

Successful Professionalization: What Can We Learn From Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985)?

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In this article, we take one of the more interesting and useful models of professionalization and apply it to the Human Resources field to see what insights can be had.

There are a number of models of professionalization, and of those one of the more interesting and useful models is that of Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985)¹. What makes this model so interesting and useful is that unlike other models it has a functional approach rather than a descriptive approach—that is, it looks at the process of professionalization (see figure 1). We should introduce a caveat at the start, however. The Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) model is, after all, just a model. The model is derived from observation and reasoning but not empirical data. Indeed, in regards to professionalization, despite the search for general principles, each situation needs to be considered as a case study. The point is that models of professionalization like the one proposed by Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) should be considered for the insights they may bring about, but they are not ‘laws’ and are not necessarily correct or the only way things can happen.

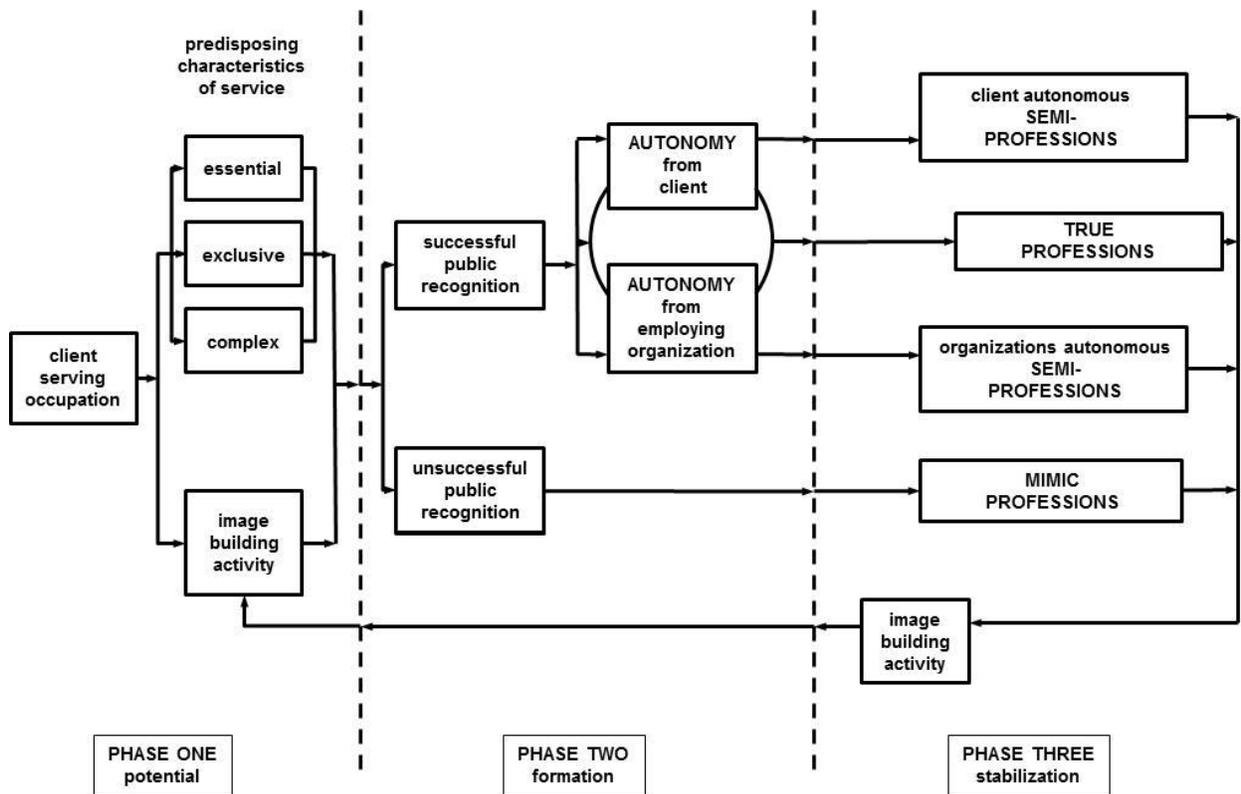


Figure 1 - Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) Model of Professionalization

The Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) model is simple and straightforward. The core aspect of the professionalization process is that an occupation must convince the public that the occupation should be considered a profession. There are two conditions required to make this happen. First, an occupation has to have the potential of making a claim to being a profession. Forsyth & Danisiewicz

¹ Forsyth, P., & Danisiewicz, T. (1985). Toward a theory of professionalization. *Work and Occupations*, 12, 59-76.

(1985) call these *predisposing characteristics*. These predisposing characteristics are that the work performed by the occupation (called service-tasks by the authors) must be *essential, exclusive, and complex*—more about these predisposing characteristics shortly. The second condition is that the occupation must be effective in convincing the public that this is so—this is what Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) call *image-building activity*. Image-building activity refers to efforts by the occupation to display the service-task as essential, exclusive, and complex to the public.

The key objective here is *successful public recognition*—and both predisposing characteristics and image-building activities feed into this objective. Without the right predisposing characteristics, no amount of image-building will be successful. Without effective image-building activities, public recognition will not happen.

Let's return to the predisposing characteristics. The first is that the service-task has to be essential. What Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) mean by *essential* is that the service-task has to be of serious importance to clients. The essentiality of HR may be taken for granted by some, but HR is also prone to questioning its own value and existence from time to time. The second predisposing characteristic is that the service-task needs to be *exclusive*. The meaning that Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) give to *exclusive* is not the same as licensure. No doubt, licensure creates exclusivity; but exclusivity can also be thought of as a relative concept. Exclusivity can be thought of as the degree of preference in the marketplace for the services of registered or certified professionals. Competence and reputations are drivers of this exclusivity. The third predisposing characteristic is that the service-task must be *complex*. What is meant by complex is that the work involves the non-routine application of a variety of techniques. In short, there has to be the right mix of knowledge and judgment. Professional work must be resistant to routinization.

Of course, these three predisposing characteristics are not entirely independent. For instance, complexity means that it will take a higher level of competence and judgment to do the work, hence the exclusivity.

The second aspect of the model is what Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) call *image-building*. Image-building refers to the efforts made by the occupation in convincing the public that the work done by the occupation is essential, exclusive, and complex. Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) do not have much to say about how this actually happens, but they do note one of the key issues encountered by some occupations. Simply, the work done by many occupations that claim professional status is simply not sufficiently essential, exclusive, and complex to convince the public that the occupation should be considered a profession. As Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) put it:

the likelihood of successful image building is increased if the service-task is actually essential, exclusive, and complex. Mimic professions have built an image that exceeds credibility. The public must perceive congruence between the predisposing characteristics of the service-task and the efforts of the occupation to portray its image.

In other words, Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) argue that if the work done by an occupation is not actually essential, exclusive, and complex enough, efforts at convincing the public that this is so will fail. In fact, it becomes a futile strategy that wastes energy and resources.

This last quotation introduced the concept of mimic professions. Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) coined the term “mimic professions” to refer to professions which have failed in their attempts to convince the public that the work they do is sufficiently essential, exclusive, and complex. Examples of mimic professions might include landscape architects, interior designers, project managers, management consultants, and real estate agents. The bad news is that Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) thought that “personnel administration and funeral direction” might be examples of mimic professions. But note that they used the word *might be* rather than *are* in regards to personnel administration being a mimic profession. In a sense, Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) seem to suggest that there is still hope for the HR profession².

Possibly the greatest threat to HR’s claim to being a profession, is that in the eyes of many “anyone can do HR.” In other words, although most would grant that the work of HR is essential, many seem to believe that is not that complex and therefore not that exclusive.

The level of education required to perform an occupation is an important factor that the public uses in gauging the complexity of a service-task. In the past, the minimum level of formal training in HR has been quite low. Although all Canadian HR associations agreed to introduce a degree requirement in 2011, in most provinces there is no requirement for any HR coursework. Indeed, only in Quebec and Ontario are candidates required to complete any coursework in HR. Although there are other professions that have non-specific degree requirements (e.g., accounting), these professions invariably require discipline-specific coursework either as part of, or in addition to, a degree.

Also, there are many that feel that experience is much more important than academic background in being an effective HR practitioner. This also is a problem. Professions require both academic background *and* experience. The position that all one needs is experience to be an effective HR professional is detrimental to the claim that HR is a profession.

Is it too late for HR?

An interesting, and scary, aspect of the Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) model is that there seems to be a critical phase of sorts. Once the public has made up its mind about an occupation, further attempts to portray the occupation as a profession are likely to be futile. This needs to be put into perspective, however. Hodson & Sullivan³ (2012) noted that the period where the occupation is negotiating its status with the public can last for decades. The window is not necessarily a narrow one, but it is a window nonetheless.

²For more on the discussion of professionalization and professionalism for HR professionals, please see: “The Professionalization of Human Resources” available at <http://irc.queensu.ca/articles/professionalization-human-resources> and “What does ‘professionalism’ mean for HR professionals?” available at <http://irc.queensu.ca/articles/what-does-professionalism-mean-hr-professionals>.

³ Hodson, R. & Sullivan T. A. (2012). *The Social Organization of Work* (5th ed.). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

It appears, however, that the public has not rendered its final verdict in relation to HR's claims to being a profession just yet. The HR profession appears to still be in the negotiation phase. HR seems to have been in this "maybe but maybe not" zone for quite some time, so this not quite a comfortable position to be in.

What advice can we draw from Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985)?

A key point made by Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) is that professional power comes from exclusive competence and that without this exclusive competence having "codes of ethics and other trappings of professions" is not sufficient to convince the public that the occupation is a profession. They suggest that what the public considers is the actual essentiality, exclusivity, and complexity of the work done by an occupation rather than the "trappings" of professionalism.

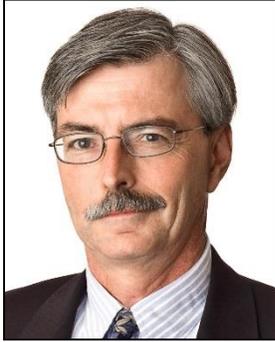
So the essential advice from Forsyth & Danisiewicz (1985) would be for the HR profession to focus on making the work of HR as essential, exclusive, and complex as it has the potential to be. The assumption here is that the HR profession has the potential to be more essential, exclusive, and complex than it is right now.

One could understand the HR profession as having enough of the predisposing characteristics not to be rejected outright as a possible profession, but not enough of the predisposing characteristics to make it a done deal. It is not clear how long HR can stay in this in-between phase before falling into the "futile" phase. It is important that the public not come to a decision that HR is not a profession because changing the perception of the public after this would be much more difficult.

Not all the work done by a profession is essential, exclusive, and complex; but those aspects that are, need to be clearly understood. We need to evolve the HR profession towards those tasks that require a high level of competence and judgment. Although it may well be the case that HR professionals can conduct better hiring processes than most managers, this is not likely to be recognized as exclusive work by the business community. On the other hand, conducting workplace investigations, negotiating collective agreements, fine-tuning large-scale talent acquisition strategies based on predictive analytics, and putting in place the organization-wide systems and processes to ensure compliance with all employment and workplace legislation, are challenges that most would agree should not be undertaken by amateurs.

The usual way of thinking about things is that the qualifications for an occupation should be set based on the nature of the work to be done. Here the reverse is proposed, we should design HR around those tasks that involve a professional level of complexity and therefore a professional level of competence and judgment. We need to select, train, and socialize HR professionals to do this kind of work on a consistent basis (rather than on a "some of us make it and some don't" basis). If only some HR professionals can perform these tasks, the ability to perform these tasks will be attributed to the individual and not the profession. In time, the HR profession will own these tasks—not by means of legal restrictions or licensing, but by establishing a clear advantage in the performance of these tasks. Only then can the HR profession dispel the idea that "anyone can do HR" or at least the most important or essential aspects of HR work.

About the Author



Claude Balthazard is Vice-President Regulatory Affairs and Registrar at the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA). Claude's responsibilities include ensuring that all regulatory policies and processes are in place in order for HRPAs to fulfill its obligations under the Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013, and other acts which HRPAs is subject to as a professional regulator. Claude is responsible for ensuring that registration and certification processes at HRPAs meet all regulatory and technical standards. Claude is also HRPAs's Privacy Officer. Claude has a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Waterloo, is a registered psychologist in the Province of Ontario, and holds the CHRL designation.

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