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“A new focus on process could transform the accountant’s role”

THE CURRENT debate on audit and associated assurance is a serious challenge to the accounting profession. However, I see the solution to this challenge as just part of a new opportunity for our profession to take greater responsibility for the creation and use of business data, something that has increasingly become the preserve of the IT industry. Delivery of digital is now high up businesses’ agendas and business-driven software technologies can support new business activity models, to ensure future prosperity while allowing accountants to deliver greater assurance regarding data creation.

Three key points to consider are:

1. Digital at work is about people and processes and the data they generate; these are the critical factors within every business.
2. Businesses should gain knowledge of new technologies which enable business, not just IT specialists, to enhance the business processes, employee experience and customer service.
3. New supporting technology allows new business and management models. These need to be reimaged by business leaders to lead to a much more profound transformation of productivity at work.

The ICAS booklet *The Flaming Torch* (1994) recognised that the rise of IT was presenting issues for accountancy and bookkeeping, to the point where many user clients had got into “quite a mess”. Frankly, that mess still exists. As IT specialists took on a lead role in controlling data, accountants failed to recognise that the new systems often did not reflect the reality of how new data was actually being created.

The resultant gap between people and their processes, and IT systems, was recognised by concerned IT professionals in the late 1990s and this generated the business process management (BPM) movement. BPM is a discipline and a way of thinking about people and day-to-day processes, in contrast to silo-oriented, inflexible applications. BPM, being business-focused, did not use the same language as IT and was not taken seriously

by many IT specialists. Despite this, the movement has progressed, albeit slowly, promoted by bpm.com and other such forums.

Software technology is now emerging that allows business to take control of the build of flexible applications, supporting BPM discipline without the need for coding. Such developments are now serious challengers, as discussed by analysts such as Jason Bloomberg at Intellyx (bit.ly/intellyph-low-code) and the Low-code daily (low-code-daily.com)

Focusing on people and their processes was a core skill with the accounting profession in the 1970s, when auditors were mapping out step-by-step processes, looking for control weaknesses and making recommendations for change. I was fortunate to be active in such exercises and in one case found a huge systemic fraud, just by talking about what was actually happening. This is exactly what BPM is about, and now technology exists in the hands of business to deliver on all aspects required to build new systems, with full audit trails.

With such transparency comes not only real accountability but also the opportunity for new, efficient business models that do not simply digitise existing processes. The capability to deliver “ground-up” systems, built using the reimaged visions of business leaders and the business knowledge of employees, will enable real empowerment of both leaders and workers. It will also encourage automation and artificial intelligence – but as part of any business process BPM should be under scrutiny.

Accountants with this new business-driven technology inherently have the knowledge and skills to become leaders in the delivery of meaningful digital transformation. This new empowerment and flexibility will undoubtedly elicit new business models, improving productivity and the employee experience and strengthening customer relationships. This could be a significant move to power the transformation of the accounting profession. **CA**



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