

Chartered Accountants and Life-Long Learning

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and re-learn,” rightly said Alvin Toffler. Mahatma Gandhi, who had a special aptitude for learning new things and who even learnt the basics of accountancy while preparing for a legal case, had said: *Live as if you were to die tomorrow, learn as if you were to live forever.* These words of wisdom are worth taking note of in the Indian accountancy profession, which is constantly evolving and taking up ever newer roles of professional excellence amid ever rising expectations in the country’s knowledge economy.

In the last more than 67 years since the inception of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) on July 1, 1949, the Indian accountancy profession has undergone a paradigm shift, and the phenomenon continues to this day. The key to this ongoing transition is constant capacity building, life-long learning and being in tune with times. Today, the Chartered Accountants are regarded as an *‘institution of public trust’* besides being *‘conscience keepers of economy’*. It was in this backdrop that the visionary former President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam acknowledged them as *‘Partners in National Development’*.

No doubt Indian accountancy profession has come a long way, but still there are miles to go. And this will be possible only through constant capacity building in both the core and the emerging new areas, and harnessing technology. In fact, the foremost challenges are to keep abreast of rapidly evolving technological tools as well as regulatory frameworks, which means going for comprehensive all-encompassing knowledge upgrade.

While emphasising on technology-driven capacity building, let’s take stock and analyse how new technologies are being applied across the profession. The trend focuses on three areas of technology that have particular relevance. First, given that accountancy is grounded in financial data, improved capabilities in data, including big data and analytics, will have a significant impact. The importance of data also emphasises the need for good cyber security. Second, technologies such as cloud, mobile and social media deeply change the way that we can interact with clients and across businesses. Third, new financial technologies, including digital-currencies and distributed ledgers, will also have significant relevance to financial services and associated areas of accounting. On the basis of these technology trends, we see many examples of innovation across the profession globally. For example, Cloud accounting is now mainstream in many countries and enabling greater collaboration between the accountant and the client. In addition, Cyber Security has risen up in corporate agendas in the wake of large-scale data breaches, providing opportunities for new assurance and advisory services.

Today, the all-beneficial automation being offered by I-T also pose a threat to many tasks associated with accounting profession, which demands the professionals to redefine their core offerings. According to the book, *The Future of the Professions* authored by Richard and Daniel Susskind, the accountancy profession’s future rests on inventing useful new tasks and applying knowledge of expertise on the task at hand and effectively playing decision making, planning and advisory roles, which are least susceptible to automation.

In recent Indian scenario, which calls for continuous capacity building, newer opportunities have emerged in the garb of challenges—particularly in the spheres of ‘Ind AS converged with IFRS,’ ‘Companies Act 2013,’ ‘Goods and Services Tax,’ ‘Income Computation and Disclosure Standards,’ ‘CSR Reporting,’ ‘Big Data and Data Analytics,’ ‘XBRL,’ ‘Integrated Reporting,’ ‘e-Commerce,’ ‘m-commerce,’ ‘Environmental Accounting,’ ‘International Taxation,’ ‘Technology Consulting,’ ‘ERP Control Design and Implementation,’ ‘Forensic Accounting,’ ‘Fraud Detection,’ ‘Cloud Computing,’ ‘Information System Audit and e-governance,’ etc.

However, by virtue of their tough training, Indian CAs can easily convert the challenges into opportunities, provided they dedicate themselves to continuous self education, skill upgrade and a life-long learning. The ICAI is very much alive to the need of capacity building of its members through its various committees. Special focus has been on women CAs, who comprise more than 23% of ICAI membership, and young members (of or below 40 years of age) who constitute 74% of the ICAI membership strength. According to ICAI data (as on 3rd October 2016), the average age of a total of 2,64,669 Indian CAs is 38.5 years. Further, the ICAI members are required to spend certain minimum number of hours in a year as part of learning initiatives.

Besides, a separate Committee for Capacity Building of Members in Practice is exclusively espousing the cause of comprehensive capacity building. Harnessing technology for professional excellence is a key area that is being given special attention. According to IFAC, the Artificial intelligence (AI)—the capacity of machines or software to create and exhibit intelligence— could become “an invaluable and enabling partner in shaping the future accountancy profession”. Besides, ICAI is presently offering 16 Certificate Courses and four Post Qualification Courses for its members to build new skill sets.

To conclude, let’s recall the saying: *“formal education will earn you a living, self-education will earn you a fortune.”* One cannot disagree with Henry Ford when he says that *“anyone who stops learning is old, and anyone who keeps learning stays young.”* So let’s commit ourselves to lifelong learning. ■

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