

The career sustainability of accountants: a profession in transition

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In the past you had those defined roles, CFO, trainee accountant, which were there for decades, they didn't change. Now we're in a situation though where the roles of the future aren't even defined. I don't even know what they are. And this is not unique to accountancy. We don't know now because technology is going to dictate to a large extent what those roles may be... so I think that's important for us to try and... and support those people as they learn to adjust to a new world, which is difficult because we can't articulate what that new world is yet, and we may not be able to for some time.

Round table participant (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants [ACCA], 2020, p. 17)

1. INTRODUCTION

Accountants have always performed an important role in the creation and upkeep of sustainable organizations, and that role will become even greater in the years to come (Bebbington et al., 2021). Accountants shoulder important responsibilities, whether by helping to effectively manage organizational risk, analyzing the information that helps to improve internal decision making, or producing detailed reports that provide a more complete picture of organizational performance. Therefore, there is a certain level of consensus (at least among us professional accountants) in considering that

accountants are fundamental for building sustainable businesses, with them even being portrayed as potential “saviors” of the world (King & Atkins, 2016). However, in this editorial, I argue that we need to further discuss and reflect on the career sustainability in the accountancy profession, since in order to “save” the world, first it is necessary to feel “safe.”

A career was defined as the sequence of roles/functions performed by an individual over their lifetime (Super, 1980). The profound transitions in job functions have long been an omnipresent characteristic of professional

life (Horton, 2020). In fact, every worker must negotiate their entry into the labor market, as well as their retirement at the end of their career, while many employees face multiple transitions (intracompany, intercompany, and even interprofessional) throughout their professional lives (Louis, 1980). However, changes in professional careers have increased in number and magnitude in recent years, since the world of work is undergoing a major transformation driven by various “megafactors,” such as: technological advances, careers self-directed by individuals, the gig economy (characterized by short-term and freelance work instead of permanent contracts), a greater degree of uncertainty and business volatility, and, more recently, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2020).

These global trends are transforming the world of work and also reshaping the future of the accounting profession. The key question is how professional accounting careers will adapt, how the skills will transform, and how learning in the profession will evolve as the profession takes on a central role in building and protecting organizations in a sustainable future global economy. The ACCA and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (2019) predict that career paths will continue to evolve in line with the “macro”

trends that are occurring globally (for example, flexible work, increased life expectancy, and lifelong learning). Career paths will be difficult to predict more than two to three years in advance. They will increasingly depart from the formal path and will contain mechanisms to enable people to “enter” and “exit” their career paths (ACCA & PwC, 2019). This situation was illustrated by one of the interviewees of the study conducted by the ACCA (2020, p. 17) regarding the future of the accounting profession:

People look 18 months ahead in their careers...there's not the assumption any more that if I go into an accounting firm there's a single pathway to partnership. They are picking up signals from the world that say there's no way I can plan 10 or 15 years away.

Taking this scenario into consideration, this editorial aims to call for new studies/reflections that seek to understand how accountants can overcome (multiple) transitions in job functions and pursue professional career paths that are multidimensional, elaborated, resilient, and flexible (that is, sustainable) by nature, enabling them to proactively prepare for desired role transitions and to more effectively respond to (undesired/imposed) job transitions throughout their careers (Horton, 2020).

2. A FAST-CHANGING PROFESSION

Various studies indicate that the greatest future impact on the accounting profession will be caused by technology (Moll & Yigitbasioglu, 2019). Studies suggest that digital developments may present an opportunity to reformulate the role of accountants, thus increasing new possibilities to add value to companies (Andreassen, 2020). This will be sustained by the increased automation of routine and transactional tasks, freeing up accounting professionals to apply their skills in other strategic activities (Chartered Global Management Accountant [CGMA], 2019). As emerging “cognitive” technologies evolve, there will be new opportunities for the human and machine “nexus,” in which accountants can take advantage of new digital resources to make valuable contributions to the organizations where they work (Leitner-Hanetseder et al., 2021). Thus, studies suggest that these technological transformations will be important drivers in expanding the profession and the future of accounting work (CGMA, 2019).

Besides the effects of technology, research indicates that the accounting profession has been developing in order to change the accountant's/controller's role from bean-counter to that of business partner in organizations (Goretzki & Messner, 2019). The literature has highlighted different types of profiles that can be

adopted by accountants and the changes in the nature of the functions and their responsibilities in recent years. For example, the literature emphasizes that individuals can adopt a more traditional attitude (bean-counters), typically associated with the activities of recording and compiling financial data, statements, and analyses and controlling and monitoring the performance of operational managers, relating financial indicators (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007; Emsley, 2005) with a more strategy-oriented position, usually associated with a high level of involvement with the business and a high degree of integration with other functions in the company, with the aim of integrating accounting information with non-financial indicators (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007).

The commonly-defended rhetoric that accountants are business partners is widely supported and sponsored by professional associations, as well as by universities and accounting institutes. For example, the CGMA (2014) advocates that the role of accountants is to support and enable the implementation and development of the company's strategy, as well as being a value creator for the company's shareholders.

Changes in business needs will require continuously enhanced skills, as the new service offers or work activities

evolve and technological and digital developments transform business models. A rethink is needed, especially with the entry of a new generation into the work environment that may be less interested in following a linear line of ascension in the organizational hierarchy (ACCA, 2020). Transitions between different organizations are likely to become more common. Career paths will become less visible and less obvious.

Technological changes, political reorientation, distance working, economic challenges, and demographic and

climate changes: all of these forces are coming together to fundamentally transform how organizations compete, operate, meet stakeholders' demands, and create long-term sustainable prosperity for the interested parties. These dynamics require a new focus on the main capacities for organizations, as well as digital capacity, including, of course, human capital. This new world order is turning the previously well-established workplace standards "upside down" and redefining the very meaning of the human work that organizations in all sectors need to carry out.

3. SUSTAINABLE CAREER – A CALL FOR RESEARCH AND REFLECTIONS

The message is simple: the "job for life" is practically a relic (ACCA, 2020). New and more amorphous careers in the profession will probably emerge (Skrbiš & Laughland-Booř, 2019). The new career plans could be seen as a series of experiences linked to the career, but not always following "traditional" paths. This does not necessarily suggest the end of highly specialized technical functions and some "traditional" career plans will still exist. However, increasingly permeability and different stages and forms are foreseen for many roles in the future. For the ACCA (2020), as the organization's skills requirements become blurred and have to more quickly adapt in response to fast-changing environments, career plans will be less anchored in the traditional vertical model and in the pyramid-shaped organization, and new career paths will emerge, not always necessarily in an "upward direction."

For individuals, this transformation in the form of work requires a different mindset and the need to more quickly adapt to rapid and different career plans. Navigating among new career opportunities driven by the transformation in the work environment will be constant. Thus, it will be a professional life of transitions and constant renewal of experiences and knowledge and skills rebalancing. In this setting, individuals are increasingly responsible for their own career choices and the "traditional" dependency on the employer to support us tends to decrease. Employers now seek to train, hire, or "borrow" personnel. Borrowing personnel reflects the need to seek specialist skills for a short period and return individuals to the labor market. Thus, individuals will increasingly be their own "curators," gradually using more sources of information and forms of learning to pursue their personal career journeys. Moreover, it will be important for individuals to "unlearn," as some activities and knowledge become less relevant (McGuigan, 2021).

As in any period of transition and paradigm shifts in work, the transformation process of the accounting

professional could potentially be hard or even traumatic for some. The initial studies indicate that new professionals and intermediate level accountants will potentially feel a greater impact with the transformations in the world of work in the short and medium terms (Herbert et al., 2021; Howcroft, 2017). The sustainability of the career of new professionals is already beginning to worry some researchers who have identified that the opportunities for recent graduates to start their careers may potentially decrease with the automation, reallocation, and reengineering of tasks that are considered to be basic in accounting (Herbert et al., 2021). Recently, the ACCA and the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) (2021) published a report about the future of the accounting profession and of generation "Z" and the results of that study are clear: generation Z is worried about the future. The report mentions well-being as a key issue and that they are looking for organizations that support their mental health and offer a good work-personal life balance. For 58% of the respondents, the "lack of job opportunities/job security" is the main concern about the future, followed by concern about issues related to personal well-being and mental health (51% of the respondents; in Brazil, this question worries 60% of the respondents). This concern about the future among generation Z is explained by one participant in the round table of the study of the ACCA and IFAC (2021, p. 35):

This is a generation that had expected to inherit a stable work environment with record unemployment. But instead what's happened during a very formative stage of their careers is an international catastrophe, the kind of crisis that none of the previous generations that are actively working today have faced. So, they will definitely be stressed and scared.

Therefore, a focus on sustainable careers in the accounting profession and on understanding how individuals and organizations can promote flexible

and sustainable career paths in light of the increasing turbulence and uncertainty is necessary and essential (Tomlinson et al., 2018; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). A sustainable career was described as one that

endures over time and that is characterized by development, conservation and renewal of the working individual's career-related resources, including human and social capital...as well as personal characteristics such as proactivity and resilience that aid in career self-management (Valcour, 2015, p. 22)

Sustainable careers are also characterized by continuity over time, agency in the career choices of individuals, amplitude in the social spaces (professional and non-professional) in which careers are pursued, and intrinsic meaning for individuals (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Researchers propose that individuals with sustainable careers are capable of learning with the key experiences (positive and negative) related to their careers and of taking advantage of that personal and contextual knowledge to achieve productive, healthy, and happy (that is, sustainable) careers over time (De Vos et al., 2020).

In their conceptual model, De Vos et al. (2020) affirm that those studying sustainable careers should address three key dimensions, namely: person, time, and context. By person, the authors refer to the investigation of how individuals can be active agents in the elaboration of their own (sustainable) career plans. By time, they refer to the inherently dynamic nature of the sustainability of the career and to considerations of how the sustainability of the career can be developed over time. Finally, by highlighting the context, the authors recognize that careers do not occur in a vacuum and that, as such, the context in which this is represented can play an important role in the formation of an individual's career path. Based on these core elements of the theory about sustainable careers, it is recognized that individuals can have agency in the development of sustainable professional careers, as they encounter and respond to role transitions throughout their professional lives. At the same time, it is recognized that an individual's search for a sustainable career is often shaped (and limited) by wider contextual forces (Horton, 2020).

Thus, it is necessary to expand the debate and support new studies on how accountants can overcome (multiple) work role transitions and how they can pursue professional career paths that are multidimensional,

elaborated, resilient, and flexible (that is, sustainable) by nature, enabling them to proactively prepare for desirable role transitions and to more effectively respond to (undesirable/imposed) job transitions throughout their careers. Below, I indicate some key questions regarding the sustainability of the accounting career that could incentivize the debate and new studies.

- How are the growing turbulence and uncertainty in the professional accounting environment affecting the work and career of accountants?
- How can the sustainability of the accounting career be maintained and increased over time?
- How can a positive professional identity be built in an environment of constant transformation of the career?
- How can the concept of "sustainability of the accounting career" be instilled in accounting education?
- How can accountants maintain a sense of confidence in the career in the 21st century amidst concerns associated with the increase in technological breakthroughs and constant transformations in the work environment?
- What are the implications of accountants being their own "curators" for the profession and for accounting education?
- What behavioral mechanisms are used by accountants to maintain and increase the sustainability of the career?
- How can the "work-personal life" balance be maintained in the search for sustainability of the accounting career?
- How can the personal well-being and mental health of accountants be increased in an environment of uncertainties and transitions?

Besides the questions proposed, there are also many others to be explored.

The changes and transitions in the career are usually complex, difficult, and charged with emotions (such as insecurity and fear), but with a focus on the sustainability of the accounting career, I suggest, in this editorial, that we can look at these transitions through a positive "lens," in order to provide support to accountants on the accounting career journey of the 21st century.

4. CONCLUSION

The work environment is no longer the same and is constantly changing. Social and technological developments are changing our professional lives and

careers. The traditional career paths of the accounting profession are no longer as usual. Employers expect more from those who join the profession and, as individuals,

we also seek to perform a professional role for a longer period of our lives, as the demographics of the active population change. Thus, the pace of changes in the accounting profession is increasing and, therefore, accountants need to be able to respond to this and recognize the importance of sustaining personal growth. Although the accountant's role continues to be potentially attractive in society, it is a role that is increasingly changing and transforming. Lifelong adaptation is critical for professional survival.

There is currently no systematic analysis of relevant aspects concerning the sustainability of the accountant's

career over time. Considering the future scenario of the business environment and of the accounting profession – new technologies, remote work, climate change challenges, and changes in accountants' basic competences (accountants as business partners) – our knowledge remains quite limited regarding the impact of this scenario on the sustainability of the accountant's career. Thus, I hope that this editorial has encouraged researchers and professionals to reflect on the sustainability of the accounting career over time and that new studies will help accountants in the professional transitions they will face more quickly and frequently in the future.

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