

Transforming professional values in an automated public sector

International
Journal of Public
Sector
Management

Annika Andersson

School of Business, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

John Brauer

*School of Behavioural, Social and Legal Sciences, Örebro University,
Örebro, Sweden, and*

Ella Kolkowska and Jenny Lagsten

School of Business, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

Received 19 January 2026
Revised 23 April 2026
10 June 2026
Accepted 15 June 2026

Abstract

Purpose – Many public sector caseworkers experience the shift to digital administration as having changed their daily practices – especially in relation to their professional values. The purpose of this study is to find out in which ways these values have changed and how automation affect caseworkers’ possibilities of acting in accordance with their professional values.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on an interpretative case study-approach, we have conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with public caseworkers in Sweden: eight in social work and seven at a driving license department. Findings were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis and a framework of value positions for e-government.

Findings – We found that the following professional values were brought to the fore: equal treatment of clients and rule-adherence were emphasized, accountability of decisions was questioned in one organization, efficiency mainly increased and service-level was mainly improved. Other professional values affected by automation were that time for relational work increased and the discretion to make individual assessments decreased.

Originality/value – The study is original in how it addresses value positions by intersecting literature on e-government and sociology of professions. The study is also original by comparing caseworkers at different administrative levels, national and municipal.

Keywords Professionalism, Automation, Values, Digitalization, Public sector, Caseworkers

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Automation of the public sector is rapidly increasing worldwide based on dominant discourses of efficiency, equality and standardization (Bannister and Connolly, 2014). Automation can, in its simplest sense, be defined as “the execution by a machine agent (usually a computer) of a function that was previously carried out by a human” (Parasuraman and Riley, 1997, p. 231) and has been introduced in public administration based on ideals of “neoliberal efficiency, cost cutting, accuracy and industriousness” (Sleep, 2024, p. 849). Other values relate to how automation can improve service delivery for citizens (e.g. Reddick, 2005) and how technology can relocate accountability and decision-making to citizens (Petrakaki, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2010).

The upholding of public values is expected to be done by street-level bureaucrats, or case workers, and it is therefore important to investigate how the rapid increase of automation affects these “upholders,” especially taking into account how their judgements may differ in

© Annika Andersson, John Brauer, Ella Kolkowska and Jenny Lagsten. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Funding: Parts of this research were funded by Forte, The Swedish research council for Health, Working Life and Welfare.



International Journal of Public Sector
Management
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6666
p-ISSN: 0951-3558
DOI 10.1108/IJPSM-01-2026-0050

terms of professional values. Currently, little is known about these changes – not much about value transformation in general and even less so about values in relation to different occupational groups. Several reviews call for empirical investigation (e.g. [Zyzak et al., 2024](#); [Charles et al., 2022](#)) since value management in digital transformation “is a relatively unexplored topic” ([Zyzak et al., 2024](#), p. 845)

Looking at the limited evidence at hand, we find a few notable examples. [Aschhoff and Vogel \(2018\)](#) analyze which value tensions arise when public values are co-produced with citizens. Based on three German case studies, they identify three major public value tensions occurring in co-production: the inclusiveness-accountability-tension, the flexibility-accountability-tension and the productivity-diversity-tension. [Borrey and Getha-Taylor \(2019\)](#) use data from both state and local government levels in the United States to see how automation impacted the workforce regarding the trade-offs and ethical impacts. They find that professions occupied by female and non-white employees are more likely to be threatened by automation and argue that those making decisions about automation “should be aware of the demographics of those jobs and the potential implications of reductions in force on equity and diversity goals” (pp. 18–19). Swedish studies focusing Robotic Process Automation (RPA) in public sector organizations show how caseworkers often express professional values on effectiveness and legal correctness, but caseworkers also found RPA to threaten their professional autonomy and possibility to make individualized judgments ([Andersson et al., 2022](#); [Germundsson and Stranz, 2024](#); [Nauwerck and Cajander, 2019](#)). [Caron and Giauque \(2006\)](#) study challenges to civil servants’ professional identity that arise when new public management principles and tools were introduced in Canada and Switzerland. New professional values such as quality of customer service, flexibility, innovation and efficiency were insufficient “to allow civil servants to develop their own capacity for ethical deliberation” (p. 543). Finally, based on a survey distributed to Swedish municipalities and national agencies, [Sundberg \(2019\)](#) emphasizes a trade-off between different values when public administration is automated. These trade-offs relate to a set of value positions, proposed by [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#), including professionalism, efficiency, service and engagement – value positions that make our starting point for further investigation.

This article sets out to further investigate the trade-off between the value positions proposed by [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#) and studied by [Sundberg \(2019\)](#), from the perspective of professions and professionalism with special emphasis on differences in the experienced trade-offs between occupational groups. Our investigation is based on interviews with caseworkers at two different administrative levels – national and municipal. At the national level, we interviewed case workers at a driving permit licensing unit at the Swedish Transport Agency. At the municipal level, we interviewed social workers in social assistance administration. As shown above, previous research has found that many caseworkers experience the shift to digital administration to have changed their daily practices – especially in relation to their professional values. We want to know in which ways these values have changed and if the changes differ between different occupational groups. We thus pose the following research questions:

- RQ1. Which professional values are brought to the fore when automation is introduced in the public sector?
- RQ2. How does automation affect caseworkers’ possibilities of acting in accordance with their professional values?
- RQ3. Are there differences in which professional values are actualized, and the possibility to act in accordance with professional values, based on different occupational groups?

By focusing professional values in two different occupational groups, we contribute not only to research on value transformation when public sector is increasingly automated, but also to a

more nuanced view on how this value transformation is situated in specific organizational and professional contexts characterized by different values. This view challenges the technology-deterministic view often found in literature on e-government, where technological change is viewed as unidirectional. Another contribution is to connect e-government literature with the sociology of professions. This approach can provide a more nuanced picture of certain dilemmas within the public sector, such as the balance between flexibility and predictability or rule-following and discretion. A final contribution is to elaborate on [Rose et al.'s \(2015\)](#) value positions framework to also account for individuals' values since this framework was previously mainly used to study entire organizations.

Automation and value propositions

This article addresses value positions by intersecting literature on e-government and the sociology of professions. This intersection is motivated by tensions that are enhanced by the rapidly increasing use of digital tools in the public sector. These tensions concern repeated dilemmas within public authorities to balance flexibility and predictability, but also the expectation on (and of) occupational groups to be equipped with discretion (the power or right to decide or act according to one's own judgment), based on their professional status. As we will return to below, the literature on e-government has not sufficiently taken the issue of professionalism into account.

The literature on value propositions in e-government (e.g. [Rose et al., 2015](#)) equates *professionalism* with accountable and rule-based Weberian bureaucracy. When tapping into literature on sociology of professions, however, we need a richer vocabulary. [Evetts \(2013\)](#) shows that within organizations, there is a tension between organizational and occupational control. Organizational control is characterized by hierarchical authority, standardization and managerialism. Thus, it overlaps with the understanding of professionalism used by [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#) in the e-government literature. Occupational control, on the other hand, relates to collegial authority, professional ethics and discretion based on professional training. Additional characteristics of this understanding of *professionalism* include shared ethical standards upheld by professional associations and unions. Taken together, professional power is grounded in the societal expectations that professional groups act in accordance with their ethical standards and make well-informed decisions based on their specific knowledge ([Svensson and Evetts, 2010](#); [Brante, 2022](#)).

In previous literature on professionalism, there is a vivid discussion concerning which occupational groups could be considered professions (see, e.g. [Brante, 2022](#)). We acknowledge the relevance of discussing the traits of professions while also avoiding a binary conception of professions by taking a more ideal-typical approach, with inspiration from [Evetts' \(2013\)](#) distinction between managerial and occupational control. From this perspective, professionalism occurs in the conflict between organizations and occupational groups concerning the governing of work. The scope of professionalism is greater when an occupational group has discretion to make decisions based on its professional knowledge. At the other end, the scope of professionalism decreases when an occupational group is given less discretion.

The relevance of tapping into sociology of professions to the discussion of value propositions in an automated public sector concerns the need to consider how occupational control is affected by automation in the public sector and how this, in turn, affects service users. Many public organizations handle complex issues, administered by civil servants with specialized training, that concern citizens with complex needs that do not always follow the streamlined categories and regulations set up by authorities. Further, many public organizations need to moderate goal conflicts inherent in policies. For instance, caseworkers in social services are expected to both support and control long-term unemployed individuals, which creates tensions for individual officers as they must balance these two tasks in relation to individual clients (see, e.g. [Torsvik et al., 2022](#); [Lipsky, 2010](#)). From the perspective of

occupational control, the argument is that these types of services require discretion to overcome inherent goal conflicts. This argument raises the question of how automation affects public services, civil servants and clients. In our case, we focus on how automation affects caseworkers' possibilities of acting in accordance with their professional values.

Value positions framework

To investigate professional values in relation to automation, we use the value positions framework presented by [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#). There are many frameworks on how to capture public value creation in automation (see [Luna-Reyes and Zhang, 2023](#)). Our choice is motivated by the frequent use of the framework in similar settings (e.g. [Ranerup and Henriksen, 2019](#)). The framework consists of four value positions: *Professionalism*, *Efficiency*, *Service* and *Engagement* ([Rose et al., 2015](#)):

- (1) *Professionalism* is focused on providing independent, robust and consistent administration, governed by a rule system based on law. Automation should support accountability and standardized administrative procedures grounded in the values of equity, legality and accountability.
- (2) *Efficiency* concerns the provision of lean and efficient administration that minimizes waste of public resources gathered from taxpayers. Thus, automation is viewed as a productivity tool based on the values of efficiency, value for money and productivity.
- (3) *Service* involves maximizing the utility of government to society by providing services to citizens and businesses. Automation ought to improve availability, accessibility and usability of services based on the values of citizen-centricity, service level and quality.
- (4) *Engagement* involves engaging with civil society to facilitate policy development in accordance with liberal democratic principles, thus articulating the public good. Automation should support deliberation and networking based on the values of democracy, deliberation and participation.

The framework opens for potential value conflicts, or what [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#) refer to as congruence or divergence between different value positions. A typical conflict is between equal treatment of all and individual treatment based on needs. For instance, [Considine et al. \(2022\)](#) discuss “machine bureaucracies” in welfare and employment services, focusing on tensions between efficiency versus inclusiveness as well as between consistency versus personalization.

Whereas the framework was only used as a sensitizing device in this study, we, however, argue for the need for a bottom-up approach, investigating individual caseworkers' values related to professionalism. The framework is developed based on a managerial perspective and designed to study entire organizations and needs to be adapted to other stakeholder groups and include these stakeholders' *professional* values – values that “lie at the foundation of a profession and serve to shape individual roles and careers of its practitioners” ([Holland, 1989](#), p. 28).

Material and methods

This exploratory study aims to deepen the understanding of the value trade-offs caseworkers experience as their work becomes automated, and whether these trade-offs vary across occupational groups. Accordingly, an interpretive approach was adopted ([Walsham, 1995](#)). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews ([Ruslin et al., 2022](#)) and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun et al., 2023](#)). These methods enable an in-depth examination of how automation shapes perceived value tensions and influences caseworkers' ability to act in line with their professional values. Case and informant selection was guided by the aim of capturing diverse perspectives rather than achieving empirical saturation.

Case descriptions

The study was conducted in Sweden and investigates two cases of automation: (1) driving permit licensing at the national Swedish Transport Agency and (2) social assistance administration within municipal social services. The cases were chosen to allow us to explore the differences between two occupational groups. Both contexts concerned the use of RPA, an algorithm that automates tasks previously performed by humans. The department at the Transport Agency, employing Driving License Case Workers (DLCWs), is responsible for processing applications for learner's permits, issuing driving licenses, warnings and revocations of drivers' licenses, etc. They handle client contacts as well as investigations concerning more complex cases. The RPA [1] was implemented in the agency during 2010–2013. The social workers are employed by municipalities, i.e. the lowest governmental tier in Sweden. All social workers worked with the social assistance administration, i.e. processing basic income support. Most worked in middle-sized municipalities in Sweden and in all municipalities, RPA was introduced during 2019–2020.

The two occupational groups differ significantly in terms of occupational control. Swedish social workers have several of the traits associated with occupational control, including shared educational background through the seven-terms-long social worker program. The program is based on the scientific discipline of social work. In terms of unionization, Swedish social workers are either members of the Union for Professionals or Vision. Both associations represent different occupational groups; the former only represents academic occupations, while the latter also represents non-academic occupations. Swedish social workers also have profession-specific ethical guidelines provided by [the Union for Professionals \(2015\)](#). In comparison, DLCW is a less institutionalized occupational group. There is no systematic data on the educational background. According to an informant of the Transport Agency (personal communication, 09/09/2024), there are general requirements regarding academic education authority for most caseworker positions, including DLCWs. However, there are no formal requirements on the specific subjects or scientific disciplines to be covered by this education. Turning to unionization, DLCWs are mostly represented by two organizations: the Union of Civil Servants (which represents civil servants both with and without an academic degree), and the governmental branch of the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, which is an umbrella organization that gathers unions representing academic white-collar workers.

Another aspect that divides the two occupational groups is the ethical standards promoted by the unions and intended to guide their work. As acknowledged within sociology of professions ([Svensson and Evetts, 2010](#)), such guidelines are central traits of professional groups, manifesting a collective professional self-conception. [The Union for Professionals \(2015\)](#) highlights social workers' ethical responsibility in supporting their clients well-being based on respect for clients grounded in solidarity and human rights. In comparison, DLCWs lack designated ethical standards, but are covered by more state-centric guidelines promoted by [the Union of Civil Servants \(2022\)](#). They stress a more rule-of-law-oriented understanding, arguing that DLCWs and other civil servants are part of a legal and objective public administration that works on behalf of citizens.

Data collection

The choice of informants was guided by the aim of capturing diverse perspectives and deep understanding. We chose caseworkers who had experience working both before and after the RPA implementation and who could reflect on the effects of RPA. The DLCW interviews were conducted in relation to a project on accountability in public sector automation as well as changes in the caseworkers' work and professional values. The interview guide was guided by theories of public accountability (see, e.g. [Behn, 2000](#)) and focused on automated decision-making, how technology was used for case processing and making decisions on driver permits. The interviews with social workers were conducted in relation to a project on social work automation and the interview guide focused on how RPA affected caseworkers' possibilities of

acting in accordance with their professional values and was guided by the theoretical lens of the four value positions (Rose et al., 2015).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and all statements have been verified through concurrent document analysis in both projects. Table 1 summarizes the time and focus of the interviews in the two cases.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun et al. (2023). This approach is well suited for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The analysis began with familiarization through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. In the initial coding phase, we would draw an arrow from one statement in the transcripts writing down, e.g. “loss of agency and control”. Second, we categorized, or grouped, statements around values that were related to the automation of the informants’ work – e.g. “loss of agency” and “computer made decision” were categorized as the “RPA taking decisions on money to be paid or driving license revoked”. Coding was still primarily inductive here, aiming to capture the case workers’ own expressions and conceptualizations. In the next phase, these values were related to and framed into Rose et al.’s (2015) theoretical framework on value positions where applicable – e.g. “RPA taking decisions” were put in the box “efficiency” when related to “we are quicker now” and when it did not fit as in “loss of agency” we put them in a separate unlabeled box. We went through the text again, questioning and querying our assumptions and themes, and finally labelled the boxes that were not covered by the framework. To address concerns related to subjectivity and enhance reliability, the analysis was conducted collaboratively by the authors. Our coding schema with example quotes can be found in Appendix.

Once all statements were categorized into the initial framework or in new boxes, we started the final step, which involved synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative structured around the identified themes. By reading the individual case stories, similarities and difference between the cases were analyzed.

Caseworkers’ professional values in an automated public sector

The professional values brought to the fore with the introduction of an automated caseworker were: equity, legality, accountability, efficiency, service level, relational work and discretion. The latter two are not included in the framework proposed by Rose et al. (2015) but added by us. These seven professional values will be described from the view of both occupational groups below.

Equity

In the value positions framework, equity is described as “equality before the law” (Rose et al., 2015). Johnson and Svara (2015) describe how “[p]ublic administrators should prevent and reduce inequality, unfairness, and injustice based on significant social characteristics and to

Table 1. Time and focus of interviews in the two cases

Setting	Time of data collection	Number of interviews	Focus of the interviews
6 municipalities: social work units	2023–2024	8	Structured to four value positions: professionalism, efficiency, service and engagement
1 government authority: the Swedish Transport Agency	2016–2017	7	Open, and generally investigating changes in the caseworkers’ work and professional values
Source(s): Authors’ own work			

promote greater equality in access to services, procedural fairness, quality of services, and social outcomes” (Johnson and Svara, 2015, p. 282). At the Transport Agency, equity through standardization was the explicit motive to automate case processing at the agency:

[the lack of] equality of treatment . . . It was a bit of a problem that you wanted to get to the bottom with when we took over the operations from the County Administrative Board and introduced [name of RPA], because then there were 21 authorities and although they had some cooperation bodies, errands were still treated quite differently – “We do this in our office. And in our office, we do it like this.” (DLCW 3)

The quote illustrates that automation of case processing became important for standardization and enhancing rule-of-law. DLCWs emphasized that the automated caseworker pushed the human caseworkers to ensure equal treatment of service users: “We try to use the same rule-system irrespective of if it is an automatic or manual case processing” (DLCW 3).

Among the social workers, equity was also valued but not addressed as directly or frequently:

I would say that it [our most important task] is . . . what directly comes to mind is, what the RPA does . . . at our unit, the RPA prepares the case and handles it equally for everyone. The RPA takes care of all errands in the same manner (Social worker 7)

Legality

The introduction of an automated caseworker was mainly described in positive terms by all informants in relation to the professional value of “legality.” Automated case processing reduced manual errors, documents no longer disappeared and it became more difficult for unauthorized people to access the client’s documents and personal information. As described by a social worker:

I would say that it is more legally secure, and that . . . there are so many details in this work. It’s about so many things . . . you apply for a cost here, and we approve a certain part of it, and the RPA helps to keep track of the correct cost . . . that the accommodation cost is correctly calculated for everyone, so to speak. So, it is more legally secure this way. (Social worker 6)

When decision-making is made by the automated caseworker, the strict rule-following is even further reinforced, as described by a DLCW: The automated decision-making system follows how it is programmed. It only follows the given rules. (DLCW 4)

Whereas the caseworkers in both occupational groups consider the automated caseworker mostly helpful in getting things right, they cautioned for over-relying on it since both clients and the automated caseworker could get things wrong. However, the automated caseworker, both at the Transport Agency and at most social work units, had to provide a notice in their system if there were large deviations in the entered figures, and in most cases, the automated caseworker was only allowed to make positive decisions.

The rules that are implemented, they are just built on the law. If the applicant marks everything as “ok”, then it is ok. . . . We have actually just made a system based on the rules for the formal demands. The rest is made manually.

Interviewer: Why is that so?

I do not have a very good answer. That is true. There are some things. Hmm . . . there are some conditions and situations that could lead to a denial. That is why we [the human caseworkers] have to assess the application. In the beginning, it is more complicated, and we feared making a wrong negative decision, it is about trust. That sounds strange, but I agree. It is more complicated to give a negative decision than a positive one. (DLCW 1)

Since a positive decision was almost never appealed, there were no cases where the accountability of the RPA had been tested from such a perspective.

The automated caseworker takes positive decisions only. But we can dismiss an application if it is incomplete. There is information about how to appeal on those decisions as well [. . .] And in these cases a citizen can contact us [. . .]. And if you appeal such a decision, it ends up at customer service [. . .]. And we look through it and make an evaluation. To see if the automated caseworker has taken the right decision. And he usually has. But we still want to have the security that a human goes through it. (DLCW 5)

The excerpt illustrates that the legal systems created a structure for automated decision-making, but it could not lead to a formal decision when the response was negative. This illustrates that legality is formed around a positive decision-making process, and even when the Administrative Procedure Act (SFS, 2017:900) recently changed in Sweden to allow for computers to also take negative decisions, many social work units have not implemented this option due to an expressed doubt whether the RPA should make its own decisions regarding payments without control from administrators.

Accountability

All social worker interviewees believed that it was still the social worker who ought to be responsible for all decisions that the automated caseworker made and that it was the social workers' responsibility to read through the automated decisions. Thus, in terms of responsibility for decisions, the social workers considered it to be unchanged with RPA. At the Transport Agency, however, the introduction of automated caseworkers re-arranged the accountability with increased uncertainty of who was responsible for the decisions made. When discussing accountability and who or what was responsible for the decisions taken by the automated caseworker, many DLCWs were hesitant:

There is no signature on these (automatic) decisions. So, it is . . . [hesitates] the government as a whole who stands behind these decisions. I don't think any of the managers are assigned responsibility for these decisions. I don't really know. But I don't think so (DLCW 7).

Efficiency

Efficiency gains and increased productivity were stressed as important values at the Transport Agency, and in a few instances at social services. At the former, being "efficient" was described as highly valued. One of the core ideas of the management was to have a unified manner of working, with a high degree of automation for efficiency gains. This made the automated caseworker popular and DLCWs talked about "him" with a sense of admiration due to his speed:

A caseworker processes around 5–8 cases per day that you have time to finish. But it's like a conveyor belt, so it never stands still, so you're in and putting in a lot of cases too. So, there are perhaps 200–300 cases a day that are active. [Name of the automated case worker] stands for maybe 1/3 of the inflow of these cases. So, it is still, in terms of numbers, a couple of hundred thousand cases that [name of the automated case worker] completely handles. He is very quick! (DLCW 1)

The social workers similarly talk about the efficiency gains enabled by the RPA, but always in relation to other professional values, typically relational work:

For our part, it [introduction of RPA] was very much about streamlining the work. To free up resources and get rid of administrative tasks to instead be able to focus more on the meeting with the clients and put a greater focus on how we work to make the clients self-sufficient. [. . .] We had a researcher here who did some calculations based on statistics and such. And he stated that the application process was faster now. It was a difference of several days. (Social worker 7)

The social workers also mentioned that the case processing was not considered stimulating, but rather a kind of "appendage, a necessary evil for the client to survive until the next month, so to speak" (social worker). The social workers were also more critical, compared to DLCWs,

stating that the automated caseworker did not always live up to the promises announced by the management. Some caseworkers felt that the workload had become even higher after the introduction of RPA:

I feel that there is a greater expectation of us that we should [work more with] change work with the clients. They [management] thought . . . that this system will reduce our workload by some 30% . . . But maybe it has been reduced by some 10%, . . . but we've gotten 30% of other work tasks instead. (Social worker 2)

Service

Service concerns accessibility and usability of services online to foster values such as citizen-centricity, service level and quality. During the interviews, availability in terms of more channels for contact was one of the most frequently mentioned value by both occupational groups. For instance:

[It is] better for the client who can write 24/7 – phone, letter, my messages, many more inflow channels. For the client, I think it's better, because it's hard . . . I mean, calling in . . . I only have two hours. If many people call, then many, or at least some, will not be answered. So, it's good that they can write, because they can write at any time twenty-four-seven and they will get some kind of response from me. (Social worker 8)

At the Transport Agency, the DLCWs also valued the new opportunities for contact that the e-services and the automated caseworker have entailed, but they also discussed how information accessibility – especially regarding language – has decreased:

There is more service now but [there are] still many who call in . . . there has been quite a lot of work here with “language care” as it is called. To try to make it as easy to understand as possible, so that as many people as possible can understand the message. As simple as possible. Unfortunately, bureaucratic Swedish is difficult. [. . .] It is quite common for them to call in and ask “Why?” And “what do you mean?” I think the website is in English. But our e-services are only in Swedish. (DLCW 6)

Relational work

Relational work is a professional value that we did not capture through using [Rose et al.'s \(2015\)](#) framework, but it was mentioned by all social workers – often as a value overriding all other values. When the automated caseworker took over many time-consuming clerical tasks, the caseworkers gained time for relational work with their clients:

. . . because everything the robot does frees up time for me for meetings with the client. Yeah, that's kind of what my job is. I mean handing out monthly money . . . It's not really my job, I think, but it's like in the meeting with the client to help the client move towards self-sufficiency. That's what my job is . . . To be a bank clerk, no. (Social worker 4)

The personal meeting was what social workers considered to be the most important part of their profession. Thus, the social assistance administration – that was automated through RPA – was considered less significant. They believed that the tasks associated with their profession were much more important and time-consuming:

We have so much work to do besides this because the decision itself is just an approval that you have done what you have to do. But we must also motivate them to change their situation and that is what constitutes our work. That's what the work is, the actual decision on [financial] support is just the last piece. It's maybe 5%, the rest is a work on justification and checking that everything works, that you tune in and that you have updates and meetings and action forward and things like that . . . That's what our job is, to make sure that these things actually are met and [that the client] is entitled to financial assistance. (Social worker 3)

Another social worker expressed that some tasks would possibly change due to RPA, but that the basic values would remain. Focus on the client and the personal meeting was still, according to the managers, the most important task:

I am not worried about that, because I think that we have such work where we will always be needed. If it is the case that the management itself becomes more, even more computerized, then we will have to do other checks and other tasks. . . . because you can never remove the human factor from [individual-based work] . . . Otherwise it wouldn't be social work. (Social worker 3)

Whereas relational work was not mentioned explicitly by DLCWs, we find traces of this aspect in the adjacent category of discretion described next.

Discretion

Discretion is a professional value not captured by [Rose et al.'s \(2015\)](#) framework, but mentioned by all social workers and many DLCWs. Discretion can be described as “the freedom street-level bureaucrats have to make decisions concerning individuals regarding the sort, quality and quantity of sanctions, and rewards during policy implementation including the possibility of no sanction at all” ([Busch and Henriksen, 2018](#), p. 3; [Lipsky, 2010](#)). It concerns the power to decide or act according to one's own judgment; freedom of judgment or choice and is often discussed in terms of making individual assessments for service-users based on professional values. According to the interviewees, there is some human element missing when case processing is made by a computer—“humans are humans, robots are robots” (social worker 8). As described by a DLCW:

We try not to make any interpretations. But somehow there is always some personal judgments when it [a decision] ends up at a human being (DLCW 5).

Some respondents criticized how the individual manner of working would be affected; that the human perspective based on individual assessments could be neglected if RPA were to have greater influence on the case processing. One social worker considered that certain tasks could be automated, such as payments and the like, while the individual treatment and assessments could not:

Absolutely that you can automate certain things, but I think exactly this . . . Based on the legislation that we work with, it's like we must make individual assessments and that, yes, I think that you lose a little. Or it will be, it will be very difficult anyway. So yeah, I guess I'm a little skeptical about it that way. (Social worker 2).

Caseworkers in both organizations sometimes tried to override the automated caseworker regarding the professional value of discretion. One DLCW felt sorry for a young man who had his driver license withdrawn after driving too close to the car in front of him, which resulted in him having to re-take his driver license test. The man had just relocated and been offered a new job that required a driver license. He also told the DLCW that his dad had recently died. Based on the information, the DLCW used his/her discretion to speed up the process:

So here I was talking to an investigator, who just said . . . hello . . . we must fix this quickly. So, he can get a new driver license permit. He had to re-take the driver license. We cannot do anything about the laws. But we made sure he got a new driver license permit quickly to get a new driver license and keep his job. (DLCW 2)

Based on professional discretion, the caseworker minimized the time for decision. The discretion enabled this processing without the DLCW stepping outside the formal legal system. This example shows how the human caseworkers can add dimensions to the decision-making that the automated caseworker cannot take into consideration.

Discussion

Little is known about value transformation in public sector automation (Zyzak *et al.*, 2024) and more empirical accounts of this transformation have been called for (e.g. Charles *et al.*, 2022). We have heeded this call through our empirical investigations, interviewing caseworkers in the public sector. We found the following professional values to be affected when case processing was automated: equity, legality, accountability, efficiency, service, relational work and discretion. Since the discourses around the automation of the public sector mainly revolves around efficiency and standardization (e.g. Sleep, 2024), it is not surprising that both categories of caseworkers stressed values of equity and efficiency. The automated caseworker in both organizations seemed to push human caseworkers to ensure equal treatment of clients. Further, efficiency gains were reported in both cases. The professional value of legality had in both cases become easier to act upon due to the strict rule-following that comes with RPA, which aligns with previous research (e.g. Nauwerck and Cajander, 2019). Turning to accountability, and especially the responsibility for decisions, we found some discrepancies between the two cases. The value of accountability was not challenged or reinforced by the introduction of RPA for the social workers, while it was made unclear for DLCWs. This difference is in part explained by how automation of the public sector often re-arranges accountability (Smith *et al.*, 2010), but it does not explain why this did not happen within the investigated social services. Delivering good service is also a value that was addressed in both cases. We found that relational work was seen as a very important value by social workers – often as a value overriding all other values. This is not surprising given the importance of human relationships stated in professional guidelines for social workers (e.g. the Union for Professionals, 2015). According to the interviewed social workers, relational work was to be enabled by the efficiency gains made possible by the automation of more administrative and repetitive tasks. Limitations in how automation affects caseworkers' possibilities of acting in accordance with their professional values are made most visible through the value of discretion. Like the findings by Germundsson and Stranz (2024) and Andersson *et al.* (2022), the interviewed caseworkers in this article experienced that automation of their work limited their discretion, i.e. their room for autonomy. This included room for making value-based judgments. Prior to this, seemingly simple decisions were problematized both by social workers and DLCWs based on values such as the consequences for single clients. Both examples show that, in practice, public administration is more complex than simply implementing standardized procedures. Rather, public officials use their discretion, including liberation over value conflicts, to overcome – what they consider to be – too rigid interpretation of policies.

We also made a point of how little is known about value transformation in relation to different occupational groups. Whereas similar professional-related dilemmas, investigated by us, have been discussed by, e.g. Caron and Giauque (2006) and Andersson *et al.* (2022), we contribute by grounding our analysis in sociology of professions (Svensson and Evetts, 2010) to discuss how different occupational groups within the “guild” of caseworkers experience these changes. We found that the scope of professionalism decreased when the occupational groups were given less discretion. Additionally, based on the ethical guidelines provided by the unions, we expected social workers to experience goal conflicts relating to the dilemma between control and support (Torsvik *et al.*, 2022), given that the organizational control (Evetts, 2013) increases. However, the social workers expressed enthusiasm about automation, expecting it to decrease their administrative workload, thereby saving them time to do “actual social work.” This surprised us based on our assumption that social workers would find the introduction of RPA more problematic, compared to DLCWs, given the emphasis on individualized services in social workers' professional ethical guidelines, as well as in the policy that guides their services. The explanation to this contrary finding is illustrated in the quote where the case processing of unproblematic social assistance applications was not considered “actual social work” by the social workers. Thus, reducing the degree of discretion *in that part of their work* was not considered problematic among the social workers. Rather the opposite, as described. The lesson to be learned here is the need to

consider what tasks are automated. The social assistance RPA only processed approvals, which meant that social workers needed to process rejections, which in turn meant that many goal conflicts were not automated but remained subject to human decision-making. In comparison, DLCWs expressed the need to correct the RPA when it made assessments considered too strict by the caseworkers. These situations seemed to occur because the RPA couldn't comprehend complex assessments. This illustrates that the type of goal conflicts discussed by [Considine et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Rose et al. \(2015\)](#) also occur in seemingly less conflicting policy areas such as driving license permits. Furthermore, seemingly more conflicting policy areas, such as social assistance assessments, can be automated in a way that retains much of the discretion for value-based assessments undertaken by caseworkers. With regard to practice, public sector organizations need to include caseworkers in the development, or procurement-process, to capture the actual users' requirements on the system, thereby safeguarding professional control and values. Like [Norling \(2025\)](#) we strongly recommend that policymakers and public sector managers, incorporate a "cultural awareness" of professional groups "to foster a more conducive environment for digital transformation within bureaucratic settings" ([Norling, 2025](#), p. 91).

Limitations and avenues for further development

As with all case study research, the obvious limitation of this study is that it lacks breadth. In a case study, the researcher typically researches one organization or one phenomenon. In our case, we examined two organizations, but the number of informants was limited to the available participants who had experiences also before the automation. Other major limitations are that the two cases are from one country (Sweden) and were researched with some years apart. This limits the potential for generalizing our findings. However, case studies may reveal important information about the object under study through the rich details they provide and allow for generalization, not to other cases, but rather to theoretical constructs. An avenue for further research in this sense relates to our use of Rose et al.'s value positions framework ([2015](#)). We argued that a shortcoming of this framework is the top-down approach and its limited use to explain value transformations below the managerial level. By analyzing professional values at the individual caseworker level, we extend the framework to incorporate individual perspectives. Furthermore, we see the need for similar investigations in other contexts, both in terms of countries and sectors, to further expand the understanding of how professionalism taps into questions concerning automatization. Given the rapid growth of more complex algorithms, not least Large Language Models such as ChatGPT, we expect this need to become more pressing when algorithms replace humans in more complex tasks, as the influence of human bureaucrats decreases in favor of black-box algorithms.

Conclusions

This article started out by arguing that too little is known about value transformation when the public sector is automated and that more empirical accounts of this transformation are needed. Based on our empirical investigations and drawing on a framework on value positions for e-government we found several professional values brought to the fore: equal treatment of clients increased; legality was reinforced; accountability of decisions was unchanged in social services but changed at the Transport Agency; efficiency mainly increased; and service-level was mainly increased through the use of more channels. Other professional values that were directly affected by the ongoing automation were: time for relational work increased and the opportunity to make individual assessments (discretion) decreased.

We compared whether there were differences in the professional values that are actualized based on two occupational groups. There were more similarities than

differences – a caseworker is a caseworker in many regards. The main implication for public management practice is to include caseworkers in the development, including the procurement process, when their tasks are automated, specifically bearing professional values in mind. The main implications for public management theory are to develop methods and theories on how caseworkers' values can be integrated with technology and to further adapt [Rose et al.'s \(2015\)](#) framework to better fit the individual level.

Appendix

Table A1. Analytical codes

Codes from Rose et al.'s public value framework (2015)	Excerpts of caseworkers' description on automation and professional values
<i>Equity</i>	Interviewer: What is the major benefit with the RPA? Caseworker: I would say that it is ... what directly comes to mind is, what the RPA does ... at our unit, the RPA prepares the case and handles it equally for everyone. The RPA takes care of all errands in the same manner [...]
<i>Legality</i>	Interviewer: What is the major benefit with the RPA? Caseworker: I would say that it is more legally secure, and that ... there are so many details in this work. It's about so many things ... you apply for a cost here, and we approve a certain part of it, and the RPA helps to keep track of the correct cost [...] So, it is more legally secure this way
<i>Accountability</i>	Interviewer: Who is responsible for the decision made by [name of RPA]? Caseworker: There is no signature on these [automatic] decisions. So, it is ... (hesitates) the government as a whole who stands behind these decisions. I don't think any of the bosses are assigned responsibility for these decisions. I don't really know. But I don't think so
<i>Efficiency</i>	Interviewer: What is the major benefit with the RPA? Caseworker: A case manager handles around 5–8 cases per day that you have time to finish. [...] So, there are perhaps 200–300 cases a day that are active. [name of the automatic case worker] stands for maybe 1/3 of the inflow of these cases. So, it is still, in terms of numbers, a couple of hundred thousand cases that that [name of the automatic case handler] completely handles. He is very quick!
<i>Service</i>	Interviewer: Are there other benefits with the RPA? Caseworker: better for the client who can write 24/7 – phone, letter, my messages, many more inflow channels. [...] So, it's good that they can write, because they can write anytime twenty-four-seven and they will get some kind of response from me
<i>Codes inductively generated in transcript analysis</i>	
Relational work	Interviewer: What is the major benefit with RPA? Caseworker: But my hope, well my hope is that it will give me a little more space to maybe do those little extra things for the clients. Or like this – take that little extra meeting to check the situation or something like that. So, after all, we want to be there for, for the clients, sort of move them forward
Discretion	Interviewer: What is the major drawback with RPA? Caseworker: Absolutely that you can automate certain things, but I think exactly this ... Based on the legislation that we work with, it's like we have to make individual assessments and that, yes, I think that you lose a little. Or it will be, it will be very difficult anyway

Note

1. At the transportation agency, people rarely referred to their automatic caseworker as “RPA” but usually called it by its nickname, the “automated case worker” or the “Automated Decision Maker”. (Authors)

- Andersson, C., Hallin, A. and Ivory, C. (2022), "Unpacking the digitalisation of public services: configuring work during automation in local government", *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 39 No. 1, 101662, doi: [10.1016/j.giq.2021.101662](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2021.101662).
- Aschhoff, N. and Vogel, R. (2018), "Value conflicts in co-production: governing public values in multi-actor settings", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 31 No. 7, pp. 775-793, doi: [10.1108/ijpsm-08-2017-0222](https://doi.org/10.1108/ijpsm-08-2017-0222).
- Bannister, F. and Connolly, R. (2014), "ICT, public values and transformative government: a framework and programme for research", *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 119-128, doi: [10.1016/j.giq.2013.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2013.06.002).
- Behn, R.D. (2000), *Rethinking Democratic Accountability*, Brookings Institute, Washington.
- Borry, E.L. and Getha-Taylor, H. (2019), "Automation in the public sector: efficiency at the expense of equity?", *Public Integrity*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 6-21, doi: [10.1080/10999922.2018.1455488](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2018.1455488).
- Brante, T. (2022), *Professions, Science and the State: How Science and Practice Are United in the Contemporary Knowledge Society*, Studentlitteratur, Lund.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Davey, L. and Jenkinson, E. (2023), "Doing reflexive thematic analysis", in *Supporting Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Research*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 19-38.
- Busch, P.A. and Henriksen, H.Z. (2018), "Digital discretion: a systematic literature review of ICT and street-level discretion", *Information Polity*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 3-28, doi: [10.3233/ip-170050](https://doi.org/10.3233/ip-170050).
- Caron, D.J. and Giauque, D. (2006), "Civil servant identity at the crossroads: new challenges for public administrations", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 19 No. 6, pp. 543-555, doi: [10.1108/09513550610685989](https://doi.org/10.1108/09513550610685989).
- Charles, V., Rana, N.P. and Carter, L. (2022), "Artificial Intelligence for data-driven decision-making and governance in public affairs", *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 39 No. 4, 101742, doi: [10.1016/j.giq.2022.101742](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2022.101742).
- Considine, M., McGann, M., Ball, S. and Nguyen, P. (2022), "Can robots understand welfare? Exploring machine bureaucracies in welfare-to-work", *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 51 No. 3, pp. 519-534, doi: [10.1017/s0047279422000174](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0047279422000174).
- Evetts, J. (2013), "Professionalism: value and ideology", *Current Sociology Review*, Vol. 61 Nos 5-6, pp. 778-796, doi: [10.1177/0011392113479316](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113479316).
- Germundsson, N. and Stranz, H. (2024), "Automating social assistance: exploring the use of robotic process automation in the Swedish personal social services", *International Journal of Social Welfare*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 647-658, doi: [10.1111/ijsw.12633](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12633).
- Holland, T.P. (1989), "Values, faith and professional practice", *Social Thought*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 28-40, doi: [10.1080/15426432.1989.10383650](https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.1989.10383650).
- Johnson, N.J. and Svara, J.H. (2015), *Justice for All: Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration*, Routledge, New York.
- Lipsky, M. (2010), *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Luna-Reyes, L.F. and Zhang, J. (2023), "Guest editorial: public value creation through information technologies in government", *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 173-176, doi: [10.1108/tg-03-2023-319](https://doi.org/10.1108/tg-03-2023-319).
- Nauwerck, G. and Cajander, A. (2019), "Automatic for the people: implementing robotic process automation in social work", *Proceedings of the 17th European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work-Demos and Posters*, Salzburg, 8-12 June 2019, European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies (EUSSET).
- Norling, K. (2025), "Digital transformation or digital standstill? Status quo bias in Swedish public sector strategies", *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 91-107, doi: [10.1108/tg-04-2024-0078](https://doi.org/10.1108/tg-04-2024-0078).

- Parasuraman, R. and Riley, V. (1997), "Humans and automation: use, misuse, disuse, abuse", *Human Factors*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 230-253, doi: [10.1518/001872097778543886](https://doi.org/10.1518/001872097778543886).
- Petrakaki, D. (2018), "Re-locating accountability through technology: from bureaucratic to electronic ways of governing public sector work", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 31-34, doi: [10.1108/ijpsm-02-2017-0043](https://doi.org/10.1108/ijpsm-02-2017-0043).
- Ranerup, A. and Henriksen, H.Z. (2019), "Value positions viewed through the lens of automated decision-making: the case of social services", *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 36 No. 4, 101377, doi: [10.1016/j.giq.2019.05.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.05.004).
- Reddick, C.G. (2005), "Citizen interaction with e-government: from the streets to servers?", *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 38-57, doi: [10.1016/j.giq.2004.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2004.10.003).
- Rose, J., Persson, J.S., Heeager, L.T. and Irani, Z. (2015), "Managing e-Government: value positions and relationships", *Information Systems Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 531-571, doi: [10.1111/isj.12052](https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12052).
- Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M.S.A., Alhabsyi, F. and Syam, H. (2022), "Semi-structured Interview: a methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies", *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 22-29.
- SFS 2017:900 *The Administrative Procedure Act (Förvaltningslagen)*, Government Offices of Sweden, Stockholm.
- Sleep, L. (2024), "'This is NOT human services': counter-mapping automated decision-making in social services in Australia", *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 60 No. 3, pp. 618-642, doi: [10.1177/14407833241266022](https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833241266022).
- Smith, M.L., Noorman, M.E. and Martin, A.K. (2010), "Automating the public sector and organizing accountabilities", *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 1-16, doi: [10.17705/1cais.02601](https://doi.org/10.17705/1cais.02601).
- Sundberg, L. (2019), "Value positions and relationships in the Swedish digital government", *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 9 No. 1, p. 24, doi: [10.3390/admsci9010024](https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci9010024).
- Svensson, L.G. and Evetts, J. (2010), *Sociology of Professions: Continental and Anglo-Saxon Traditions*, Daidalos, Göteborg.
- The Union for Professionals (2015), "Ethics in Social Work. A code of conduct and ethical behaviour for social workers", *Akademikerförbundet SSR*.
- The Union of Civil Servants (2022), "Vad är den statliga värdegrunden?", available at: <https://www.st.org/rad-och-stod/jobba-statligt/statligt-anstalld/den-statliga-vardegrunden> (accessed 19 September 2024).
- Torsvik, G., Molander, A. and Terum, L.I. (2022), "The will to sanction: how sensitive are caseworkers to recipients' responsibility when imposing sanctions on non-compliance in a welfare-to-work programme?", *International Journal of Social Welfare*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 77-85, doi: [10.1111/ijsw.12472](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12472).
- Walsham, G. (1995), "Interpretive case studies in IS research: nature and method", *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 74-81, doi: [10.1057/ejis.1995.9](https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.1995.9).
- Zyzak, B., Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, K. and Jensen, M.R. (2024), "Public value management in digital transformation: a scoping review", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 37 No. 7, pp. 845-863, doi: [10.1108/ijpsm-02-2024-0055](https://doi.org/10.1108/ijpsm-02-2024-0055).

Corresponding author

Annika Andersson can be contacted at: annika.andersson@oru.se