Trust me, I'm a professional: 
trust, credentialism and the new professions

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Given the intangibility of the services offered by professionals, trust has to occupy a central place within the provider/client relationship. One mechanism that has traditionally facilitated this process is that of credentialism – a key tool in the attainment of social closure. This paper explores the differing methods by which trust is established in new, knowledge-based professions through a comparison of two different aspirant groups: personnel/HR practitioners and organisation consultants. It indicates that where aspirant professions such as personnel/HR are concerned, whilst the process of credentialism is important regarding the assertion of professional status, the ability of these groups to use it to attain the status traditionally associated with social closure is limited.

This occupational group seeking a heightened professional status will be contrasted with that of the organisation consultant – possibly an archetype of the new form of expert labour – and the markedly different processes used here to engender client trust. These appear to be less reliant upon credentialism and more concerned with alternative intangibles concerning the client’s belief in the consultant(s). This is largely determined by a combination of factors: their clientele, their track record with these organisations and their reputation concerning their ability to deliver their services, the knowledge possessed by the consultant – what they do, their culture and their sensitivities here. Such contrasts call into question not only the nature of trust at the heart of professional relationships but the ways in which client/provider relationships are being reconfigured and conceptualised within the professionalism literature – leading us to ask whether new models are now needed which reflect this occupational dynamism and the shifting role played by credentialised trust.