

Self-regulating Professionals and Experts in the "Knowledge Economy": Autonomy and Authority Compared

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Abstract

Professionals have long-been characterized as privileged workers in the labour market, enjoying more status, autonomy, and higher incomes than most other workers. These privileges, however, appear to have waned over time, to the extent that professional workers may be largely indistinguishable from other expert workers in Western knowledge economies. In this brief report, we compare the autonomy, authority and incomes of workers in self-regulating professions, and those in other expert occupations. We find no significant differences in terms of autonomy and authority, and only marginal differences in terms of income. Including managers in supplementary analyses reveals that they enjoy work privileges that expert non-managerial workers lack.

Introduction

Workers in self-regulating professions – including most notably medicine, dentistry and law – have long been regarded as privileged. These workers have enjoyed social and cultural authority, workpla92 resJTah0 612 Te/4r9 Tff0 GG21 0 0 1 462.94 389.71 Tm0 g0 G{-})JTJETQq0.00000912 0 6

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In light of this literature, we report the findings of a recent national survey exploring whether self-regulating professionals enjoy more autonomy, authority and income compared to other expert workers.

Methods and data

To determine if self-regulating professionals

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typically confers more autonomy and authority. Our analytic sample is therefore reduced to 2,471 cases. The focus is on *employees* to determine if self-regulating professional employees differ from other types of employees in terms of their autonomy and working conditions.

Independent and dependent variables

Our main independent variable was constructed to distinguish self-regulating professions, and compare them with other occupations with credible claims to expert status. Occupations of all respondents were first coded according to the National Occupational Classification (NOC) of the Canada Census. NOC identified all those with professional titles as well as expert technicians and technologists, those in skilled trades and those with managerial job titles. Those in occupations with less skilled designations as well as skilled trades were omitted from the

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To assess how expert workers differ in terms of autonomy and authority we draw on several survey variables. First, the survey asked respondents if they had opportunities to participate in policy-making at their workplace (for instance, with respect to hiring, firing, budgets etc.). Respondents could respond yes or no to this question assessing workplace authority. Second, respondents were asked to what extent they could plan their own work.

Answers were given on a five-point scale, ranging from 'all the time' to 'never'. Respondents

with autonomy should report a greater ability to plan their working day than others. Respondents were also asked to what extent they could plan others' work, with responses arrayed on the same

five-point scale. In decades past, scholars argued that self-regulating professionals were distinguished

with

Table 1 Regulatory Status by Post-secondary Education Completion

Regulatory Status	% completing any post-secondary	% completing university degree**	% requiring university degree	N
Self-regulating professions	94		59	62
Experts	94		43	49
Technicians	75		24	27
Total	87		41	48

*Pearson Chi-Square= 61.9, p = .000; ** Pearson Chi-Square= 61.3; p = .000; *** Pearson Chi-Square = 71.4; p = .000

But it is also clear that we now live in a "post-industrial society" with educational arms

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attainments and the educational requirements of their jobs. The education-jobs gaps for the rest of the labour force with less skilled jobs are much greater (Livingstone, 2009). The closer apparent correspondence between attainments and requirements for self-regulating professionals appears to be consistent with their greater statutory control over entry and practice.

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Table 2 summarizes responses by self-regulating professionals, experts, and technicians on participation in organizational decision-making. This includes involvement in making decisions about such things as the types of products or services delivered, employee hiring and firing, budgets, workload, and change in procedure. Only about a third of self-regulating professionals indicated they were involved in any of these decisions. Similar proportions are found among both experts and technicians. This finding is in contrast to the notion that members of self-regulating professions are able to exercise greater authority on the job.

Table 2 Regulatory Status by Participation in Organizational Policy-making

Regulatory Status	% who participate	N
Self-regulating professions	30	241
Other experts	34	243
Technicians and technologists	33	318
Total	33	802

Pearson Chi-Square=.928, p. 629

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Table 3 summarizes the findings on the extent to which respondents are able to design their own work. A little over half of all self-regulating professionals indicate that they can plan or design their own work at least most of the time. Once again, there is no significant difference between self-regulating professionals and other experts.

Table 3 Regulatory Status by Design Own Work

Regulatory Status	% who design own work most of the time*	% who design others work most of the time**	N
Self-regulating professions	56	11	248 (248)
Unregulated professions	55	17	245 (236)
Technical experts	53	21	324 (320)
Total	54	17	817 (804)

*Pearson Chi-Square=3.8, p = .873; ** Pearson Chi-Square = 19.1; p = .014

In addition, respondents were asked about the extent to which they can plan the work of others. As Table 3 also shows, quite small proportions of most professional and expert

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professionals have high scores on this index. Once more, there is no significant difference with other experts and technicians.

Table 4 Regulatory Status by Authority-Autonomy Index

Regulatory Status	% with high authority-autonomy	N
Self-regulating professions	24	237
Other experts	25	240
Technicians & Technologists	27	312
Total	25	789

Pearson Chi-Square=10.758^a, p .824

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to answer. But over 85 percent of professionals and experts did answer our income question. The results appear in Table 5.

Table 5 Regulatory Status by Mean Income

Regulatory Status	Mean Income	N
Self-regulating professions	\$62,581 ^a	213
Experts	59,084 ^a	205
Technicians	58,597 ^a	292
Total	\$59,932	710

^a Difference in Means Tested with Independent Samples T-Test (No significant differences)

The difference between the mean incomes of self-regulating professionals and technical experts in 2015 according to our estimates was about \$4,000, a difference of about 7 percent. While the mean incomes for self-regulating professionals were slightly higher and the standard deviations between their incomes were slightly lower, these differences do not appear to represent a major advantage for them.

Overall, it is clear that self-regulating professionals hold no advantage over other expert workers in terms of pay, authority or autonomy.

Discussion

Until recently, in the sociological literature, workers in self-regulating professions have been regarded as privileged — possessing more autonomy, authority, and enjoying higher incomes than other workers (Friedson, 1970, 1986). Recent studies have suggested that self-regulating professionals' special status has declined since the late twentieth century (Abel, 2003; Evetts,

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primary purpose in this report has been to assess the extent of job control among non-managerial self-regulating professional *employees* and other expert *employees* without confounding class differences. But for this further analysis, self-regulating professionals, experts and technicians are aggregated into “all expert” employees and compared with managers.

The most evident difference in job control in most workplaces is by employment class (Livingstone and Scholtz 2016). Employers have overarching control accruing to their property ownership rights. Owners and boards of directors delegate prerogatives to managers to coordinate and control other hired employees. At the outset, we noted the exclusion of professional employers from our empirical investigation because of their superordinate control over their workplaces and their small numbers in most professional associations. Managers, however, including professionals who have official managerial job titles have been retained in our sample. All expert employees will be compared here to all managers, with managers posited to exercise greater discretion in all aspects of job control.

Secondly, greater experience in given workplaces tends to generate more competence with work processes. It is now quite widely recognized that more familiarity with work tasks is at the foundation of productivity growth (Pankhurst and Livingstone, 2006). Assuming that these expert employees all have relatively high levels of initial technical knowledge, longevity and seniority may be associated with greater job control. The measure used here is the number of years the respondents have been doing the kind of work they do in their current main job.

Thirdly, increasing organizational size has been mentioned in the above review as a likely factor on professional job control. Those in smaller organizations may have greater opportunities to exercise discretion in their work than those embedded in the hierarchies of larger bureaucracies. The measure used here is the number of people who are employed in the

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workplaces in which woman employees predominate (Livingstone, Pollock and Raykov, 2016). We can posit that women professionals still experience job control deficits in the general labour force.

Finally, visible minorities and especially recent immigrants are known to experience discrimination in terms of job opportunities and underemployment (Boateng and Adams, 2016; Galabuzi, 2006). We can posit that they also experience deficits in job control in relation to their qualifications. The measure here is whether the respondent consider they are a member of a visible minority.

For all of these possible factors (all expert employee/manager employment classes, time in the job, organizational size, gender and visible minority status), we conducted bivariate correlation and logistic regression analyses for job control with our sample of professional and other expert employees

Table B Logistic Regression of Significant Correlates with Job Autonomy

Predictor	SE	Wald's ²
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