THE NEW SPACE RACE

How today’s accountants are helping businesses outpace their competition in a digital-first world
Remember learning about the Space Race? In the 1950s and '60s, the world watched in anticipation as the United States and the Soviet Union battled to see which country would first achieve spaceflight capability. As the two nations pressed to land the first astronauts on the moon, they quickly developed and implemented new technologies — from satellites to wireless headphones — that were once deemed impossible at the turn of the 20th century. Technology advancement and adoption made the impossible possible.

In 2020, a new race has emerged among businesses of all sizes and industries. Recent advancements in technology, along with rapidly evolving consumer demands, have put many companies in a constant sprint to outperform their competition in a digital-first world. A 2019 technology vision survey by Accenture, a global leader in consulting and technology services, found that the pace of innovation had accelerated over the past three years according to 94% of business and IT executives surveyed. In other words, organizations are trying to stay relevant by disrupting their operations with emerging technologies.
Among the adopters of these emerging technologies are CPAs and accounting professionals. Advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and blockchain now permeate the services they deliver, and task-oriented projects that used to take up sizable amounts of time are now being automated. This shift has given accounting professionals the opportunity to focus more on using data to drive their organization’s finance strategy and create business partnerships while also raising the bar for newly minted CPAs. In addition to core accounting knowledge, entry-level candidates are now expected to have savvy business, communication, and technology skills such as data analytics and cybersecurity.

The rise of AI

One of the most in-demand emerging technologies is artificial intelligence – machines using software to analyze data and complete tasks at a much faster rate than humans ever could.

Organizations such as public accounting firms, Fortune 500 companies, and government agencies have already experienced its value in their everyday operations. According to a 2020 survey conducted by the World Economic Forum and the Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance, 77% of business leaders believe artificial intelligence will be an essential business driver across the financial services industry in the short run and 64% of those respondents also believe that artificial intelligence will soon be adopted within all key business functions.

For many organizations, the race to implement AI isn’t about increasing production speed – it’s about opening staff bandwidth to pursue new opportunities to create value. In theory, these changes could allow businesses to greatly scale operations without taking on excessive overhead.

However, with any new technology, implementation has its challenges. The same survey by the World Economic Forum and the Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance found that 80% of fintech and incumbent financial institutions believe the access to people who possess in-demand technology skills is one of two major obstacles they face when implementing AI, regardless of sectors and entity types.

Similar concerns exist for other growing technologies such as blockchain, data analytics, and cybersecurity. As a result, organizations are expanding the roles of their staff, investing in technical training, and hiring accounting and finance professionals who already possess digital, technical, communication, leadership and business skills. It’s up to current accounting professionals to keep up.

The ‘upskill’ takeover

At an early age, we’re taught by our parents and teachers about the power of education and to never stop learning. Embracing this philosophy is what put historical figures such as Katherine Johnson and Henry Ford ahead of their time.

As advances in technology allow accounting and finance professionals to take on new and exciting roles, many businesses are emphasizing lifelong learning to remain competitive in their field and help employees develop broader skill sets – an effort that produced the term “upskilling.”

“You can’t just hire new people to fill skills gaps. The idea that finance people can learn a skill set that can last them 20 years is long gone. There is a need to constantly train: to learn, unlearn, and then relearn, and to have a culture of learning throughout the organization,” said Andrew Harding, FCMA, CGMA, chief executive, Management Accounting at the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants.

Staff often have different outlets to both sharpen previous skills and learn new skills. Accounting and finance professionals can follow industry-specific news outlets, like the Journal of Accountancy and FM magazine, or attend conferences to learn from industry leaders. However, to earn the greatest return on investment in their careers, many professionals turn to certifications to grow their skills.
The value of credentials

Pursuing a credential is one of the best ways young professionals can prove they have mastered in-demand skills. A certification communicates to employers that the person is a continuous learner—a key trait in a rapidly evolving profession. Not only do credentials differentiate individuals from their peers, but they also afford them the opportunity to earn a higher salary and land greater responsibilities.

Many accounting students in the United States who are interested in a career in public accounting pursue the certified public accountant (CPA) credential. This credential distinguishes professionals who have met extensive education and experience requirements and have passed all four parts of the rigorous CPA Exam. The requirements to obtain the CPA licensure are what make the credential so well-respected and admired by accounting professionals, business leaders, and the general public.

For students who have decided to work in finance or accounting and have opted out of a career in public accounting, the Chartered Global Management Accountant® (CGMA) designation can provide another path.

The CGMA designation is the most widely held management accounting credential with over 150,000 professionals represented. It was created by the American Institute of CPAs® (AICPA) and The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants® (CIMA) in 2012 to meet growing employer demands for business professionals with a broader leadership skill set. If you have a real interest in strategy and want to directly contribute to the success of an organization, the CGMA designation can help you gain the well-rounded skills needed to not only analyze data, but also communicate and act on the results to a global audience.

Pursuing the CGMA designation early as a senior-level college student can help provide some distinct advantages as you begin your search for employment. In addition to gaining new skills, Kathy Lockhart, CPA, CGMA, vice president and controller at Noodles & Co., notes, “pursuing the CGMA in college shows that you’ve done something very rigorous and that will put you ahead of everyone else coming out of school.”

How to earn the CGMA designation

Earning the CGMA designation means that you have a wide range of business, technical, communication, and digital skills that employers need. In a world where emerging technology is greatly evolving the accounting profession, earning this designation communicates that you’ll possess the talents needed to drive results.

Obtaining the designation means that you must have a college degree, complete the CGMA Finance Leader-
ship Program, and have three years of relevant work experience. The CGMA Finance Leadership Program is an online, self-paced platform that’s designed to allow you to start the program while simultaneously completing the academic and work experience requirements.

The learning and assessments are divided into three levels; you will start at different levels depending on your current subject expertise, degree type, and whether you have a CPA license. For example, marketing or communication degree holders will be required to complete all three levels to acquire the necessary foundational competencies. This isn’t the case for accounting and finance degree holders, who can use the knowledge they’ve already gained to start at higher levels in the program.

Regardless of where you start, you should expect each level of the program to take eight months to one year to complete – this includes the learning program, the case study exam review course, and sitting for the exam.

The CGMA Finance Leadership Program case study exam is much different from traditional, multiple-choice exams. Instead of cramming knowledge, you can demonstrate and apply the skills you’ve learned through real-world business scenarios on the computer-based case study exam.

“The exam is a great way to test your knowledge and to build your confidence by developing comprehensive solutions within time constraints,” said Lex Waters, a Master of Accounting graduate of Brigham Young University who recently passed the CGMA management case study exam. “In school, students often spend too much time focusing on specific details. The case study exams allow you to apply your understanding and develop comprehensive solutions that cover the totality of the business.”

Upon passing each required case study exam, you’ll be awarded a certificate to help communicate your new skill sets to current or prospective employers.

### Earning a CGMA student scholarship

Similar to seeking the CPA, you will need to pay a fee to start the CGMA Finance Leadership Program. While many employers cover a portion or total amount to help upskill their staff, many college students may not have access to the funds needed to start this journey. But don’t fret. If you are a college student, a CGMA Finance Leadership Program student scholarship may be an option.

The Association of International Certified Professional Accountants is offering a one-year, all access, scholarship to senior-level undergraduate accounting and finance students; graduate-level students pursuing a master’s degree in accounting, finance, or business administration are also eligible.

To qualify for consideration, you’ll need to possess a 3.0 minimum GPA and express an interest in pursuing a career in accounting within your application. Scholarship awards will operate on a rolling acceptance policy for 2020. There is no set deadline to apply, and the Association will continually review applications throughout the year. However, there is an advantage to applying early as spots will fill up quickly.

You can apply online by visiting https://linktr.ee/CGMAstudent.

### To infinity and beyond

As businesses race to integrate emerging technologies in their organization, the need will only grow to find accounting professionals with broad skill sets. What is deemed as an emerging technology today may be considered prehistoric in 20 years. The unknowns of tomorrow are why developing a broad skill set provided by the CGMA designation is so important.

You can’t predict the future and know precisely how technology will shape business in the next 30 years. However, you can prepare by possessing a mixture of technical, digital, business, leadership, and communication skills.

By doing so, you’ll set your career up for infinite possibilities.
Showcase yourself as a strategic leader.

Earn the designation for business professional recognized around the globe.

“...It is a great learning opportunity where you can gain insight on the best practices in the curriculum, which applies to the industry that you work in and other industries, and apply it to get a competitive advantage for yourself and your organization.”

Amin Mohomed, CPA, CGMA
Assistant Project Manager, Financial Accounting Standards Board

Learn more about the CGMA® Finance Leadership Program: A lifelong professional learning journey that puts you on the path to jump-start your career. You’ll learn and acquire the skills it takes to become a strategic, confident, secure and insightful leader who will influence and guide groups and decisions within an organization.

Learn more about the program, powered by the AICPA, at Linktree/CGMAstudent.