Global Risks and Confronting Insecurity and Vulnerability+

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We are 'in for a rough ride'. The 2025 annual Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF) "reveals an increasingly fractured global landscape, where escalating geopolitical, environmental, societal and technological challenges threaten stability and progress" (WEF, 2025b). People, organisations and governments face a combination of inter-related challenges, global risks and existential threats (WEF, 2025b & c). Most of them are ill-prepared to cope, especially if a combination of incidents occurs simultaneously, and many of them are also feeling increasingly insecure and vulnerable (Coulson-Thomas, 2025).

Global events and emerging trends suggest fundamental shifts may be ushering in a new era of instability. It is causing many people to question past assumptions. Some of them are anxious, uneasy and unsettled. They are unsure of how to respond. What might an unprecedented range of challenges, risks and threats mean for productivity and other management services professionals and their clients? How should they, other practitioners, professional associations, and those whom they advise and support, prepare and respond?

Environmental and Contextual Risks

According to the WEF the outlook for environmental risks over the next decade is alarming, with the top four global risks in terms of severity of impact all being environmental (WEF, 2025b). Global warming continues, and in response we are collectively not doing enough. 2024 has been confirmed by international scientific agencies as the warmest year on record (Bardan, 2025; Copernicus, 2025: WMO, 2025). It was also the first year with an average temperature clearly exceeding 1.5°C, the pre-industrial level (Copernicus, 2025). This is the threshold set by the Paris Agreement to reduce the risks and impacts of climate change, and from which President Trump announced the withdrawal of the US on his inauguration day.

Levels of carbon dioxide (CO_2) in the atmosphere have continued to rise at a rate incompatible with Paris Agreement targets (Betts et al, 2025; MET, 2025). Biodiversity loss and habitat degradation continues, and tipping points approach after which changes and trends become irreversible (WWF, 2024). The Arctic tundra has recently been emitting more carbon than it stores (NOAA, 2024). A first ice free day in the Arctic Ocean could occur before the end of the decade, with the loss of reflective sea ice greatly speeding up global warming (Heuzé and Jahn, 2024). The consequences of rising temperatures for humans range from higher excess deaths and sea levels to more frequent and severe extreme weather events.

For many, including governments, common and shared challenges can constitute existential threats. Boundaries, differing opinions and perspectives, and longstanding allegiances complicate or prevent collaboration and collective responses. Uncertainty abounds. The number of factors to be considered by decision makers has greatly expanded. The provision of advice and guidance have become more problematic. The further one tries to look ahead, the cloudier the picture becomes. Inter-relationships between issues complicate their individual discussion. Simultaneously addressing groups of them together is challenging.

Recognising Obstacles and Unintended Consequences

Persisting silo-based corporate structures can hinder cross-functional, multi-silo and/or inter-organisational collaboration and required collective risk responses. Boards and CEOs often do not know to whom to turn for more holistic advice, or who might be sensitive to possible unintended consequences of future actions and decisions. They find it difficult to assess how these might complement or interfere with steps taken to address other issues. Implications and consequences of actions and responses are often more difficult to predict. Action to tackle one problem may worsen the potential impacts of others or undermine preparations for them.

Steps taken by some can cause others to relax and continue activities that generate negative externalities and exacerbate their undesirable environmental impacts. Innovations often initially benefit their proponents, producers, owners and elite early adopters. People rushing to use AI applications and tools, including to understand how they may be impacted by increasing greenhouse gas emissions, can spike energy demands. The generation of additional electricity required can boost emissions and make matters worse. It consumes finite natural capital required by future generations, ramps up power demand and prolongs fossil fuel use. AI can also be used to both protect against cyber-attacks and undertake them (WEF, 2025a).

High tech innovations sometimes benefit a few and impose further burdens upon the excluded and marginalised. As cyberspace becomes more complex, cyber inequity and the gap between those able and unable to properly prepare and defend themselves against cyber-attacks increases (WEF, 2025a). Proposals for new initiatives or investments often stress internal and short-term benefits for those considering them, while underplaying or ignoring adverse and longer-term consequences for others which should be mitigated. Measures to protect one vulnerable group might represent a threat to others. Problems are sometimes moved rather than solved, or deprioritised if several adverse events happen at the same time.

Emerging and Complicating Realities

Donald Trump's re-election as US president, geopolitical tensions, global economic challenges, climate change, trade wars, AI advancements, cybersecurity, and organisational culture have all been identified as 'big issues' for corporate boards during the current year (IOD, 2025). Aspects of a new era are becoming clearer as events unfold, including rivalry for scarce resources. Significant environmental damage can be caused by the search for critical and rare minerals required by electronic devices, electric vehicles and solar panels (Beiser, 2024). Rainforests are being destroyed, rivers polluted, and children exploited.

Competition for life essentials like potable water could lead to further conflicts. More situations may be seen as zero-sum games, encouraging competition for available supplies or talent, rather than collaboration to develop alternatives or discover new deposits. Realpolitik, self-sufficiency and national interest appear to be on the rise. Concern for the common good and ethical and/or moral responses seem on the decline. There is push back against appeals to suggested shared interests. Individuals do what they think is best for themselves and their families. They may support flawed demagogues if they feel this might benefit them.

In many jurisdictions, people find their living standards have either been stagnant or have not increased as fast as previously hoped for. They may sense that while elites have benefitted, they have not. Past allegiances are changing, and old loyalties are breaking down. Many feel forgotten, left behind, powerless and abandoned by those whom they no longer trust. They look for scapegoats to blame and 'enemies within'. Preoccupation with the precarious nature

of their own situations, leaves little time to consider wider concerns. Most entities and institutions and many communities face certain common challenges. Across several different categories of existential threat collective resilience is falling as vulnerability increases.

Growing Geopolitical Challenges

A fundamental geopolitical realignment may be occurring that will have political and strategic consequences for many people and organisations (Black, 2024). Revisionist powers threaten and challenge an existing world order (Sanger, 2024; Sciutto, 2024). They represent a growing and potential existential threat to both democracy and capitalism (Black, 2024; Coulson-Thomas, 2025). Views differ on whether they can cope and survive (Wolf, 2023; Mayer, 2024). Greater geopolitical instability and rising tensions may now be influencing both strategic decisions and the operating policies of most organisations (WEF, 2025b).

Although acting to address existential threats is often more cost effective than delaying or not responding, many governments are distracted and focused on immediate national needs. Western democracies face a sustained assault from certain authoritarian and autocratic regimes that collaborate to undermine them. The global expansion of supply chains has made them more vulnerable to cyber-attacks, and for many large companies supply chain challenges are their biggest obstacle to achieving cyber resilience (WEF, 2025a). Regular, prolonged and intense cyber-attacks have been joined by acts of sabotage and arson. These are denied, although increasingly blatant. Continuity and stability cannot be assumed.

Vulnerability of the Media

Misrepresentation, misinformation, disinformation, fake news and deepfakes can undermine trust (WEF, 2025b & c). They can be used by dictators and authoritarian rulers to discredit and undermine other more open regimes, while they use surveillance technologies to maintain order at home. Advertising is switching from traditional media to social networks and on-line sources. Business models and algorithms encourage extreme and polarising views that increase online visits. A shift of advertising to social media is resulting in the layoff of fact-checking investigative journalists and forcing local and marginal print titles to close.

Traditional or 'old' media may also be or become the subject of cyber-attacks. Their survival can require financial support. This might only be possible from a source that would impose a different editorial perspective. As pressures upon them increase, more voters and politicians may perceive advantages in authoritarian models, particularly in terms of ensuring their own retention of power. Professionals should be alert to signs of leaning towards autocracy. More elections may be rigged, and further media could become subject to state or foreign control. Freedom to innovate and enterprise may become subject to 'guidance' or controls.

Implications of Polarisation

More communities and societies appear to be fragmenting into factions that may each have an increasingly distinctive view of reality. Almost two-thirds (64%) of WEF GRPS respondents believe that "we will face a multipolar or fragmented order, in which middle and great powers contest, set and enforce regional rules and norms" (WEF, 2025b). More areas of professional advice may need to vary by jurisdiction. Previous differences of emphasis are becoming fundamental divides. A shared reality which is a precondition of a healthy

democracy that tolerates diversity and a spectrum of views and which respects contending positions on issues, may fade or no longer exist in some countries.

Autocrats can consolidate their positions by repeating core messages so frequently that false claims become credible. Partisan media can re-enforce them. Self-constraint might be 'advised' or required. There are many disappointed people who have fallen behind. They may feel insecure and vulnerable, and no longer trust experts, the views of scientists and/or those in charge. They may associate democracy with inequality and unequal rewards, as others take advantage. Power bases can be created by appealing to those who are alienated and unhappy with traditional political leaders and parties. They may be isolated, lonely and disillusioned.

A demagogue might be able to persuade people who feel marginalised and left behind that they are the ignored victims of an elite. Offering to fight for their interests and against those taking advantage of them can appeal to people who feel their support has been assumed. A 'strongman' may pledge to protect them and provide them with a purpose and a movement to join. Demagogues can also make deals with elites and certain interests, offer them spoils to retain their allegiance, and even use their money to buy up and secure control of the media. Those who entrench the positions of demagogues can end up being dependent upon them.

Increasing Requirement for Self-Reliance

Multiple risks and a variety of existential threats loom at a time when many countries are already struggling to cope and have limited bandwidth to prepare for them. Confronting cyber and other threats requires resilient processes, systems and supporting infrastructures. Defences may crumble if certain institutions are compromised. New actors have emerged, including international criminal gangs. They operate as agile and flexible networks that can move much more quickly than those they pray upon, or who are attempting to confront them. While public bodies prepare cases for support to present at the next national spending round, if they see an opportunity to exploit or penetrate, criminals go for it.

As faith in multilateralism declines, the UN Security Council continues to be divided, and military buildups occur, more countries may be inclined to undertake unilateral action, increasing the risk of instability, armed conflict, tighter controls on citizens and greater internal surveillance (WEF, 2025b & c). The assault on liberal democracy and capitalism and advance of authoritarianism may continue. Removal of alternative sources of information, power and influence and democratic checks and balances can lead to corruption, illiberalism and insecurity. UN members exercising their veto wielding powers, and a perceived decline in the ability of states to provide protection, is causing some citizens, communities and companies to arrange their own security, education, healthcare and/or other services.

As public borrowings increase and resistance to further taxation and other revenue raising grows, many public bodies lack the funds to meet the requirements of citizens for services and support. Expectations may be dashed and promises broken, while lifestyles become unsustainable. Collaboration with businesses can enable public bodies to supplement their resources and fill gaps in their capabilities. They may also benefit from the greater ability and freedom of companies to innovate, and easier access they might have to needed resources and certain forms of additional finance. The possibilities created can be ignored or considered.

Recognising Overall Vulnerability

Safety, well-being and security in an era of greater risk, uncertainty and unpredictability is becoming a higher profile and pressing challenge. Many leaders at various levels have lost control. State-based armed conflict is ranked as the number one current risk by 23% of WEF survey respondents, followed by extreme weather events on 14% (WEF, 2025b & c). More companies and countries may seek greater autonomy, energy independence and self-sufficiency, strengthen their domestic industrial bases, diversify supply chains, reduce dependencies and build up supplies of critical resources such as rare earth minerals.

Most governments, public bodies and infrastructures would be unable to cope with the simultaneous occurrence of a combination of events associated with existential threats. Citizens would initially, and perhaps for much longer, be left to their own devices. As order declines, they could either cooperate or go on the rampage. Greater migratory flows caused by conflicts and climate change increase the challenge of securing borders. Private security resources may have to supplement those of states. As it becomes easier for criminal and other unwanted activities to cross national borders and other physical barriers, technological solutions might need to supplement the use of people to ensure law, order and security.

The number of points of organisational vulnerability would increase exponentially if more risks crystalise, global temperatures increase, and other existential threats intensify. Entities might need to explore a wider range of scenarios, contingencies and crawl-out or start-up costs. Alternatives and back-ups may be required. Arrangements may have to be made with other enterprises, public bodies and local authorities to maintain, safeguard and ensure the security and continued operation of local and wider infrastructures and services.

Potential Coping Strategies

The extent to which global risks can or could be tackled by research and development, national and local regulations, development assistance, financial instruments, corporate strategies and multi-stakeholder engagement may vary (WEF, 2025b). Those considered by WEF GRPS responses to be most susceptible to corporate action are talent and/or labour shortages, supply chain disruptions, lack of economic opportunity or unemployment, asset bubble bursts, economic downturn, recession or stagnation, inflation, inequality of wealth or income, pollution, critical infrastructure disruptions, and public, corporate and household debt (WEF, 2025c). Professional advice and counsel in these areas might be required.

Many individual companies and some governments turn to external contractors and partners to supplement their capabilities, mitigate risks and increase their security, resilience and ability to cope. Complementary capabilities are sought that are adaptable, flexible and can be quickly scaled up and down as situations and circumstances change. Such assistance is not limitless. When simultaneously required by multiple clients, it may increase in price or be lost to another and the highest bidder. Laggards who are not already considering the challenges and opportunities of the new era that is emerging may 'miss the bus'.

Gaps in capability may be filled, actions might become more comprehensive, and their potential reach and impacts can sometimes be increased by working together. Effective collaboration can require flexibility, compatibility of objectives and expectations, and regular contact with consortium partners and stakeholders as contextual and other changes occur. Sustaining cooperative relationships can become more problematic as inequalities of the

resources, influence, power and contributions of different parties increase. Risks of disputes and dissolution may be reduced if the collaborators are relatively homogenous.

Hesitant Leadership Responses

Insecure leaders may continue to avoid discussing uncomfortable realities in case this provokes dissent and results in unrest. Many of them worry about the limited means at their disposal for maintaining engagement, legitimacy, law and order. Some may fear unrest and insurrection. People might abandon them. To what extent can or should leaders and boards be held responsible for protecting stakeholders from the impacts of global risks and existential threats over which they may have very little influence or control.

Practitioners should be prepared for some of those they advise and support to hesitate and procrastinate. Among decision makers, and within boards, there is sometimes a temptation to delay or obfuscate. A laggard or reluctant participant might cast doubt as to which of various agencies, parties or users is responsible or suggest that the relative responsibilities of different parties should be discussed and clarified. This can appear reasonable and fair, and it may result in a matter being kicked into the long grass where it might fester or grow.

Infrastructures and shared activities such as transportation require more resilient and sustainable solutions (Beiser, 2024). Establishing 'ownership' of, or interests in, resources, risks and vulnerabilities affecting multiple parties, and allocating responsibilities relating to them, can take time. Fixing accountability and obtaining a commission to act may increase assignment entry costs. Events may create situations for which there is little guidance. Boards should consider the bandwidth, capability and skill requirements of achieving collaboration with, and collective responses from, parties otherwise seeking greater self-sufficiency.

Complicating Factors and Dilemmas

As well as fragmentation within stakeholder groups, organisations and professional associations may face a growing divide between the ordering of risks and the priorities and views of older and younger members. For example, younger WEF GRPS survey respondents are more concerned about global environmental risks over the next 10 years than older age groups, and noticeably more so in the case of pollution (WEF, 2025c). This is not surprising as their future lives could be much more adversely affected by multiple and inter-related environmental factors.

In an era of insecurity there are limits to what a person or entity might be able to achieve alone. Sometimes the effectiveness of collective responses is limited by the weakest link in a chain, as some perform better than others. Certain parties may also do very little and/or freeload. Entities that prepare may find their efforts are not matched by local communities and those responsible for necessary infrastructures. If a dam, levee or bridge is not properly maintained a wide area and many citizens and businesses may be flooded and suffer loss.

When confronted with changing global realities, widespread social and political trends, and unexpected developments in certain markets, those with responsibilities face dilemmas. They may walk a tightrope when trying to balance understanding and motivation. To register, impact and influence, messages from an advisor or leader may have to be clear and positive. The many nuances of a complex situation in which multiple factors might be at work may have to be simplified, or even avoided if there is a risk that they might confuse or discourage.

Providing Professional Advice

Those advising clients may have to contend with a diversity of opinions, perspectives and views. Preferences, priorities, cultures and conduct often prevent the grasping of nettles and the taking of tough decisions. On occasion, practitioners need courage and tact to 'speak truth to power'. Clients and their cronies may discourage it. Being considered 'negative' might end a relationship. To keep an account some may resist asking difficult questions. They might sense that those who ignore drawbacks and 'inconvenient truths', and offer hope, however flimsy its prospects appear, are the ones perceived as 'positive' and who retain clients.

The responsible course of action may involve unwelcome costs and/or negative externalities. For example, necessary recycling can be energy intensive and polluting (Beiser, 2024). Responsible professionals should give balanced advice that embraces costs as well as benefits and implications and consequences, and ensure vital questions are asked. Will societies lose control of both AI and biotechnology, and how can their potential benefits be secured while at the same time preventing their misuse by malicious and bad actors (WEF, 2025b)?

Handling Advice Likely to be Unwelcome

As existential threats such as climate change increasingly affect disaffected electorates, governments may feel they must offer them hope and positive prospects. Tough and expensive decisions such as replacing aging infrastructures are repeatedly postponed. Promises of something new may seem more appealing than preventive maintenance or repairs. Balanced advice would cover realities and implications of delay. Single strategies and approaches might not be equally relevant and applicable across diverse contexts.

An issue for boards in some jurisdictions is how to avoid or handle expectations of loyalty to a national policy or position, an autocrat, or short-term self and vested interests, rather than the pursuit of a wider common good and responsibilities to the environment and the whole of society. State media and public authorities may impose a particular view of society and what is expected from citizens. Responsible corporate leaders might have to hold difficult conversations with some of their peers. Courage may be required to expose propaganda, tackle corruption and combat misinformation, rather than 'go with the flow'.

Future Professional Leadership

Will people and organisations rise to the challenges we collectively face? In his new year message for 2025, and after a decade in which the ten hottest years on record have happened, the UN Secretary General has called for countries to drastically slash emissions of greenhouse gasses (Guterres, 2024). Overall opinion is pessimistic, with those contacted by the WEF doubting that our societies and institutions will collectively be able to cope with the challenges, global risks and existential threats confronting humanity and the natural world (WEF, 2025c). What role can and should professionals and their associations play in the advice and support they provide to those endeavouring to cope and respond to multiple risks?

Many practitioners have been prepared for self-reliance, considering each case on its own merits, the giving of independent advice and working with clients and their professional peers. The era that is emerging offers expanding opportunities for responsible and trusted advisers. Clients, their boards and stakeholders should be encouraged to think longer-term,

safeguard their rights and use them. They should be alert to risks, trends, dangers such as backsliding and threats from bad actors. They and those who advise them should be ready to speak up and challenge. Autocracy, extremism, polarisation and divisions are encouraged by acquiescence and silence. They can erode integrity, undermine trust, and lead to central control, uniformity and stagnation. They might also inhibit or prevent the exploration of alternatives and the development of new options.

False and outrageous claims should be countered rather than ignored. Openness and freedom of expression can result in diversity, creativity and much needed innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship. Responsible leadership can ensure a fairer distribution of the benefits of business, capitalism, innovation and enterprise. The efforts of professionals can make a difference. They can enable more effective responses to global risks and threats. Professionals and their associations may increasingly be called upon to advise on how best to prepare for and cope with the challenges, dilemmas and paradoxes of more demanding times.

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