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From Near and Far: On the Role of Distance in Changing Professional Services

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Abstract

In this editorial, we consider how technology, globalization, and organizational changes have led to professional services being delivered increasingly at a distance. We argue that the impacts of these changes are felt at individual, organizational, and institutional field levels. Impacts include changes in professional career trajectories, collegiality and collaboration, and altered client–professional relations. These developments generate new challenges for governance and organizing across borders. While existing research is often optimistic about what these changes mean for professionals and consumers, some scholars raise concerns about their impact on professional–client interactions, trust, and service quality. In addition to examining these areas, we suggest opportunities for future research that can further our understanding of the implications of these changes for the provision and organization of professional services.

Keywords

professional services, distance, technology, mobility

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Introduction

While the professions and professional services are generally characterized by stability (Abbott, 1988; Alvehus, 2021), recent work has exposed the need to consider how this sector is being exposed to significant transformation (Adams et al., 2024; Harrington, 2015). Traditionally, professional services have been delivered with close proximity between the service provider and the client, reflecting both the experiential nature of these services and the need to establish and maintain trust (Abbott, 1988; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Thus, auditors and consultants, for example, have performed much of their work on the clients' premises, doctors are trained to assess and treat their patients face-to-face, and lawyers generally meet their clients in their offices and/or in court. However, several factors—including globalization, enabling technologies, and the COVID-19 pandemic—have increasingly led to professionals working in different offices, cities, and even countries than their clients. Professional expertise, therefore, is becoming increasingly delivered at 'a distance', both in geographical and institutional terms. This shift in the conceptualization of service delivery has profound implications for the individuals, organizations, and institutions involved, and is transforming how professional services are organized, produced, and consumed. In particular, these changes have the potential to impact knowledge creation and transfer, decision-making, planning, collaboration, regulation, the content of services, work processes, and ethical conduct, profoundly altering what is done and how. Our purpose in this editorial, and in the special issue more broadly, is to explore changes relative to distance, location, and geography in the context of professional services organizations. In so doing, we sketch out what environmental and organizational changes are occurring, why they are proving transformative, and some of the implications for scholars and practitioners.

Research has long established how technological change can substantially alter the organization of professional work (Barley, 1986, 1988; Orlikowski, 2000). Despite this, Muzio and Faulconbridge (2013) pointed out over a decade ago that the role of distance, location, and geography in professional services had been largely unexplored; this remains the case despite a growing understanding of the importance of such shifts in other areas of management and organization studies (see Wright et al., 2023 for a review). The face-to-face nature of professional services has been taken for granted, and while researchers have noted that this is changing, the implications have not yet been sufficiently teased out. The sets of challenges and questions confronting contemporary providers of professional services are growing (see, e.g., Armour & Sako, 2020; Kronblad & Pregmark, 2025; Wright et al., 2018; Yao, 2022). In this editorial, we review these challenges and questions and provide recommendations for future research in this area.

We argue that the implications of distance, location, and geography in professional services can be seen at three levels. First, at the individual level, expert workers are increasingly employing new technologies to provide or oversee the provision of services to clients at a distance. Not only does this increase in remote practice potentially alter practitioner–client relationships, but it raises questions about the quality of service

delivery and the legalities and ethics of service provision. Remote work also opens up previously unconsidered opportunities for career mobility and flexibility.

Second, at the organizational level, professional service firms are exploring ways of employing new technologies, including artificial intelligence, and also working out how to adapt their organizational processes to manage challenges of distance and remoteness in the delivery of their services. These changes require rethinking the roles and management of both professional and support staff while incorporating the necessary technological and organizational changes demanded by the new realities. Third, the impact of these changes extends beyond the organizational level, to field, regional/national, and international levels, altering the structure of fields in which professional service organizations are situated. Thus, new regulatory practices are needed as traditional modes of professional regulation that have focused on local practitioners servicing local clientele are rendered insufficient to address new modes of working. We explore each of these levels in more detail in the following sections.

The Individual Level

Professionals are experiencing changes to where and how they work, with implications for the nature and quality of their work, and their interactions with others. The individual professional worker is increasingly connecting digitally and traveling greater distances for work. Researchers have argued that knowledge work is more mobile now than in the past since much of it is “project- rather than function-based ... and, as such, is easily unstrapped from the need for a specific location” (Jarrahi & Thomson, 2017, p. 1074). Professionals may move around for work—taking on short-term contracts, working remotely, or dividing their time between different offices and work sites. Such mobility is believed to enhance knowledge and skill acquisition, extend social capital, and increase wages for individual workers, while also benefitting organizations (Choudhury, 2022). Even temporary colocation—short visits—have been found to provide a range of benefits (Choudhury, 2022; Criscuolo, 2005; Piva et al., 2023). While remote working has become more common in recent years, some professional services need to be provided in person, even when the client is at a distance—with all the direct and indirect associated costs.

International mobility is important to knowledge workers (Sugimoto et al., 2017), especially those whose professional services benefit from face-to-face meetings (Bierman et al., 2019; Goto, 2022; Yao, 2022). Professionals also have a crucial societal responsibility to provide authoritative, trusted, and skilled services (Alvehus, 2021; Empson et al., 2015), are expected to be reliable sources of knowledge, and to be available and dependable (Gabbioneta et al., 2014; Noordegraaf, 2020). While technology may enable remote and online meetings, trust between professional and client is helped by face-to-face relationships and copresence (Harrington, 2015). In-person interactions facilitate communication and rapport and may lead to a better service encounter. However, the widespread shift to online forms of working catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic has altered expectations of forms of service delivery in ways yet to be fully understood.

One example of the complications this shift in expectations can bring occurs in healthcare in which a physical examination may be necessary to arrive at an effective diagnosis and treatment. Moreover, physical contact may be important in ensuring continuity of care and effective follow-ups (Adams & Leslie, 2023). Nonetheless, there may be times when in-person care is not practical, not only during pandemics as we experienced with COVID-19 but in regions where there are few professionals with sufficient expertise to meet demand for their services. For example, technology has been used to link rural clients/patients with practitioners at a distance. Research has suggested that remote services can be effective (Beks et al., 2022); however, some question whether services provided in this manner are of sufficiently high quality (Hardcastle & Ogbogu, 2020; Yao & Liu, 2025). Moreover, access to remote services is reliant upon access to reliable internet, and here rural communities are at a disadvantage. The “digital divide” in access to the internet, and comfort in the use of technology can exacerbate preexisting inequalities in accessing professional services rendered by locale, income, race-ethnicity, age, and other factors (Davies et al., 2021; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2018).

Despite the concerns raised about service quality, trust in practitioner–client relations, and inequalities with professional services being provided at a distance, there is a robust literature identifying the advantages of remote working, including flexibility, work-life balance, and enhanced productivity (Abrams, 2019; Allen et al., 2015). The main negative outcome associated with remote working for individuals appears to be social isolation, although advocates argue that this can be overcome with intention and effort (Abrams, 2019; Choudhury, 2020). Hybrid working provides an opportunity for balance, allowing workers the flexibility of how and when to work while providing the benefits of in-person contact, such as mentoring, from spells of working in person. Those with caring responsibilities in particular may benefit from reduced work-family conflict with remote or hybrid work. Opportunities for hybrid working have increased since the pandemic, but managers in professional service firms are becoming increasingly reluctant to continue hybrid work arrangements, tending to regard in-person working as superior, sometimes despite evidence to the contrary (Tsipursky, 2022). Thus, those workers who work in-person may benefit from more rewards and promotions than those who work remotely or in hybrid forms (Tsipursky, 2022).

Research suggests that recent technological innovations, such as those linked with machine learning and artificial intelligence, are changing the nature of professionals’ work, altering relationships with colleagues and clients, and even revising professionals’ identities (Faulconbridge et al., 2023; Kronblad & Jensen, 2023; Lombi & Rossero, 2024; Nelson & Irwin, 2014). Technology can augment, complement, or replace professional tasks (Avnoon & Oliver, 2023) and forge new forms of collaboration with different experts such as data scientists (Avnoon & Oliver, 2023; Faulconbridge et al., 2023). While many professionals remain optimistic about the benefits of technology (Kronblad et al., 2024), it is nonetheless the case that technology may replace some professional workers, and alter their interactions with clients. For example, clients can choose to obtain their financial, legal, or medical advice from apps that provide “robo-advice,” or connect them to real professionals

working at a distance (Hardcastle & Ogbogu, 2020; Wexler & Oberlander, 2021; Yao & Liu, 2025).

As we have seen, research findings on the impact of working at a distance, whether through mobility or technology, are somewhat contradictory. There is evidence that professional workers and clients benefit from the flexibility new modes of working bring. At the same time, the impact of distance on service quality and client trust has been drawn into question. While professionals may be more connected than ever before, those connections can vary significantly in terms of quality, trust, and meaningfulness. More research on the impact of digital divides and global inequalities on distance in access to and execution of professional services for consumers, and opportunities for professional practitioners, is therefore needed.

The Organizational Level

Distanced delivery, including remote working and applications of technology, is having pronounced impacts at the organizational level. More remote working has the potential to alter interactions and relationships among professionals and with their clients (Empson, 2021). For example, direct interaction may be giving way to technology as a mode of surveillance to ensure professionals are meeting their obligations to clients and the firm. Moreover, organizational leaders have questioned whether team-building among professional workers and knowledge transfer from senior to junior professionals can occur in organizations embracing remote and hybrid working. However, the evidence suggests that intentional organizations can find new ways to facilitate knowledge transfer and team building through online means or periodic in-person meetings (Choudhury, 2020). Distance in professional working (such as remote/hybrid and technologically mediated work) has several potential impacts on the organizations in which professionals work (Empson, 2021).

Of course, distance is not just a spatial concept, institutional distance (Kostova & Roth, 2002) is also significant for the delivery of professional services (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2016; Muzio & Faulconbridge, 2013). Institutional distance refers to the differences in rules, norms, and values separating two geographical locations and is influenced by political ties, shared historical legacies, and economic interrelationship patterns more than by physical distance itself. It is a measure of the differences or similarities in cultural, social, and economic systems. Thus, the UK may be considered institutionally closer to Australia than France despite being physically much closer to the latter. This is particularly important in the context of professional services as they are highly embedded in local regulations and sensitive to local tastes, preferences, and values. This can lead to problems when professional firms are caught between the incompatible expectations of their country of origin and of their host context.

Thus, professional organizations face significant challenges, relative to other types of organizations, when they internationalize especially if they do so in institutionally distant places. Yet, the possibilities of practicing at a distance via technological solutions might provide opportunities for internationalization without the expense and complexities of direct investment. These virtual services may be not subjected to

existing regulations and may be perceived as different by local consumers. As a consequence, they may be judged according to different expectations and may be less likely to attract the scrutiny and resistance of local actors.

Many changes experienced at the organizational level in professional workplaces are driven by technological changes. Over several decades, research has documented that changes in the way technologies are employed prompt not only changes in how work is conducted but also in how teams interact (Barley, 1986). There are also well-documented changes to how client–practitioner relationships are structured (Chiarello, 2023; Nelson & Irwin, 2014). The impacts on organizations differ according to prevailing work arrangements and the manner in which technology is implemented. Technological changes can empower some groups and disempower others, depending on the nature of the technology and the manner of its implementation (Barley, 1988; Orlikowski, 2000). Nonetheless, much of the literature on technology, professions, and organizations focuses on changes in single geographic regions. The impact of digital technologies, however, is global, and these broader impacts are not well understood.

Research on artificial intelligence in professional service work has similarly highlighted changes to work tasks and interprofessional collaboration. For example, Faulconbridge et al. (2023) examine the adoption of artificial intelligence in accounting and law firms and show how this can lead to new types of professional work. The authors describe changes that challenge some of the fundamental organizational structures and assumptions governing professional service firms, including flatter structures and new forms of boundary work, as well as the potential for altered career paths. In a similar vein, Armour and Sako (2020) describe how the use of artificial intelligence in law firms creates the need for structural change in the direction of more decentralized management and more flexible employee incentives. A changed skill mix is evident as the employment of data scientists expands and client services become more interprofessional (Avnoon & Oliver, 2023; Faulconbridge et al., 2023).

Professionals in a variety of fields postulate that greater use of artificial intelligence might actually reduce the distance between providers and clients (Lombi & Rossero, 2024), or at least diversify and improve the services provided to clients (Armour & Sako, 2020; Faulconbridge et al., 2023). More generally, technology could be used by organizations to bridge distances, not least by facilitating the ability of professionals to provide services to distant clients. Nevertheless, research has noted concerns that technologically mediated professional–client interactions may actually increase distance even when practitioner and client are proximately located. For example, research on technology in health professional practice shows that the shift to electronic record keeping has reduced the time medical doctors spend with their patients (Khairat et al., 2020), while various health practitioners note that during appointments they spend time recording notes on a computer rather than giving patients their full attention (Adams et al., 2024). In a recent study, Canadian health professionals explained that technology had the effect of distancing practitioners from the patient, since interactions are often technologically mediated (Adams et al., 2024). Thus, while technology might bring together professionals and clients who are located at a distance, those who are more

proximal might feel they are actually further apart. The role of technology in both bridging and creating distance within and across organizations is thus deserving of more attention.

Overall, the literature exploring the impact of artificial intelligence on professional workers and the organizations in which they work is still in the early phase (Kronblad et al., 2024). Organizations are challenged with rethinking their structures and practices, including the incorporation of new workers such as data scientists who may have a different approach to knowledge, work, and ethics than the professionals they increasingly work alongside (Avnoon et al., 2023).

Institutional Fields

As traditional ways of organizing professional service provision have been disrupted, so too have the ways of overseeing professional practice. Of particular interest here is the regulation of professional practice at a local level through regional or national regulatory bodies. When services are provided at a distance, especially when the service provider and recipient are located across borders, these traditional forms of oversight are insufficient. The result is new challenges in policing professional practice, protecting clients, and greater potential for unethical practice. These challenges demand new strategies from professional regulators, and greater co-ordination by firms and regulatory bodies across regions, to uphold standards of ethical practice and protect clients.

Remote practice occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but not at the same scale as when the pandemic took hold spurring a rapid switch to online working. In many regulatory contexts, this required immediate changes to legislation—for instance, to allow health professionals to bill for some services provided online, and to accept e-signatures on legal documents for which only a “wet” signature had previously been accepted. Not only did these changes require new ways of working and relating, as recounted above, but the changes created new challenges for regulators and government agencies. There was uncertainty about the extent to which practitioners could legally, and effectively, provide services to clients located outside the region where the practitioners were licensed. Conversations were particularly acute in health-care where assessment, diagnosis, and treatment without face-to-face contact were deemed easier for some ailments than others (Leslie et al., 2023). Concerns over quality and continuity of care were particularly acute (Adams & Leslie, 2023). For example, there was concern about whether remote assessments could ensure that patients received follow-up in-person care when needed. Moreover, prevailing disciplinary and complaint mechanisms were not set up with distant clients in mind, leaving questions about to whom service recipients should complain in cases of malpractice (Adams & Leslie, 2023).

Concerns extend beyond the health sector. Practice at a distance opens up opportunities for professional malpractice and illegal practice, while potentially making it more difficult to police questionable behavior (Muzio et al., 2016). Practice across borders fosters situations of “double deontology” as there is confusion of which standards and rules may apply, those of the country where the professional is based, those of

the country in which the client is located, or those of the country where the firm is located? In this context, misunderstanding of the relevant norms and rules may cause service issues and even the perception of malpractice. While these problems are mainly unintentional, there are also situations where distance might be manipulated in more active ways. As distance complicates or reduces the possibility of regulatory oversight or redress, professionals may engage in more opportunistic types of behavior as they are more likely to get away with it.

New technologies that can not only augment but also replace professional services, including artificial intelligence, also raise concerns and opportunities for both the practice and organization of professional work across geographic regions. These might act as carriers for the diffusion of new practices, service models, and understanding of professionalism without requiring a physical presence. Yet, here too, the impact on the quality of services, and collaboration and cooperation across borders is an urgent topic for future research. Additional topics for future research include the impacts of technological and other changes that have implications for distance on field-level dynamics, including how organizations within a professional service field interrelate, and what impacts these interconnections have on modes of practice.

Contributions of the Special Issue

In the Special Issue call for papers, we stated:

This special issue is ... dedicated to understanding the implications of distance on professional services provided within and across organizations in a context of change—with particular attention to the implications for practice, relationships, knowledge, and interventions. Our special issue welcomes ... studies that enhance our understanding on the changing role of distance in professional services, from a variety of perspectives and viewpoints.

The six papers selected for this special issue address different aspects of the themes laid out above. When looking at the papers, we immediately see a set of constructs that represent key distance-related issues in contemporary professional contexts, including spaces and mobility (Liu & Au, 2024), hybrid work (Reimers, 2025), distance as enabler and barrier (Sako & Peo, 2025), internationalization of professional firms (Salvoldi & Brock, 2025), telehealth, technology-adjacent and technology-distant organizing (Shen & Shahani, 2025), and digital technologies (Waeber et al., 2025). These papers consider the relevance of distance to professional services across multiple levels. The first three studies underscore interconnectivity across individual, organizational, and global/governance levels, while the second three focus on the organizational level and explore workplace changes related to shifts in technology and ways of working.

First, Liu and Au's study links individual, organizational, and field levels through their concept of *mobility spaces*, which they define as physical, social, and legal arenas that professionals navigate over their careers. By focusing on career paths,

the authors highlight how socio-structural and organizational factors influence the distance professionals travel as they make career changes. Their approach reveals the impact of ascriptive factors such as gender, ethnicity, and status. Mobility spaces are unequal spaces with different professionals benefiting from or enduring very different career mobility patterns depending on their demographic characteristics.

The following article, by Sako and Peo, is entitled “Levering or Overcoming Distance? Global Strategy and Professional Services Firms.” This contribution explores distance at the organizational- and beyond-organizational levels and draws on several theoretical lenses—global value chains, virtual teams, and ecosystems—to identify eight governance structures commonly used by professional service firms, which are tied to two logics. The first logic, distance-as enabler’, is prioritized when firms have a unified global structure. In contrast, the second logic, distance-as-barrier’, is characteristic of those firms that give more autonomy to local units. This article links governance, organizational structures, and professional practice revealing that the degree of distance and logic adopted shapes the nature and structure of professional work.

Next is Savoldi and Brock’s paper, “How Does Internationalization Help Reputation? The Role of the Learning Gap.” Prior research on services in general and professional services, in particular, has revealed ambivalence to internationalization, largely because of the traditional nature of services being local, delivered face-to-face, and subject to local jurisdictional and market factors. This paper builds on institutional and signaling theories to propose that internationalization can have a positive effect on the reputation of these firms by signaling learning advantages. Specifically, they develop the “learning gap” construct, which taps levels of cognitive distance and power asymmetry between home and host countries, and show how this is a mechanism linked to reputational benefits. Their study contributes to understanding how learning opportunities can be a catalyst for other favorable organizational processes and suggests that distance can be a source of valuable learning and growth for firms.

Shen and Shahani’s work, located at the organizational level, explores how digital technologies shape organizing and organizational practices through a case study of telehealth adoption in Texas academic health centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors observe two different pathways: technology-adjacent and technology-distant organizations. In technology-adjacent organizing, telemedicine teams continued to treat patients with mental health challenges in remote state hospitals. In technology-distant organizing, telehealth was redeployed in the focus hospital. These distinct pathways were shaped by material affordances, material constraints, embodiment, and relationality, which informed stabilization and closure trends, ultimately leading to the different pathways. This study sheds light on how digital technologies can have distinct impacts in times of crisis.

Reimers’ article, “How Situated Attention Affect the Choices of Professional Service Managers in the Transition to Hybrid Work Arrangements,” is also focused on the organization level, examining how managers in professional service firms that were geographically fragmented made decisions about transitioning to hybrid work arrangements. Drawing on the attention-based view of the firm, this study

reveals a range of issues ranging from material opportunities and barriers to concerns about changing social dynamics to which managers attend. The findings reveal a wide degree of variation in types of managerial attention, including some signs of chaos alongside more structured patterns. The article shows how managers are affected by the situated attention characteristics of materiality, social dynamics, temporality, and framing of the strategic setting. These are then aggregated into a model that shows how the different attentions cluster in different manager types across different micro-contexts in the organization.

Finally, Waeber, Fohim, and Jacob's article is titled "Digital Technologies in Client Relationships: Juxtaposing Organizational Management Perspectives with Insights from Addiction Counseling Research." Waeber and colleagues explore how digitalization impacts professional–client relationships and professional service delivery through a review of two studies: the literature on the impacts of technology on professional–client relationships and research on professional–client relationships in addiction counseling research. These two reviews are synthesized to propose a conceptual model and outline future research directions.

Together, these six papers shed light on different aspects of distance in the organization and experience of professional services work, across multiple levels. Collectively, they advance theorizing on the work and work environment of contemporary expert knowledge workers.

Conclusion

By exploring the implications of distance on professional services within and across organizations, this special issue identifies important dimensions of change experienced by professionals, as well as the organizations in which they work, the clients they serve, and the broader fields in which they operate. In our editorial, we have highlighted changes occurring at the individual, organizational, and field levels, but of course, many concerns cut across all three, including workers' mobility and career paths, client–practitioner relations and trust, and challenges linked to organizing at local and global levels. These concerns are bound up with the major trends impacting professional workers today, from technological changes through declining public trust in experts, to shifts in how professional work is organized and governed. There is a need for more research in these areas. We present our editorial along with this collection, which together comprises not only a set of contributions to these vexing issues but also, we hope, constitutes a useful resource for other researchers who seek to understand and contribute to the research and practice of professional workers in an age in which distance is increasingly significant.

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