

Keeping abreast of changes in age of robotics, digitalisation

Accountants have to review their skill sets and adapt. **BY MELVIN YONG**

ACCOUNTANTS need to revisit their career goals and review how their skill sets can better prepare them for the massive changes brought about by the age of robotics, analytics and digitalisation, say industry professionals.

These rapid technological advances are fast disrupting the accounting profession and threatening to render some traditional accounting and finance roles obsolete.

Observers say accountants may not be responding fast enough and part of the problem lies with inertia.

"Not all rank and file accountants desire to challenge themselves to up-skill and understand the changes that are happening to accountants in the mid- to back office process," said Jean Lee, Asia Pacific vice-president of finance at NICE Systems, a global enterprise software provider.

But the current trends may give them cause to buck up or risk being made irrelevant in the near future.

Already, organisations are able to deploy process automation solutions that will allow them to optimise resources or redeploy resources to value-add to services, cut costs, speed up processes, scale up anytime when volume increases, and improve productivity by reducing downtime.

Traditional back-office functions and low-value tasks can be easily replaced by technology solutions that can monitor proficiency, productivity and work compliance, while most transactional audit jobs can be automated by intelligent software and analytical tools such as data analytics.

And with more businesses increasingly adopting cloud computing technology and infrastructure, accountants are being challenged to develop new key performance indicators to help their organisations manage their business conducted in the cloud profitably.

"For organisations, it is no longer a question of 'should we introduce robotic process automation changes, advance analytics or back office proficiency solutions into the operations', it is a matter of how and how much," said Ms Lee.

"The risk is that, eventually, even more experienced accountants may be out of a job as companies hire younger accountants who understand the latest technologies and trends and are willing to champion such changes," she added.

Accounting professionals say the issue has been compounded by a traditional focus on equipping accountants only with technical skills and not enough on other areas that will be relevant in the future business context, although this situation is changing.

"The future will not be about looking backwards and presenting historical cost financial information," said Bill Bowman, senior director (risk management and internal control) at semiconductor firm Infineon Technologies Asia-Pacific.

"Accountants need to find ways to add value, which is beyond merely presenting information, and those who refuse to adapt will face limited career options and remuneration upside potential," he added.

Changing entrenched mindsets among accountants will mean further promoting the value and benefits of acquiring soft skills.

"We are not sending enough strong signals on the importance of soft skills and a broader-based accounting education," said Themin Suwardy, deputy dean - postgraduate professional programmes, at Singapore Management University.

"We need to educate accountants



Ms Chan says that "as accountants ascend the corporate ladder, the soft skill training percentage increases against the technical skills", while Assoc Prof Suwardy says accountants "should be ready to pick up related knowledge" but soft skills are "just as important". FILE PHOTOS

that, to succeed as a professional accountant, it will take more than just their hard accounting skills," he said.

"Accountants should be ready to pick up related knowledge such as business valuation, risk management, forensic accounting, integrated reporting and so forth, but soft skills such as personal, interpersonal and organisational skills are just as important," he added.

These soft skills will enable accountants to communicate, lead and create value for business.

Industry professionals suggest that critical soft skills for accountants today and in the future will include personal abilities such as how to handle oneself in situations of challenge, stress, conflict, time pressure and change, as well as having positive,



ive, proactive and reflective attitudes about one's own performance.

Important interpersonal or "people" skills will encompass competencies to secure positive outcomes through interpersonal interactions, listening, empathy, communication, motivation, team management, and giving and receiving feedback.

Acquiring skills in project management, change management and design thinking to drive process improvement and back office change for the organisation is crucial.

But encouraging accountants to look broader into soft skills that will make them outstanding will require a close partnership of employers and educators.

As part of employee development, employers could incorporate soft skills into a structured and measurable component of their in-house training matrix.

"As accountants ascend the corporate ladder, the soft skill training percentage increases against the technical skills and these percentages could be further customised for each individual depending on their needs," said Yvonne Chan, CFO at the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

The education system could support this with emphasis on building adaptive and application competencies instead of merely hard technical knowledge, which could become obsolete as standards change and the world evolves.

"Perhaps it's timely to depart from fixed subject combinations (in education) to a hybrid model which allows more training across disciplines," said Ms Chan.

While different universities have varying approaches, for its part, Singapore Management University has already shifted its method of assessing students by building in interpersonal skills as a component.

In its accounting programmes, for instance, the final exam only accounts for half of a student's final grade.

"The other 50 per cent incorporates skills that we want our graduates to develop - they have to work in teams for their group projects, write reports, present their findings, participate actively in class discussions, and be active learners," said Assoc Prof Suwardy.

As graduates enter the corporate world, organisations will also have a continuing role to play in encouraging and motivating performance and culture change for professional accountants.

"Effective coaching and engaging your direct report is a process and, as a manager, you need to consistently encourage and be a role model for adopting this cultural change," said Ms Lee.

Ms Chan suggests that staff could be loaded up to 80 per cent of their work scope and leave 20 per cent for prototyping new initiatives or experimenting with policies, processes and procedures in pilot trials.

"Create a culture of constant innovation following some common management methodology such as regular 'Ideathons' to obtain fresh ideas, design thinking on a process to improve for better customer experience, or lean thinking to simplify and reduce transaction time," said Ms Chan.

For the individual professional accountant, there is also a need to embrace life-long learning to stay relevant for the future.

"Qualifying as an accountant is only the first step, and we need to keep abreast of changes in the accounting field, including continuing to update ourselves on technologies," said Assoc Prof Suwardy.

"What was learnt during the days of undergraduate study becomes rapidly outdated. We are never too old to learn - continue to challenge yourself and your mind will remain active and enhance your quality of life," added Mr Bowman.

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