



### COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

The spreadsheet is a perfect example of what a mixed blessing technology can be for accountants. 'I can

remember when spreadsheets first came in, before they had the functionality they do now,' recalls Vic Smith. Then, the annual budget might as well have been carved in stone, but, as he adds: 'Now we use a spreadsheet plus Collaborate Planning from ABS, and we can do as many what ifs and as

much scenario-planning as we like.'

For Alan Lewis, a financial modelling specialist with Whale Rock Accounting, recent spreadsheet developments have also been a boon. 'Microsoft Excel had already become an enormously powerful analytical tool, but it's been transformed by cloud computing,' he says.

'When I build a model, there may be 30 or 40 versions and they may need to be seen by 20 people,' he explains, so version control was difficult. 'Now I can place the model at a central location, it's much easier for everyone to work on.'

Although spreadsheets remain essential, the profession's favourite

software tool isn't always the best one for the job. 'I still encounter accountants who think that poring over a spreadsheet for seven or eight hours is work. It isn't,' says Jon Hill. 'A £70,000-a-year chartered accountant who spends all day correcting spreadsheets should be putting their skillset to better use.'

Accountancy & Finance agrees. 'Finance now manages processes that other departments would previously have done because technology enables them to,' he says. But although finance is 'still predicated by safety, security and the ownership of data,' Sheldon sees less demand for those who can fulfil only a traditional financial control role, and more demand for those with analytical skills and business smarts – from the top of the professional tree down to the part-qualified and trainee.

### WIDER SKILL SET

The spread of shared services, for example, has increased the demand for accountants with strong interpersonal skills. 'It's created an enhanced route into industry for many in practice, but it's also created a demand for a much wider skill set,' says Sheldon. This includes technology skills: 'Sometimes it's Oracle, or SAP, or PeopleSoft,' he reports, and none of these dominates. 'But when people say they are looking for someone with a shared services background, they mean someone with experience of dealing with teams, and someone with proven leadership and management skills.'

Vic Smith, finance and resources manager at East Dorset District Council, is currently overseeing the move to a financial shared services centre with Christchurch Borough Council. 'You need softer skills when you are managing change on this scale,' he says, and not just because the move will reduce headcount. 'As well as the cultural issue of bringing two teams together and managing their expectations, you need to ensure that knowledge is distributed across the teams, and isn't lost during the transition.'



**Some of them would rather have done a bank reconciliation that took eight hours than have a conversation with a client**

*Phil Grainger,  
managing director,  
Ward Williams*

The increased automation underpinning developments such as shared services creates other professional challenges. At Orange Business Services, head of purchase-to-pay (P2P) strategy Pete Loughlin has seen the de-skilling of many tasks that would once have required the involvement of an accountant: 'We are about to start using a workflow and intelligent data capture tool, from Kofax, that will relieve people in accounts payable of a lot of low-value activities.'

### EXCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The question is: what will do they instead? 'Because the routine, mundane work is automated, people will be free to deal with exceptions and challenges, and AP can become more sophisticated,' says Loughlin. 'Now we've automated AP, we are repatriating it from India to the UK, because it's cheaper. Having really efficient processes means that you can think more strategically.'

In theory, there is no reason why the accountants in the AP team shouldn't step up to the challenge. 'Over the years I've seen accountants mature,' says Loughlin. 'They used to deserve the term bean-counter, but now they are much more sophisticated and business savvy and they want to take ownership of their future.'

In practice, things may be a little different, as characterised by Grainger's experience at Ward Williams. 'It's to do with personality and what you perceive your role to be.'

'In the end we kept people who were prepared to be more proactive on the job,' he says.