Embrace technology to develop warmer client relationships

A clear message at Accountex was that taking your practice digital offers more opportunities to care for clients.

For some time, when accountants have talked about the impact of automation, there has been a degree of fear as well as a degree of excitement. While most are happy to see mundane tasks completed in a fraction of the time by automated or artificially intelligent applications, some are worried about a world in which they no longer know their role.

The accountants speaking in ACCA’s theatre at Accountex – Europe’s largest accountancy and finance conference and expo – took a different view. Delegates repeatedly heard that there was nothing to fear from automation and that, in fact, they have a more hands-on role to play than ever before.

More time with your clients
Xero’s Neil Sheehan opened proceedings with a look at the digital practice journey. He explained that Xero’s research shows that firms which fully embrace the cloud actually have more staff, better client retention and higher revenue. This is because automating simple tasks means that accountants can spend more time listening to their clients.

This was a theme revisited by Andrew Van De Beek of Australia’s Illumin8. He argued that clients don’t want an accountant – they want a person, someone who understands their business, their goals and their concerns. He described Illumin8’s vision as helping clients to spend time on what matters to them most.

Sharon Pocock of Kinder Pocock echoed these sentiments in her session on advisory: ‘The best thing you can do for your clients is listen,’ she said, describing how technology not only makes many tasks quicker but also allows you more touch points with your clients.

Specialist people doing specialist work
Many of the speakers also touched on the challenge technology poses to recruiting and retaining good accountants. The days of starting out performing painstaking and tedious tasks are over. Technology takes care of that. So, accounting firms are, in many ways, having to re-think how and who they recruit, and how they keep hold of them.
Advalorem, a UK-based practice, described its three-stage approach:

- test personalities
- get your most experienced accountants to sit alongside your most technology-savvy team members
- give your new recruits responsibility early.

Personality testing also helps them to place the right people in the parts of the business where they will thrive. Van De Beek also pointed out that personality testing – whether formal (as at Advalorem) or more informal, like part of his company’s approach (taking the interviewee out to lunch with the team) allows you to test whether potential new recruits are ‘culturally on the bus’ – that they understand what kind of business you want to be.

Sitting your experienced employees alongside your new, tech-savvy, recruits has two effects, according to Advalorem’s Nikki Adams. First, your new recruits learn complex client-focused skills from the oldest hands in the business. Second, your experienced employees get to see how digital natives integrate technology into their working day and, crucially, they can ask questions.

This has a better effect than sending your more experienced and less tech-savvy team members on training days. But pairing up typically younger and newer team members with other, long-standing staff has another effect: it helps to bridge the generation gap and means that both sides can appreciate the skills and approach of the other.

Giving early responsibility to new hires is, according to Advalorem’s young recruit Alex Black, key. Black described how the new generation of recruits tends to want to take more ownership of their projects and be more entrepreneurial. Advalorem has found that putting their ‘millennials’ in front of clients early is a good way of motivating and developing them – and thus holding on to them. For staff at every level, said Adams, it is about recognising and utilising their particular experience.

Both Adams and Black spoke enthusiastically about their ‘millennial club’: a group of younger staff members that drive digital change in the business.

**Making the transition**

But many of the speakers pointed out that no matter how proactive the tech-savvy and no matter how willing the less tech-competent among your staff are, taking an entire practice digital is not easy.

Xero’s Sheehan talked the audience through how to make the process as painless as possible. His first piece of advice was to be honest and recognise that accountancy as a profession has often been resistant to change. But the single most important thing that practices going digital can do, said Sheehan, was to ‘understand the processes behind caring for your clients’. This means that firms can make the most out of their technology.

As Nigel Adams of Advalorem pointed out, ‘technology is only an enabler’. Taking your processes digital is only one step towards becoming a fully digital practice. The
hard work is in understanding that clients now expect accountants to do and be more. ‘What’s falling away is high prices for low-value work,’ said Adams.

Accounting firms need a vision of how they’re going to care for their clients. And, as Van De Beek pointed out, care leads to referrals.

**Don’t throw everything into technology**

But focusing everything on technology has its dangers. Illumin8’s Van De Beek argued that firms who throw themselves head-first into applying technology to everything they do will only grow their revenue and not their profit. ‘Randomly implementing technology is not sustainable,’ he said. Businesses should conduct a careful review of what technology is available to them, how it might fit into their business and what its purpose is.

Practice Ignition’s Trent Mclaren advised that firms look to implement technology in five key areas:

- automation of simple tasks
- real time reporting
- workflow planning
- instant messaging
- video conferencing.

Technology, said Mclaren, isn’t just about doing the job better and more efficiently. It’s also about quality of life.