As described elsewhere, the Human Resources profession in Ontario has entered the last stage in the professionalization process. It is important at this point to articulate a vision of what the Human Resources profession will look like when it will reach the end of this last stage. Hopefully, this vision will be a compelling one.

Many are surprised to hear that, even when successful, it take decades for the process of professionalization to run its course—eighty years or more is not uncommon—and indeed, the Human Resources profession has been at it for quite some time. As far back as the late ‘50s, one will find articles and editorials indicating that Human Resources professionals had made professionalization an objective.

The word *professionalism* is used in two different ways. To most, the term *professionalism* refers to attitudes, values, and behaviours of individuals who are members of professions. Sociologists, however, think of *professionalism* as a characteristic of the occupation. It is in this sense that the word is used here.

One can describe four spheres of professionalism as it applies to the professions—institions, public perceptions, the perceptions and attitudes of employers and clients, and the attitudes, values, and behaviours of members of the profession.
Institutions

Professions are supported by key institutions—and two key institutions are the profession’s regulatory body and its educational programs. One characteristic that true professions have in common and that distinguishes them from other occupations is that they all have regulatory bodies which mission and mandate is to promote and protect the public interest. It takes time for professional regulatory bodies to establish themselves. Although professional regulatory bodies are core to identity of a profession, the profession is bigger than its professional regulatory body. The other important institution are the various academic institutions which train professionals. This goes beyond offering courses. Academic institutions are the primary socializing agent for the professions—they shape identity as professionals. The Human Resources profession’s institutions are not quite there yet. Its professional regulatory body is just beginning to establish itself, and academic programs have not quite taken hold of their role in the socialization of Human Resources professionals.

Public perception

There is one important aspect to professionalization—the status of profession is something that is granted by society, it is not something that an occupation can grant itself. Occupations can claim to be professions but it doesn’t mean that society will necessarily recognize the occupation as a true profession. It is important that the public-at-large think of Human Resources as a true profession. Again, the Human Resources profession is not quite there yet. It will become important for Human Resources professionals to better understand, and then leverage, the drivers of public perception.

The perceptions and attitudes of employers and clients

In many settings, Human Resources professionals are respected for what they bring to the table, but not everywhere. There is still work to be done here.

The attitudes, values, and behaviours of members of the profession

Although mentioned last, this is where it all starts. Of course, this is definitely the trickiest aspect. There are some aspects of professionhood that are still challenging to many Human Resources professionals.
professionals. For instance, the idea that one is accountable to one’s peers, or that compliance with rules established by one regulatory body is important even if one doesn’t agree with the rules. Our compliance rates show that we are not quite there yet.

A few key points

We can see that, in each of the spheres, much progress has been made, but also that some work remains to be done.

As the profession enters Stage 5 of the professionalization process, what it will look like when we get there becomes a clearer and, hopefully, a more compelling vision of what could be. Becoming a true profession is no longer a dream but a tangible target.

Although the profession is getting closer to the finish line, there is still plenty of work to be done and it will not happen overnight. Changing perceptions is not easy and it takes time. Also, the required change is systemic--it is beyond any single institution or organization to make happen. It is not a matter of authority, it is a matter of leadership and influence. As argued before, at this stage of the professionalization process, the professional regulatory body must take on a leadership role in moving matters forward. But it is not only the professional regulatory body that can drive this change, other champions of professionalization must be enlisted.