, of collaboration and trust – qualities that are utterly different from the machine logic of networked sensors and processors.

"Being human," then, becomes a real hope for continued differentiation within the business of expertise, where the familiarity of the expert with the client, and access to the key expertise consumers at the right time and place are critical sources of value in the delivery of such knowledge. Could it be, that after several decades of managerial professionalism arguing that "what you know" is more important than "who you know," we are suddenly right back where we started from; where successful expertise provision depends more upon such "soft skills" as Intimacy and Self-Orientation, than it does upon Credibility and Reliability? Or, rather, since the advent of AI and algorithmic thinking have now made Credibility and Reliability tickets to the game rather than real

differentiators, that it will be how expertise is delivered, and to whom, that will become the real source of premiums in the expertise business?

This is quite a departure from where we have been in the past. It affects career potential, skills development and the entire value-chain of organizations that serve the expertise business. Perhaps, most ironic of all is the idea that it took the most artificial of intelligence to rekindle the promise of humanity in interpersonal relations.

*[Bill Fischer](#) is a Professor of Innovation Management at IMD. He co-founded and co-directs the [Driving Strategic Innovation](#) program in cooperation with the Sloan School of Management at MIT.*

*He will be speaking at the [7th Global Drucker Forum](#), taking place November 5-6, 2015 in Vienna.*

*This article was originally published in [Harvard Business Review](#).*

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