

Transforming Professional Accountants' Skills and Capabilities for a Sustainable Future



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ABSTRACT

Professional accountants (PAs) find themselves working in a trans-disciplinary world, not a mono-disciplinary one; a world of continuous flux, where technical and human factors constantly interact in a complex and unique ways. It is a world where unpredictability and change are always in the air and PAs skills, competencies, and capabilities are most tested when the unexpected happens, and unanticipated opportunity arises; when things suddenly go awry or they are faced with a 'wicked problem' or dilemma which turns to question or even rock the talent, skills and capabilities of the professional accountant.

This paper, using documentary evidence and interactions with key employers as a methodology, discusses the growing interest in making sure that PAs equip themselves with the capabilities and competencies required not only to be work ready for today, but also 'work ready plus' for tomorrow.

Keywords: talent, talent hunt, competencies, capability, skills, professional capabilities framework, professional quotients.

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Introduction

The issue of talent, competence, and capability of professional accountants have become a major topic both within and outside the accountancy profession today. Barber (2013) posited that given the state of the global economy, tensions in international relations, massive gaps between wealth and poverty, the deepening threat of climate change, and the ubiquity of weapons of mass destruction, the contention is that there is the need for a generation better educated, in the broadest and most profound sense of that word, than ever before. This fact is equally true when you consider the required talents, competencies, skills and capabilities of professionals, accountants not an exception, to operate at the optimum level in the 21st century.

Thus, professional accountants practicing in today's context need to possess not only an up-to-date and relevant repertoire of generic and role-specific skills, competencies, and knowledge upon which to draw from. They must also have mutually reinforcing set of personal, interpersonal, and cognitive capabilities. This enables them to face situations of uncertainty with equanimity and to accurately 'read' the unique mix of technical and human issues embedded in what is going on and then 'match' the most uniquely appropriate response.

Talent, skills, competencies, and capabilities are interlaced with and gingers the ability to manage oneself, remain calm, face and learn from errors, tolerate ambiguities, to persevere, keep perspective, apply oneself with commitment, and take hard decision; while simultaneously being able to listen to and engage productively with other players from diverse backgrounds (Rivera, 2015). The 21st century professional accountants need to ensure that they are not only job ready and skilled for today but are, in addition:

- sustainability literate (socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally);
- change implementation savvy (able to productively engage a wide variety of people with necessary change competency and help them to deliver it);
- incentive and creative (able to create and test out innovative social, cultural, economic or environmental solutions; and are clear on what concepts like ethical entrepreneurialism entail);
- clear on their considered position on the tacit assumptions driving the 21st century professional and business agenda (assumptions like 'growth is good for everyone'; 'consumption is happiness'; 'ICT is the answer'; and 'globalization is great').

Professional Capability Framework (PCF)

Professional capability framework has been extensively researched in order to help educators, employers, and practitioners to focus on the capabilities that count or do not necessarily count towards effective career performance (Chade-Meng Tan, 2012). It is worth pointing out the distinction between 'capability' and 'competence' as they are often used interchangeably, but incorrectly. Whereas being competent is about delivery of specific tasks in relatively predictable circumstance,

capability is more about responsiveness, creativity, contingent thinking, and growth in relatively uncertain terms.

What distinguishes the most effective performers is their capability, in particular their emotional intelligence and a distinctive contingent capacity to work with and figure out what is going on in troubling situations. Equally, the ability to determine which of the hundreds of problems and

unexpected situations they encounter each week are worth attending to as well as those which are not of much importance. The ability to identify and trace out the consequences of potentially relevant ways of responding to the ones they decide need to be addressed is crucial. While competencies are often fragmented into discrete parcels or lists, capability is a much more holistic, integrating, creative, multi-dimensional and fluid phenomenon. Whereas most conceptions of competence concentrate on assessing demonstrated behaviours and performance, capability is more about what is going on inside the person's head (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008).

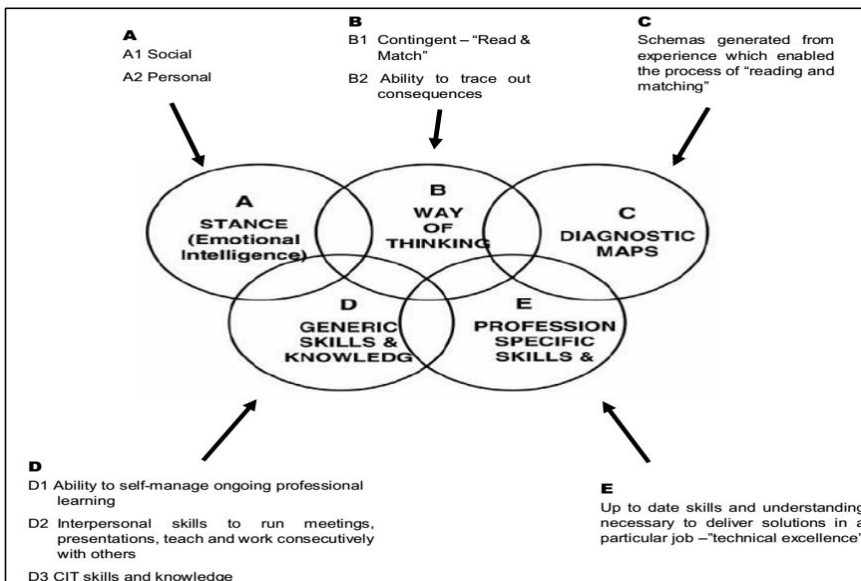
Talents, professional standards, competence, and capability are not necessarily about skills and knowledge but is typically concerned with fitness for purpose (or getting the job done right). Capability however infers a high level of performance i.e. making judgements about the right job to do, suggesting a conceptually higher level of operation than that typically captured in most notions of competence.

Scott, in his classical work in 2001, pictured the five interlocking professional capability components as depicted in Figure 1. He opined that while generic and job or profession-specific skills (D & E) are important, such skills are not sufficient for effective performance. What is of equal importance is that the employee also possesses:

- a high level of social and personal intelligence (A);
- a contingent way of thinking, an ability to read what is going on in each new situation, and 'match' (B);
- a capacity to deftly trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action (B);
- a set of 'diagnostic maps' (C) developed from handling previous practice problems in the unique context.

It is these maps which enable the professional to accurately 'read the signs' and figure out what is really going on in each new situation and to determine when and when not to deploy different generic and technical skills (Scott and Yate, 2002; elaborated in Wells et al, 2009).

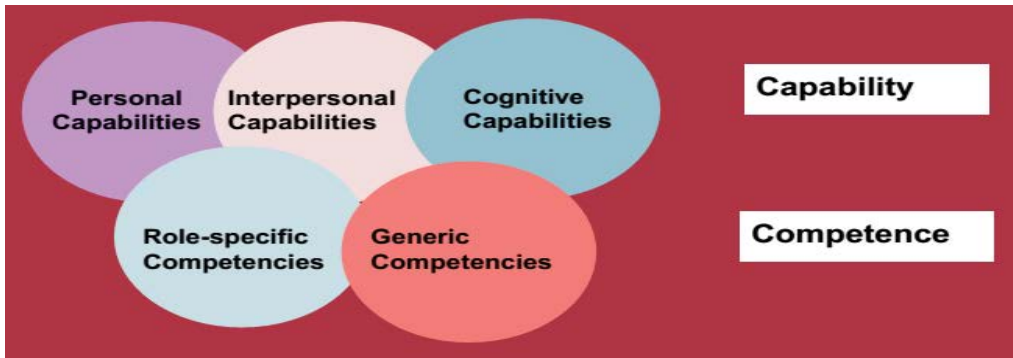
Figure 1: Professional Capability Components



(Source: Adapted Scott et al, 2001, elaborated by Wells et al, 2009)

Interestingly, as quoted by Wells (2009), Arthur Anderson and Co in 1989 recommended a professional capability components as depicted in Figure 1. The same was reinforced by International Federation of Accountants (IFAC, 1996). Through the lenses of Professor Geoff Scott of University of Western Sydney, the PCF components were further explained to comprise of five (5) interlocking dimensions and ten (10) subscales, each with a set of operationally clear, user – validated items as represented in Figure 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Professional Capability Framework



(Source: Adapted Scott, 2016)

Figure 3: Professional Capability Dimensions & Sub-scales

Components	Dimension	Subscale
Capability	Personal	Self-awareness & regulation Decisiveness Commitment
	Interpersonal	Influencing Empathizing
	Cognitive	Diagnosis Strategy Flexibility & responsiveness
Competence	Generic	Transferable skills & Knowledge
	Role or discipline specific	Skills & knowledge necessary for effective role practice in the specific discipline or profession

(Source: Adapted Scott, 2016)

A New World Order and The Talent Hunt Era

As the world changes, so does the work place. Professionals today operate in an environment quite unlike those they first entered, and must regularly update their skills to meet the challenges of a dynamic global market and a more diverse workforce.

The drivers of change impacting the survival skills of the professional accountant stems from stimulating growth in tough economic times, the fast paced phenomenon of technology (digitalization), market globalization, turbo-consumerism, crusade on sustainability of our environment (environmentalism) and significant failures in corporate governance resulting from the technology stock bubble of the late 1990s and the

puncturing of that bubble in 2000. This scenarios created the need to re-innovate professional competency and capability skills to secure the skills the future workforce will need, culminating in the era of talent hunt (Cory et al, 2012).

Talent hunt and competency framework were developed by a number of international agencies to provide corporate learning opportunities, and to design structured career development programmes. Figure 4 is the OECD Competency Framework displaying fifteen core competencies grouped into three clusters: delivery-related competencies, international competencies, and strategic competences.

Figure 4 – Core Competence Summarizing Capabilities



(Source: Adapted OECD, 2014)

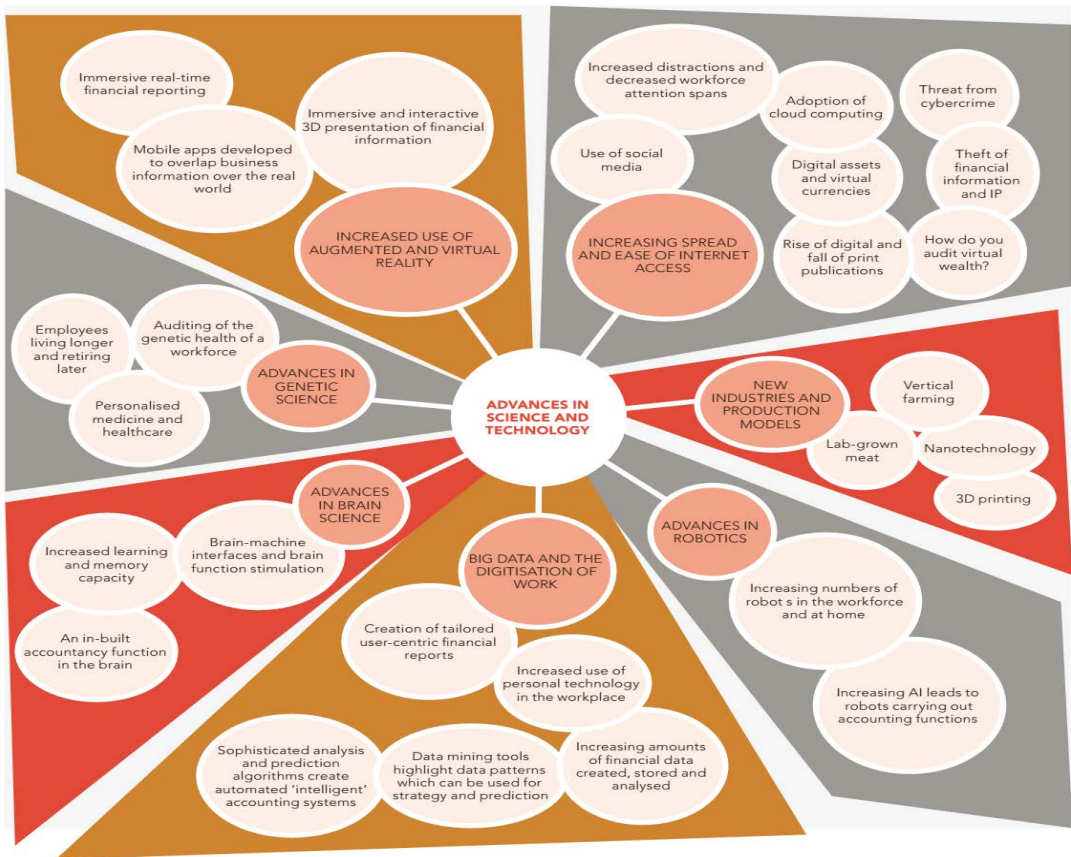
New World Order And The Professional Accountant

Current trends are pushing the professional competency framework of professional accountants towards a predominantly functional or activity-based, rather than skills or attributes-based model of competence. Securing the right quality and quantity of skills will depend on how the accountancy profession can innovate, and respond to the ever changing, dynamic financial and policy environment resulting from rapid economic growth being experienced in the 21st century. There is no escaping the fact that accountancy, and the nature of business as a whole, has changed significantly

today and the accountancy function is much more than the 'bean counter' of the past. (Grandmont, 2004).

The accountancy profession is being influenced by sophisticated and smart technologies (smart software systems) including cloud computing, social media, big data, global markets, changes in the investment landscape, enhanced regulatory framework, and corporate reporting standards – the big picture is seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5: The Big Picture – The Drivers of Change



(Source: Adapted ACCA Global Research Report, 2016)

To provide the needed quality and quantity of skilled professional accountants in this changing landscape, there is the need for the frameworks for collaborative, cross-professional, and development of skills agenda to fill the skills gap conundrum in the area of: cloud computing and smart software systems, big data, digital technology, integrated reporting, and tax planning. Peering into the future, the professional accountant must move from its

comfort zone (good with numbers) and assume more of an advisory role, offering more strategy than figures because technology now manages the execution of most accountancy tasks. Such a move should not necessarily jeopardize the avowed key attributes of detailed-oriented and worthy trusted partner – uniqueness of the professional accountants.

Tomorrow's Talent Hunt for Professional Accountants

Professional quotients for success is a seminal work conducted by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) of the United Kingdom in 2016 titled – Professional Accountants in the Future – Drivers of change and future skills. It postulates that:

“ To continue to add value to employers and clients, professional accountants of the future will need an optimal and changing combination of professional competencies: a collection of technical knowledge, skills, and abilities, combined with interpersonal behaviours and qualities. Intellect, creativity, emotional intelligence, vision, experience, mastery of the digital world and technical skills make up of these ‘magnificent seven’ sought-after skills and qualities. (And) perhaps most crucially, they must all be underpinned by a strong ethical compass ”.

Professional quotients (PQ) for success identifies the following seven (7) competencies and skills as depicted in Figure 6.

- Technical and ethical competencies (TEQ) – The skills and abilities to perform activities consistently to a defined standard while maintaining the highest standards of integrity, independence and skepticism.
- Intelligence (IQ) – The ability to acquire and use knowledge – thinking, reasoning and solving problems.
- Creativity (CQ) – The ability to use existing knowledge in a new situation, to make connections, explore potential outcomes, and generate ideas.
- Digital Quotients (DQ) – The awareness and application of existing and emerging digital technologies, capabilities, practices, strategies and culture.
- Emotional intelligence (EQ) – The ability to identify your own emotions and those of others, harness and apply them to tasks, regulate and manage them.
- Vision (VQ) – the ability to anticipate future trends and facts, and filling the gaps by thinking innovatively.
- Experience (XQ) – The ability and skills to understand customer expectations, meet desired outcomes, and create value.

Figure 6 – The Professional Quotients (PQ) for Success

PQ = TED + XP + IQ + DQ + CQ + EQ + VQ	
Where:	
TED =	Technical & Ethical Competencies
XP =	Experience and Exposure
IQ =	Intelligent Quotient
DQ =	Digital Quotient
CQ =	Creativity Quotient
EQ =	Emotional Intelligence/Quotient
VQ =	Vision Quotient

(Source: Adapted – ACCA Global Research Report, 2016)

Professional accountants must enhance the high levels of knowledge and skill already acquired in the field of accounting so as to be ready (fit for purpose) for the job market as a result of the big changes culminating from globalization, environmental changes, and stakeholder needs (Black, 2012).

Accordingly, the needed skills set (ideal competencies) for sustainable future of the professional accountant encompasses: creative thinking and innovation, learning to learn, lifelong learning, communications, use of emerging technologies, looking beyond the numbers, understanding of data analytic – tools and expert systems, risk management, and corporate reporting among others. Added to these competencies is the emphasis on the International Education Standards (IES) that discusses: morals, discipline, honesty, sacrifice, and conformity. Further, Professional accountants' 'knowledge' must include both theoretical and practical aspects, as well as specific knowledge in the regulations relevant to their field (IAESB, 2015).

Professional accountants must be capable of problem-solving including having skills in analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and decision-making. Their relationship and responsibility competencies should include leadership, teamwork, self-development, and knowledge of their responsibility. The IES is established by the International Accounting Education Standard Board, which is an independent body setting standards in the area of professional accounting education. The IES is one of the most important Standards influencing the development of accounting education to prepare students to join the accounting profession, and consists of eight frameworks, namely:

- the entry requirements into a programme of professional accounting education;
- the contents of a professional accounting education programme and professional skills;
- professional values;
- ethics and attitudes;
- practical experience requirements for aspiring professional accountants;
- the assessment of professional capabilities and competencies;

- continuing professional development; and
- the competency requirement for audit professionals

It is evidently clear that the research-light for tomorrow's accountancy talents is on the prospective future professional accountant who will exhibit passion for the profession. Passion drives people to create, discover, achieve, and improve on performance. It adds a personal intangible dimension to work and give people the motivation to push themselves to the limits of individual capability with commitment and focus. It releases the inherent intrinsic energy that can create real economic value for employers.

The future and talents required belong to persons with different kind of mind – conceptual age and thinkers built on big picture, innovative, creative abilities – typical of the use of the right hand side of the brain.

Professional accountants immersed in invoices, bank statements, ledgers, reconciliations, audit of bank, P/Ash, receivables, payables and fixed assets, which focuses on logical, analytical, and linear thinking – a typical left brain skills would be outdated. The huge technology shift taking place in the accounting profession confirms that soon, a greater degree of what professional accountants do will be automated. It means that the definition of an accountant will change – those that do not change will become irrelevant.

The so called demise and rebirth of the accountancy profession is seen in the explosion of robotics – smart machines as robot advisers (Frey, 2015). The birth of robot advisers currently stands as follows:

- **Robot Adviser 1.0** – Portfolio Management
- **Robot Adviser 2.0** – Cognitive computing in financial planning, accounting, tax, banking, risk management services, legal, and insurance
- **Robot Adviser 3.0** – To incorporate process expertise enabling it to understand personal, financial, and lifestyle concerns creating a personalized family office.

Training received as accountants by many professional accountants was established in a world that was pre-cloud and pre-internet. Cognitive computing in professional areas is much more normative today hence the majority of professional accountants who do not re-train (continued professional development) will surely be replaced by smart machines. The workplace and workforce are changing pretty dramatically as we look forward to more explosive changes fueled by information technology. The entire concept of work is going to become more flexible. The skills needed in the workplace are going to be less IQ and a little bit more about EQ; a lot of IQ knowledge is going to be available at our finger tips, through handheld devices and the computer and technologies that we have at our disposal.

The future professional accountants must be alive to a far wider range of issues and influences as their remit spreads into more and more areas of the business. As indicated and emphasized earlier, alongside technical, ethical, and digital expertise, the future professional accountants must possess another set of skills, perhaps not historically associated so closely with the profession (Ulrich, 2003). Namely creativity, emotional intelligence, and vision – the 'platinum' competences as coined by me. The future professional accountants will need to be able to steer a business on a steady course between risk and opportunity. This requires collaboration, strategic thinking, and a genuine 360 degree understanding of the business – its environment, its people, and its opportunities (ACCA, 2010).

The Accountancy Profession in Ghana

Accounting needs of the Republic of Ghana become evident with the introduction of Income Tax in 1943 in the then Gold Coast. The production of accountants for tax purposes increased the demand of accountancy services both internally in organizations and externally for auditing purposes. This led to the formation of Association of Accountants of Gold Coast in 1954, which eventually fueled by the promulgation of the Companies Code in 1963 led to a landmark in the development of the accountancy profession in

Ghana, with the establishment of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, Ghana, in 1963.

Seemingly, professional competencies and capabilities exhibited by most professional accountants in Ghana centre around manual processing, traditional historical audit, small entity audit, manual calculation and filing of tax returns for income, employment, and sales.

Technology awareness and application is limited to usage as exhibited in Figure 7:

Figure 7: Technology Awareness and Application Usages (Low Level)

GENERAL ICT USAGES	
Data Entry	Preparing Payroll
Writing Letters	Reconciling Bank Accounts
Emailing & Communication	Making General Ledger Adjustments
Tracking Accounts Payable	Preparing Working Papers
Tracking Accounts Receivable	Preparing Audit Plans
Tracking Inventory	Testing Companies Accounting Information System
Verification & Validation of Database Information	Producing Financial Statements
Validation of Companies Website Information	Preparing Budgets
Reviewing the Work of Subordinates	Preparing Financial Estimates
Reviewing Economic Performance of Companies	Electronic Reporting of Financial Information
Performing Ratio Analysis	Assist in Decision Making Process
Extensible Business Reporting Language (XBRL)	Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)
SysTrust and/or Webtrust	Word Processors and Spreadsheets
Management Information System (MIS)	Tailored Auditing Software
Accounting Information System (AIS)	

(Source: Author's Construction)

Figure 8: Technology Awareness and Application Usages (Low Level)

GENERAL ICT USAGES	
Verification & Validation of Database Information	Testing Companies Accounting Information System
Validation of Companies Website Information	Electronic Reporting of Financial Information
Reviewing the Work of Subordinates	Assist in Decision Making Process
Reviewing Economic Performance of Companies	Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)
Extensible Business Reporting Language (XBRL)	Tailored Auditing Software
SysTrust and/or Webtrust	
Management Information System (MIS)	
Accounting Information System (AIS)	

(Source: Author’s Construction)

The use of high level technology application, as depicted in Figure 8, by the accountancy profession in Ghana as well as specialist services is mostly seen in the current Big 4 practicing firms and companies quoted on the Ghana Stock Exchange. Professional accountants in Ghana should, as a matter of urgency, ensure increased use of and dependence on emerging technologies such as cloud and big data; effective computer skills including Microsoft applications and financial database, knowledge of net suite and other accounting systems, financial ERP systems and oracle systems. Additionally, professional accountants must sharpen their professional quotients in the areas of business acumen, understanding of money laundering, forensic audit, cross-functional working knowledge, and the ability to take a more global perspective of 21st century developments including international best practices and frameworks on governance and risk management and practical ethics.

Professional accountants providing services in industry and commerce in Ghana must hone in on the following skills to offer business advice as a trusted partner:

- Skills to analyse a firm and facilitate growth of a firm
- SME management skills
- International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) technical knowledge
- Web-based business skills

Professional accountants in Ghana should also embrace the future and be opened to change. They must build relationships by collaborating with other professionals in this global community. The roles and responsibilities of professional accountants in Ghana are changing fast and there is the urgency to take a more global view of the business environment, and to develop and apply a broader range of technical accounting and personal communications skills. The most important areas needed to fill the skills gap of the professional accountants in Ghana are: knowledge of emerging issues, communications and smart technologies, business partnering and relationship building, and advanced investment appraisal and analysis.

Building Future Accountancy Skills Ecosystem

In summary, professional accountants constitute an important source of future leaders in business and wealth creation. Development of wider skills in accountancy is not only important for the profession to secure the right quality and quantity of skills needed to deliver superior service but also to secure its future workforce skills in the 21st century.

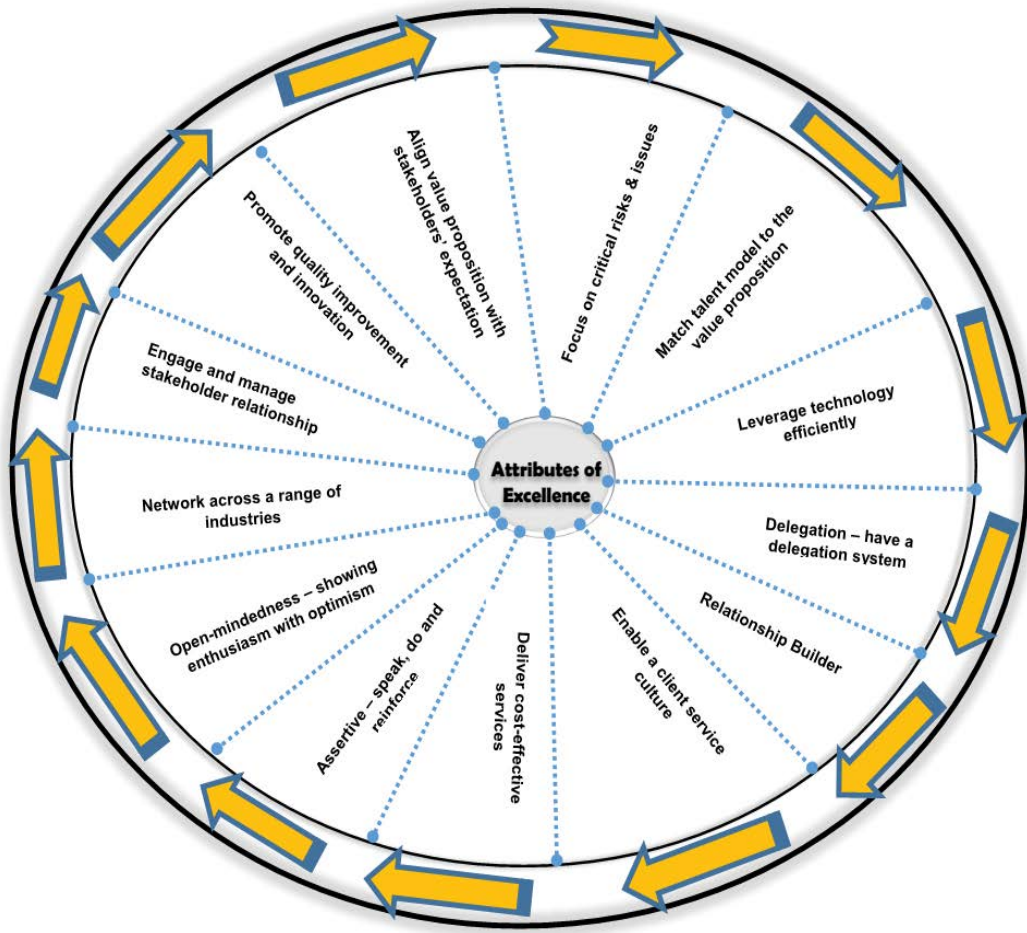
Flowing from documentary study and interactions with key employers as discussed in this paper, the skills ecosystem in accountancy in the 21st century is summarized in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: 21st Century Accountancy Skills Ecosystem Continuum

Hard Skills	Added Advantage	Soft Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial Accounting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong Ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adept in smart technologies & shows robust flexibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management Accounting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client-centric 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taxation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Killer Time Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extreme creativity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit, Fraud Detection & Investigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good listener & attention to details 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good at marketing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analytical Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orally expressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to work with diverse people and diverse professionals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology/Data Mining/ Data Analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionalism & professionally skeptical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full of Determination & Confident
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge Seeker & calculated Risk Taker
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team player & collaborator 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk Management & Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative & creative 	

what a professional accountant should be able to provide. Exceeding the basics is what will make a professional accountant stand out, and the public will recognize you for that. The great professional accountants in the 21st century would not have to completely change who they are as such. Instead, they would have to maximize certain core aspects of their personalities in addition to the acquisition of the skills ecosystem depicted in Figure 9 above. These personality traits or attributes of excellence are shown in Figure 10 – The Wheel of Professional Accountants’ Attributes of Excellence.

Figure 10: The Wheel of Professional Accountants’ Attributes of Excellence



(Source: Author’s Construction)

Conclusion

In the 21st century, professional accountants will need to spend less time dealing with financial accounting, management accounting (budgets etc.) and tax issues because of computerization. More of their time must hence be spent learning and equipping themselves about product and process technology, operations systems, marketing strategy, and behavioral and organization issues. Familiarity with the business, understanding the industry, interpersonal and leadership skills, business proficiency and communication skills are essential for the 'new' breed of professional accountants.

To meet the ever-changing global economic demands, professional accountants should inculcate into their innate personal characteristics, the core values of relationship, integrity and excellence. The said three values will help the professional accountants to deliver their expert services to anticipate and meet the rising

expectation of the society; take opportunities in a better way to face the challenges of fierce global competition fueled by technology explosion; strengthen the changes in the economy/business and develop the path to success by adopting changes in knowledge management, skills, and also recognize the need for services as world class advisors.

Finally, professional accountants will need to explain business strategy, especially finance, and performance: defend investments and manage the conflicting expectations of stakeholders both inside and outside organizations. Teamwork, language skills, multicultural awareness and the ability to collaborate, influence, persuade, speak articulately, and present to others inside and outside the enterprise on issues of finance and accountancy will be vital for the survival and sustainability of tomorrow's professional accountants.

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