

Learning to Become a Professional in the Age of AI

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Introduction

As I wrote in 2003, “Becoming a professional is more about mindset than title.” This insight is more relevant than ever. In today’s world, influenced by recent developments in automation and AI, professionalism requires more than adapting to new technologies—it demands that we continually evolve in our identity as ethical, reliable contributors in our fields.

Instead of being propelled by steam or steel, our world is experiencing a new digital revolution thanks to revolutionary developments in artificial intelligence (AI). This technology is changing how we work and make decisions in several professions, including manufacturing, technology, healthcare, finance, and education.

Continuous learning is crucial in this day and age. Due to the ever-changing technological changes, employees must constantly refresh their skills and knowledge. Periodic updating is inadequate. Incorporation of these tenets includes timeless principles of integrity, responsibility, effort, and insight. In a time of change and innovation, we can foster professionalism by connecting skill sets to principled directions. Whether you're a professional or just starting, embracing an attitude of openness and growth is essential.

Core Qualities of the Modern Professional

In my 2003 article, I introduced the concept of explicit versus tacit knowledge, drawing on the work of John Seely Brown. Explicit knowledge includes facts and concepts; tacit knowledge encompasses the skills, behaviors, and identity formation professionals develop over time. In the age of AI, we must not only learn tools—we must also learn to be professionals who use them wisely and responsibly.

"At its core, professionalism means showing up on time, prepared, and with integrity. It's about doing your work to the best of your ability, whether anyone is watching or not" (Morneau, 2003).

As a father of four, I’ve worked to instill these values in my children. My oldest son is a living example. He works for Amazon Web Services (AWS) and leaves home at 4:30 a.m. to ensure he arrives before his scheduled time. During one critical moment, the data center he works at failed while streaming Thursday Night Football. The backup power failed, too. But he remained calm, did exactly what he was trained to do, and restored the stream successfully. AWS recognized him for his prompt and professional response. Throughout his life, every job he held earned praise from his employers. His work ethic, willingness to learn, and commitment to excellence define the heart of professionalism.

Even in the age of AI, while the tools change, the foundational values of professionalism endure. The argument could be made that professionalism is even more critical today. But, you can either embrace the AI era and thrive or resist it and struggle.

Beyond Technical Skills

Soft skills represent the tacit knowledge that AI cannot replicate. As I noted in 2003, professionals gain this through immersion in communities of practice. Today, it's vital to join communities where AI actively shapes the conversation to stay relevant and effective.

Technical aptitude is just one part of the equation. Employers seek professionals who can communicate effectively, think critically, collaborate, and exercise ethical judgment (Morneau, 2003). AI is a tool to be mastered, not a substitute for human judgment and creativity.

Employers increasingly value soft skills such as ethical reasoning, creativity, empathy, and a strong work ethic—traits becoming more important as AI automates routine tasks (World Economic Forum, 2020; OECD, 2021; NACE, n.d.; American Management Association, 2010). AI literacy is essential. Without it, you risk becoming obsolete.

Professionalism means taking initiative, not just completing assignments but exceeding expectations. Professionals pursue feedback and reflect on their performance (Morneau, 2003). Professionals should always strive to continuously improve and take constructive criticism as an opportunity for growth. Influenced by recent developments in automation and algorithms, workplaces are experiencing this growth, which includes learning new tools and championing ethical innovation (Fountaine, McCarthy, & Saleh, 2019).

When your work aligns with your passion and mission, it becomes meaningful. I have been an educator for over 30 years and made a pivotal decision early on to pursue this path. I've never regretted it. And every day, transformed lives I've witnessed reaffirm that decision..

As AI evolves, professionals must remain rooted in human dignity and service, not just efficiency (Deloitte, 2019). We must ensure that those displaced by automation are still supported and valued. That means lifelong learning and moral leadership.

"Becoming a professional requires humility. True professionals are lifelong learners open to new ideas and willing to learn from others at all levels" (Morneau, 2003). "The best leaders are humble leaders" (Taylor, 2016). Humility keeps us employable in a world of constant, rapid technological shifts.

Transforming Roles and Responsibilities in the Age of AI

This transformation echoes Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of "legitimate peripheral participation," where newcomers gradually become full members of a professional community. Today, those communities are increasingly digital and AI-enhanced.

AI is reshaping how we perform daily tasks. It handles repetitive processes—like data entry, scheduling, or basic analysis—allowing professionals to focus on uniquely human strengths: critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence.

Rather than eliminating jobs, AI helps people bring their gifts more fully into their work. We are called as professionals to collaborate with AI tools. Success demands understanding how to interpret AI outputs and apply them wisely.

By 2025, half of all workers will require additional training to keep up with evolving technological changes to stay relevant in the workplace. (World Economic Forum, 2020). Lifelong learning is no longer a luxury—it's essential. Leaders must also guide AI's ethical application in hiring, diagnostics, and decision-making.

Conclusion

As I wrote in 2003, "Every job, every interaction, every challenge is an opportunity to practice being the kind of person others can rely on."

The journey to professionalism doesn't end with a diploma—it begins there. Let us rise to this opportunity boldly, faithfully, and with vision. Let's also respond to the changes thoughtfully and purposefully AI brings, making our work—and our world—a better place.

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