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Looking on the Brighter Side

The profession's leaders share why its best days may lie ahead of it

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Each year, *Accounting Today* checks in with the foremost people in the accounting profession to see what issues are keeping them up at night (see “Plenty on Their minds,” above), which inevitably yields a weighty list of dire concerns.

This year, to balance that out, we asked the leaders of the profession to share what had them most excited about the field.

The possibilities offered by technology, the exciting new services areas that practitioners are exploring, and the unique qualities of the new people who are entering the profession were the things that these thought leaders and visionaries most commonly mentioned — but a significant number were also excited about the sheer range of possibilities open to accountants.

WIDE OPEN

“The opportunity to shape our future” was the most exciting thing to Grant Thornton CEO Mike McGuire. “We’re not stuck in a dull, never-changing industry or world. To the contrary, disruption is all around us. That gives us the opportunity to be disruptive as well, to help shape the way businesses and markets work in the future. That can be scary, but it’s really exciting, too!”

Echoing that, American Institute of CPAs senior vice president of communications, media, news & professional pathways Janice Maiman noted the degree to which all aspects of the profession are open to change: “We are witnessing a sea change on every front of the profession, from the competencies required to the nature of services provided to the expectations of clients to the meaning of assurance itself,” she said. “In 10 years, the profession will be vastly differently from what we accept as today’s norm.”

“This profession is undergoing massive change, and to me that is exciting,” agreed consultant Art Kuesel. “Ultimately, there are so many viable paths the profession can and will take, and the open-ended nature of this is what’s exciting. I’d go so far as to say, if firm leadership can dream it — it can happen.”

That kind of open-ended possibility can lead to any number of positive results, including: “Growth! Accounting and bookkeeping firms are extremely focused on growth — and that is exciting for the future,” said Bill.com founder Rene Lacerte. “There are multiple opportunities for growth for today’s accounting firm. I cannot wait to see how strongly the accounting profession surges forward in the next three to five years.”

It also means opportunity on an individual level. “Job projections are very robust both domestically and internationally for accounting graduates,” New Jersey Society of CPAs CEO Ralph Thomas pointed out. “Although the new complexities of the profession lead to many challenges, they create opportunities for those who embrace those changes. We’ll see a slew of new accounting positions that weren’t previously available and the new accountants will thrive in it.”

BETTER TOOLS

Given the prominent ways computers, software and the Internet have shaped the profession in recent years, and the seemingly never-ending stream of new and improved tools being offered to accountants, it should come as no surprise that technology was the area that excited by far most of the leaders that Accounting Today heard from — and it wasn’t just vendors, either.

“Technology has revolutionized the way we work with clients and how we run our firm, and I am excited to see what comes next,” said Marcum managing partner Jeffrey Weiner. “I fully expect another technology revolution in how we prepare tax returns and perform audits in the future, and how our work force performs their jobs.”

Illinois Society of CPAs president Todd Shapiro also sees great things ahead: “Our profession is standing on the doorstep of a high-tech revolution, where big data, workflow tools, data analytics and artificial intelligence are the first steps being taken on the path to an amazing future. Being an analyst at my core, I’m excited about the unlimited opportunities this presents.”

Many cited specific technologies, or specific ways technology is improving the work accountants do. For instance, “I am most energized by the increasing number of highly specialized technology tools available to make accountant-client interaction more efficient and meaningful,” said CPA.com strategic advisor Greg LaFollette. “Each year finds more and more vendor companies serving our profession. And the ‘co-opetition’ atmosphere among those companies breeds amazing integrations.”

QuickBooks expert Hector Garcia of Quick Bookkeeping, meanwhile, noted “The emergence of technologies that reduce ‘friction,’ when the bank communicates with your accounting system, and your accountant/advisor gets the same information in real-time; all of this will be seamless from an IT perspective. Soon, doing accounting work, communicating with your accountant, and transacting business will all be as easy as playing games in your iPhone.”

Others saw ahead to what technology can offer in the future, like Government Accounting Standards Board Chairman David Vaudt: “Ultimately, technology will lead to timely, searchable financial reports where a given user can more readily access just the information needed — allowing governments to be compared side by side almost instantaneously. So that’s an exciting future to look toward.”

And VeraSage Institute founder Ron Baker pointed to blockchain technology for its potential to render financial information instantly accessible and confirmable — without the need for an audit. “Even though it was not invented by the accounting profession, it is destined to transform and disrupt how and what accountants do, while adding more value to society,” he said.

ONE TOOL IN PARTICULAR

While technology of all kinds has the profession’s leaders eager for the future, the implications of “big data” — the ability to amass, analyze, and draw insights and meaning from vast quantities of information — fired a number of imaginations.

“The development of advanced data and analytics combined with another quickly emerging capability — cognitive computing — is exciting,” said KPMG chairman and CEO Lynne Doughtie. “These technologies will take on certain elements of our work, freeing up members of the profession to take on new, elevated roles that focus on the highest risks a company faces.”

It isn’t just for big firms, either: “Integration of big data analysis coming to smaller firms will enable firms to provide analysis and insight into their clients’ business transactions beyond the general ledger,” said AICPA vice president of small firms Carl Peterson. “This integration will come from sources of big data, both public databases and industry-specific data that will take the client relationship beyond where it is today. Integration of big data goes beyond the audit; the real value for firms is the analysis of big data integration to help the clients truly understand their operations.”

HIGHER UP THE LADDER

One of the crucial aspects of technology is the way it liberates practitioners from drudgery. “Technology will set accounting professionals free to pursue much more substantive work for clients that speaks directly to growth and profitability,” said Marshal Kushniruk, executive vice president of global business development at Avalara.

The move to more of that kind of “substantive” or higher-value-added work is top of mind for many of the profession’s leaders.

“The most exciting development for CPA firms today is the opportunity to play a vastly expanded role in serving their clients, moving from work with a large compliance focus to value-added services in exciting new areas such as cybersecurity, privacy, transaction assistance, human resources, IT services, business strategy and process improvement,” said Richard Stanger, CEO of consultancy StangerCarlson.

This shift to a new mindset was long overdue for some: “I am very excited about the current focus on reinventing the CPA’s role as an advisor, consultant and business-success coach to their clients,” said consultant Rita Keller. “I have always been saddened by the fact that most CPAs are reactive rather than proactive with their clients.”

Tax lawyer and “TaxGir!” blogger Kelly Phillips Erb gave a sense of what this change can mean for the individual practitioner: “I think I’m most excited about the ability to service clients beyond the numbers. The tax and accounting profession has never been just about forms and ledgers, but as the economy changes, there is now more of an opportunity to deliver advising and consulting services. It makes sense: Tax advisors are already aware of our client’s financial and business needs — from planning to compliance. Why not be a part of a more comprehensive solution?”

And consultant Martin Bissett, founder of the Upward Spiral Partnership, is excited by “the increasing realization by professionals aged 25 to 40 that the value of their expertise lies in the outcomes created for clients, rather than the delivery of professional services in and of themselves.”

WITHOUT BORDERS

The expanded reach of the profession caught the interest of some.

“The ability to reach potential clients in a large geographic area regardless of the size of your firm” excites WithumSmith+Brown partner and well-known tax author Tony Nitti. “The Internet provides a forum where any tax advisor — whether at a “big” or “small” accounting firm — may establish expertise in the form of a blog or other informal communication. These mediums have tremendous reach.”

The Internet, and the software solutions that now live in it, mean that not only can you broadcast your expertise everywhere; you can also exercise that expertise everywhere. “Thanks to the cloud, we now live in an online, borderless world, which opens up the accounting profession to new possibilities that change the very nature of the field. The absence of physical limits allows for a global client base,” said Jim McGinnis, vice president of the Accountant Segment at Intuit. “It’s both mindboggling and exhilarating to imagine that an accounting firm’s client roster can easily include their friendly neighborhood barbershop as well as a corner bakery along the Champs-Élysées. Not only can firms now work with clients they would never have taken on a decade ago, but it broadens their horizons through exposure to new cultures and business practices, and empowers accountants to choose their own clientele and have a truly unique firm.”

THIS TIME, IT’S PERSONNEL

For many, the most exciting thing about accounting is all the accountants.

“The people!” said incoming AICPA chair Kimberly Ellison-Taylor. “I am inspired by the passion, commitment and hard work of accountants. I am excited whenever I meet AICPA members and hear their experiences and ideas.”

Others were more specific in the type of people: “I periodically travel around the country to meet with accounting students at various universities, and I am excited to see the enthusiasm these students demonstrate for a career in public accounting,” said PCAOB board member Jay Hanson. “These students have a promising future ahead of them in a rewarding and respected profession.”

Boomer Consulting chief innovation officer Dustin Hostetler gets to interact with accountants at all stages of their careers through his Lean Six Sigma consulting, and he's particularly enthusiastic about one group: "The next generation of firm leaders — the Millennials," he said. "I do not buy in to the notion that there isn't talent in the pipeline. There's an abundance of talent and passion. We just need to do a better job of nurturing and developing that talent. But the future is very, very bright based on what I see every week from the lower and mid-levels in firms. I can't wait to be working with them in 10 to 20 years when they become partners and managing partners."

"The new (and soon to be new) partners in accounting firms all across North America," are also inspiring to Upstream Academy director Sam Allred. "I have worked with and know hundreds of them and am so impressed with their intelligence, discipline, drive and courage. They are finding their voice in firms all across our profession and are becoming catalysts for change and innovation within their respective firms. They are way more impressive than I was when I became a new partner in 1991."

An interesting corollary to this point of view comes from CliftonLarsonAllen CEO Denny Schleper: "Our profession will be retiring many Baby Boomers and, more than ever, we will be able to offer tremendous opportunity to young people, from the Generation Xers, to the Millennials, and eventually to Generation Z. The new generations will be much more diversified and will bring incredible innovation to the profession — innovation that will be required to address rapid change."

NEW REALMS OF EXCITEMENT

A couple of other developments have supporters among the leaders of the profession, starting with the greater focus on building a diverse workforce. "We are expanding and growing to be more inclusive in every way — not just in terms of racial diversity, but also with regard to roles, backgrounds, service offerings and more," noted National Association of Black Accountants president and CEO Jina Etienne.

That's not to say that things are perfect: "I am most excited about the prospect of the accounting profession finally modernizing and operating at or ahead of the pace of business and society. The future is bright for a highly skilled, robust and diverse accounting profession," said PCAOB board member Jeanette Franzel — but she added a caveat: "In order to achieve this, the profession must accelerate its current efforts to recruit, retain and develop a diverse workforce, including improving opportunities for the advancement of women and minorities."

While the profession may need more work on varying its workforce, it has already begun producing a variant type of firm that is exciting to CPA Trendlines founder Rick Telberg: "It is the new breed of CPA firm that is producing outsized profits for its owners with strategic vision, exceptional talent, and fanatical client service. Mostly, they are flying under the radar, driven by a single savvy owner or a small group of tightly knit partners," he explained. "They flourish in niches and specialties, which you wouldn't find until you go looking. They provide services like cross-border trade; industry-specific regulatory guidance; or management services to the rich or famous, or both. Technology is second nature to them. They don't bill by the hour, but by value. They can afford to be highly selective in their hiring. They shun growth for growth's sake, instead focusing on partner incomes and lifestyles."

And Thriveal Network founder Jason Blumer is excited both to run that kind of firm and to show others how to: “We now have a real opportunity to run a firm like an entrepreneur. We can take risks, price higher, and offer new and valuable services that earlier practitioners didn’t have the opportunity to offer.”

Finally, Public Company Accounting Oversight Board Chairman James Doty noted that he is excited about something that should be exciting to everyone in the profession: “I see a lot of firms and accounting professionals that are open to new ideas and ways of thinking.”

*The full text of all responses is available **here**.*