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The Frontier: Tech saves time, so why do accountants have less than ever?

By [Chris Gaetano](#) October 17, 2022, 10:11 a.m. EDT 4 Min Read

Accounting's ongoing digital transformation has introduced a veritable galaxy of labor-saving solutions that have, quite successfully, automated away much of the busy work that had eaten up so much time before. Processes that once took days can now be done in hours, and those that once took hours can now be done in minutes. Nearly every branch of the profession has been affected, from auditors who can now instantly sample data, to tax planners who can automatically fill in forms, to controllers automating expense reports, and much more.

Despite all these time savers, however, accountants remain stressed out and overworked. As old tasks are automated, new ones more centered around strategic thinking and prescriptive analysis are emerging to take their place. On the one hand, this has led to an overall elevation of the profession as it moves away from the easily automated compliance functions into more value-added services like business consulting. On the other hand, it also raises questions about work-life balance and burnout.

In this installment of The Frontier, we look at how increased efficiency has led not to more free time for accountants but less. Wesley Hartman, director of technology at Kirsch Kohn & Bridge LLP, as well as the founder of RPA solutions provider Automata, said the problem is the scalability of these advances.

Hiding in Plain Sight

"What's happened is one person can do the job of five people from back then. But now that person is being given the job of 10 people, even though the scaling of what technology can help with [only] increases that capacity to five. What will happen is even though we're given technology and tools that increase a person's capacity, it's still too much and they'll still end up with burnout," he said.

He said it reminded him of lifestyle creep, where someone making more money starts spending more money until their financial position isn't that much different than what they had before.

While this has been an issue for a while, the mass migration to remote work made things worse, according to Kim Austin, director of global strategic accounting partnerships with Avalara. While people saved time by not having to commute, that extra time often wound up being filled with even more work. Part of this is because people's expectations changed too: Having everything be online,

she said, encouraged a desire for instant gratification to the point where it can become difficult to even hold a thought for too long before another demand comes up.

Austin noted that people may have undervalued "dead time." Prior to the pandemic, she noted, it took time to drive to the office, to walk down the hall or across a campus, or to get in your car and drive to your next appointment. These moments, she said, were the times to process thoughts and mull things over and compose ourselves. Now, because people are on their laptops, these moments have effectively vanished, as it has become possible to schedule one meeting after another after another with no pause in between.

"You can be on 10 Zoom calls, back to back to back, and the expectation is for this real-time instant gratification, and you're expected to be on camera, to be there, to stay to the end, and we don't have that commute time anymore, some of which was great and some of which was having a detrimental effect," she said.

Peter Scavuzzo, principal and chief digital information officer for Top 25 Firm Marcum, also observed workload compression, which he said is as bad as it's ever been. However he pointed out another factor behind this is the war for talent, which was already fierce before the pandemic and has become so much more intense since then. The increased amount of labor-saving technology that automates more and more common tasks can also be seen as a response to there just not being enough people to do everything a firm might want. One person doing the job of 10 people might be the product of not being able to recruit the nine others.

"The availability of talent in the profession is not where it needs to be. Work, especially as accountants, has evolved to a high level. Work has become more complex, and all those problems align very nicely with technology's ability to solve them. So there's been a need for technology [in response] and I believe the appetite for technology as the industry evolves will continue growing," he said.

And while this complexity may take more time to address, he felt that, on the net, the profession has ultimately benefited from it. Entire new practice areas have been invented, and old ones have been reimaged with technology at their center, leading to more value-added services and, consequently, more revenue. The rise of client advisory services is just one example.

Regardless of one's feelings about complexity and the time it takes to address it, Automata's Hartman thinks it will only grow as time goes on because the problems accountants will be called on to help with will also grow more complex.

"Think of the last five years and how many new tax laws were passed. We in tax firms want to help our clients as much as possible, but with these new complexities it requires more time, more energy to understand even part of it," he said. "Even though the software can do the calculations, so much is required to help the client out. ... We talked about the five-man team, the 10-man team, it's still just piling on more calculations, more complexity. Eventually those calculations and work require 15 people but we will still put it on the five-person team and say you have the technology to work it out."