

Why 'creative accountants' are needed for future of the profession

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Page 16 | Section: OPINION

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Why 'creative accountants' are needed for future of the profession

Cultivating an innovative mindset will enable reinforcement of the core objectives of building trust, while creating long-term value. BY LEE SZE YENG

ACCOUNTANCY and design are not typically words one would tie together. But with the accounting profession now almost unrecognisable from the one I joined when I started at KPMG some 30 years ago, it has become crucial to recognise that they are interlinked.

Accountants today are fast evolving to become "creative designers of businesses" who have to embody the tenets of design thinking and innovation in a nuanced yet important way, akin to a creative production team that works in the background to bring ideas and solutions to life.

Rethinking how we grow accountants of the future is even more critical, with the recent Accountancy Workforce Review Committee's report highlighting significant challenges for the profession.

Chief among these would be how we should continue attracting a strong enrolment of accountancy students. If we fail to achieve this, the industry will face "a significant shortage of accountants", which would impact not only the strength of the profession, but the robustness of our financial and capital markets.

Hence, in the new world order driven by trends in generative artificial intelligence (AI) as well as environmental, social and governance assurance, how can the profession best grow a strong talent pipeline?

To meet the demands of the future, the role of accountants will also have to adapt and evolve through design innovation, to be equipped to lead the way forward for businesses. Cultivating this innovative mindset as part of the profession's DNA will enable us to reinforce our core objectives of building trust, while creating long-term value.

I see the concept of growing "creative accountants" being implemented across three areas: in redesigning the workforce; the role and the functional remit of accounting in the wider context within businesses; and across society.

Redesigning the workforce starts with a new approach towards attracting the next generation of talent. This requires understanding what motivates young people. In many cases, they want their career to have meaning and a social impact.

Consequently, the profession must look beyond traditional accounting credentials and recognise attributes such as the individual's ability to embrace change, collaborate widely and generate fresh ideas.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, in his speech at the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants 60th anniversary last year, also highlighted that accountants have gone from being just "guardians" of business to "interpreters" of business, too.

Increasingly, they are expected to help decision-makers make sense of the complex business landscape and provide strategic advice on a company's direction. This necessitates concerted efforts by the industry to grow "creative accountants" of the future, who are dependable and forward-thinking, with the ability to execute well-designed, precise and innovative strategies.

Role and functional remit

As we start focusing more on growing a skills-first culture and mindset, as emphasised in the recent SkillsFuture report, we are repositioning accountancy as an exciting and meaningful career for aspirants and existing practitioners, which will not only benefit accounting firms, but the entire industry.

More crucially is the need for us to rethink the role and functional remit of accountants, and how we should equip them for a more



Lee, managing partner at KPMG Singapore, says redesigning the accountancy workforce starts with a new approach towards attracting the next generation of talent. PHOTO: KPMG

complex world. Already, we are seeing AI's profound impact in the professional services area, with the legal profession seeing roles redrawn due to the deployment of generative AI, large language models and data analytics.

While that shift has not yet disrupted audit and accountancy to the same extent, change is coming. AI and generative AI are helping staff switch from jobs that are role-centred to those that are skills and task-based. Digital full-time equivalents will be able to undertake much of the lower-value and lower-risk work, while accountants will be able to focus on areas where their skills add most value.

We are preparing businesses for this new world by embedding technology and innovation to maximise the potential of our human capital, and help businesses augment their transformation. For instance, this includes working with leading organisations to tap the power of technology to create and protect the sustainable value of businesses, whether through optimising risks or powering continuous improvements.

In this case, the principles of design innovation have been at the forefront. Successfully deploying them, too, requires working across disciplines and in collaboration with industry ecosystem partners, the finance industry and professional associations.

In the middle of a vast wave of technologi-

cal change, it is essential to keep several principles uppermost. The most significant is that trust has been, and will remain, at the heart of the accounting and audit functions. Indeed, trust will become more important in areas such as ESG assurance and AI explainability.

A new culture

What will change is the context in which we deliver our services – and how we continue to adapt to them.

Although it is impossible to know where the industry will be in 30 years, what is certain is that by then, accountants will need to be more than just functional experts. They will need to be part of a new culture of creative accountants, while continuing to be the guardians of trust.

There is optimism that the industry will rise to this challenge: From the earliest writing to the first use of double-entry bookkeeping in the 13th century, throughout history, innovation in accounting has underpinned the evolution of finance and commerce.

By championing the continued evolution of the profession, our successors will see that their achievements are based on the innovations that we are starting to put in place today.

The writer is managing partner, KPMG in Singapore