



Think Ahead

PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANTS AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATIONS



About ACCA

ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the global professional body for professional accountants.

We're a thriving global community of **233,000** members and **536,000** future members based in **178** countries and regions, who work across a wide range of sectors and industries. We uphold the highest professional and ethical values.

We offer everyone everywhere the opportunity to experience a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management. Our qualifications and learning opportunities develop strategic business leaders, forward-thinking professionals with the financial, business and digital expertise essential for the creation of sustainable organisations and flourishing societies.

Since 1904, being a force for public good has been embedded in **our purpose**. In December 2020, we made commitments to the **UN Sustainable Development Goals** which we are measuring and will report on in our annual integrated report.

We believe that accountancy is a cornerstone profession of society and is vital helping economies, organisations and individuals to grow and prosper. It does this by creating robust trusted financial and business management, combating corruption, ensuring organisations are managed ethically, driving sustainability, and providing rewarding career opportunities.

And through our cutting-edge research, we lead the profession by answering today's questions and preparing for the future. We're a not-for-profit organisation.

Find out more at [accaglobal.com](https://www.accaglobal.com)



About this report:

This report explores the future of the accountancy profession, examining the drivers of change shaping sustainable organisations as we look ahead, and the next decade of work for finance professionals as well as the capabilities and the skills most prized.

Building on ACCA's global research programme over the past two years it also includes a survey of over two thousand responses of finance professionals further enriched by a wide ranging and extensive engagement programme of roundtables, interviews and focus groups across the globe which explored further the drivers of change, as well as informing the core capabilities needed in the future for professional accountants in whatever role they perform.

In the decade ahead, this is the professional accountant playing an integral role at the heart of sustainable organisations of the future as the sustainable business and finance professional.

ACCA foreword



Helen Brand
Chief executive, ACCA

This is the decade of the professional accountant as the sustainable business and finance professional, with a vital role to play in driving positive change – it’s an opportunity the profession has to grasp.

The amount of change we’re seeing across global markets in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis is unprecedented, and many of the trends that were already developing prior to the onset of the pandemic are accelerating.

This new research identifies five dynamic areas of change over the next decade that will affect how organisations – from SMEs to large corporates to public sector bodies – seek to deliver long term, sustainable value. All of this is compounded by the very significant challenges presented by the growing environmental emergency.

These changes will indelibly impact and shape the role of the professional accountant as the sustainable business and finance professional as they help organisations navigate through these challenges.

The Covid-19 crisis has also put a spotlight on systemic societal challenges across the world which demand new thinking and recast the role of business within society. Organisations of all sizes must also continue to grapple with accelerating technological and extensive workforce change.

Yet these developments also present brilliant opportunities for the accountancy profession over the coming years. A future path ahead that reinforces and widens the role of professional accountants, and opens new doors.

Sustainable business and finance professionals will be essential in helping organisations in all sectors create long term value that benefits all stakeholders, playing their part in building a more prosperous future for wider society. From driving good business decision-making, as business leaders, partners and analysts, and helping to execute better strategies and activities that deliver more sustainable value, through to championing the ESG agenda. From emerging practices in audit that help strengthen the integrity of business performance, through to evolving assurance practices that support organisations in grappling with the challenges of climate change.

The role of the sustainable business and finance professional in all organisations of the future will be vital. And as this research shows, to capitalise on new opportunities, they’ll need to be equipped with a number of core emerging capabilities – must-have skills and behaviours that are essential across all roles and at any career stage in the future which underpin professional competence and effective performance.

Global engagement

In developing this research and identifying the drivers of change and core capabilities needed for the future ACCA undertook an extensive global engagement process starting in October 2020. This included roundtables, focus groups, consultations with ACCA expert groups and interviews held across the world. These activities were supplemented by a global member survey and qualitative research. We would like to thank everyone for their participation in these engagements that have supported the production of this report.

Roundtable, focus group and interview locations:

North America (US and Canada)
MESA (Middle East and South Asia)
Western Europe
Ireland
UK
Sri Lanka
Africa
Central & Eastern Europe
China
ASEAN
India
Singapore
Malaysia
Nigeria
Pakistan
Turkey
Vietnam



ACCA Technical expert groups:

Accountants for Business Global Forum and
Technology Global Forum (joint session)
Sustainability Global Forum
Public Sector Global Forum
SME Global Forum
Expert group – audit and tax
Expert group –
performance management
Expert group – financial
and risk management
Expert group – corporate
and business reporting
Talent and HR leader
Leaders of tomorrow roundtable

Preface

It isn't the future we perhaps expected when we last wrote a report envisioning what lay ahead for the accountancy profession in 2016. Who could have predicted this? Not many did, in truth. As the Covid-19 pandemic has raged across the planet, livelihoods have been turned upside down and governments have been rocked. It's true there have been some winners but mostly we have collectively lost; estimates abound – in trillions of dollars – of the financial impact from this unprecedented economic crisis. Beyond the money, the true social and health fallout is incalculable. As always, the poorest have been worst hit.

But perhaps not all is lost. The Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) crisis has reminded us of the role of business in society: organisations large and small will play an essential role in forging a better world for the longer term beyond the ravages of the pandemic. There is a growing appetite to address prevailing socio-economic injustices exacerbated by the crisis: growing income disparity, unequal access to employment opportunities; and inadequate provision of public services, to name a few. Yet while the lessons from the pandemic are profound and wide ranging, its impacts and consequences are simply dwarfed by the menaces of an even worse humanitarian crisis on the horizon: climate change. As the G7 leaders meet in the UK in 2021, and

with the UN Climate change (COP 26) scheduled for later this year, climate change is a call to arms like no other as governments, businesses, institutional investors and asset managers across the world race to reduce carbon emissions. In the face of this looming environmental emergency, disruption is all around, markets are shifting, workplaces are transforming, stakeholder activism is increasing, and capital is increasingly drawn to organisations that are trusted, ethical, and environmentally friendly; organisations that seek to create long-term value for all, not just for the selected few.

But what has this to do with the future of accountancy?

ORGANISATIONS LARGE AND SMALL WILL PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN FORGING A BETTER WORLD FOR THE LONGER TERM BEYOND THE RAVAGES OF THE PANDEMIC.



The **human touch** in the **decade ahead**

One of the more acute observations from the Covid-19 crisis is that those organisations that had invested in digital transformation before the onset of the global pandemic were better placed to weather the economic outfall and respond. Technology has been key to helping organisations execute their crisis management responses and grapple with an unfolding risk landscape. The crisis then further accelerated technology adoption as businesses large and small rapidly reassessed their value chains, explored new channels to market, fast-tracked and switched new services or product offerings and reconfigured their operating models. This digital change is now laying the foundations for the future as we look towards the next decade. New technologies will change work.

Yet the true impact of this disruption is most glaringly obvious not through the lens of technology transformation, but through the narrative of workforce change. The pandemic has turned on its head many prevailing work orthodoxies and raised fundamental questions about the purpose of work, how work gets done, where it gets done, and who does it. It's unleashed the art of the possible for remote working, virtual collaboration and work beyond the 9-5, with productivity measures soaring in some cases... yet employee anxiety and mental health challenges are at an all-time high, working days are longer, job security concerns are escalating and detractors of the 'new normal' claim innovation has been stifled. The paradox is this: in a world of work so innately technology led, the pandemic has exposed that work remains above all else a deeply human experience.

This is particularly true of the accountancy profession as we look towards the next decade. The work change we will see for accountants isn't just a transition to 'hybrid work', a question of redesigning office spaces or finance teams with distributed footprints. It's much more fundamental. This is about a renewed sense of human connection and purpose, the opportunity for the profession to make a real difference that necessitates human as well as digital ingenuity. It's a story of skills transformation as jobs are re-imagined, work constructs are changed and careers are disrupted, and where technology advances either complement human endeavour, or where the current limitations of digital capabilities remain exposed.

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Introducing the sustainable business and finance professional

The 2020s in accountancy are a decade in which the accountancy profession is integral to building sustainable organisations that generate both financial returns and long-term value for society. This is the decade of the professional accountant as the sustainable business and finance professional.

They'll be essential to driving positive business change and supporting economies and organisations across the world to build back better. From ensuring the strong governance and sustainable financial development of organisations, through to taking a leading role in critical challenges facing businesses today, such as responding effectively to the imperatives of climate change or championing the natural capital and environmental, social and governance (ESG) agenda, they'll use their skills, ethics and professional judgement, acting in the public interest to help create new value opportunities for organisations in all sectors across the world.

It presents an opportunity to make real, impactful change at the heart of sustainable organisations by helping businesses take the right decisions to create long term value, as well as ensuring that value is protected and externally reported in meaningful ways. This is the sustainable business and finance professional bringing to bear their technical mastery and digital know-how to support organisations to deliver long term sustainable societal value.

The decade ahead presents brilliant emerging opportunities for the sustainable business and finance professional at the heart of sustainable organisations.

CAREER ZONE 1:

TRANSFORMATION DRIVERS

CAREER ZONE 3:

ASSURANCE PROVIDERS

CAREER ZONE 2:

ENTERPRISE ANALYSTS

CAREER ZONE 4:

STAKEHOLDER REPORTERS



THIS IS THE DECADE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANT AS THE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS AND FINANCE PROFESSIONAL.

Report overview:

PART 1: Drivers of change

Trends that are impacting the sustainable organisation of the future and the role of sustainable business and finance professionals:

1. **Economy**
2. **Environment**
3. **Society**
4. **Technology**
5. **Workforce**

PART 2: Core capabilities

The must have skills needed in all future roles:



PART 3: Future career opportunities

The contribution sustainable business and finance professionals will make to sustainable organisations of the future:

CAREER ZONE 1:

TRANSFORMATION DRIVERS

CAREER ZONE 2:

ENTERPRISE ANALYSTS



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1. Drivers of change

Key trends that are impacting the sustainable organisation of the future and the role of sustainable business and finance professionals (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1: Drivers of change shaping the sustainable organisation of the future and the role of sustainable business and finance professionals over the next decade



2. Core capabilities of the future

We see a number of emerging core capabilities that will be needed by the sustainable business and finance professional of the future. These core capabilities are a direct response to changing organisational needs in the face of the drivers of change we have identified, as organisations seek to create sustainable long-term value.

They reflect the skills, knowledge and behaviours required for an ACCA-qualified accountant to meet the future needs and demands of the profession. Individuals will need to balance these core capabilities to fit their role and stage of career.

The core capabilities are at the heart of ACCA's new Career Navigator (Figure 2), which supports ACCA members in navigating their own career route, enabling them to explore potential career destinations, acquire new skills and connect with the latest jobs and talent.

THESE CORE CAPABILITIES ARE A DIRECT RESPONSE TO CHANGING ORGANISATIONAL NEEDS IN THE FACE OF THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE WE HAVE IDENTIFIED, AS ORGANISATIONS SEEK TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE LONG-TERM VALUE.



FIGURE 2: The career navigator and core capabilities



3. Future career opportunities

Our latest research identifies four new emerging career zones of opportunity for the sustainable business and finance professional where they can make vital contributions to ensure organisations are sustainable for the future through the type of jobs they perform.

The zones represent brilliant areas of accountancy jobs in all sectors and industries across the globe, in which finance professionals will help create new organisational value, protect existing organisational value or communicate that value to the outside world through their reporting activities. These new jobs go way beyond signing off a set of financial accounts or producing

a variance report. They're much more multidisciplinary and call into play the broader skills, capabilities and knowledge that complement finance and accountancy skills. These future roles are much more data and technology driven, providing finance professionals with purposeful jobs and great career options for the future (Figure 3).

CAREER ZONE 1:

TRANSFORMATION DRIVERS



CREATE VALUE:

Helping organisations execute the right business decisions to create sustainable value



PROTECT VALUE:

Helping organisations establish and execute processes that protect sustainable value



REPORT VALUE:

Helping organisations report value externally in meaningful and transparent ways

CAREER ZONE 3:

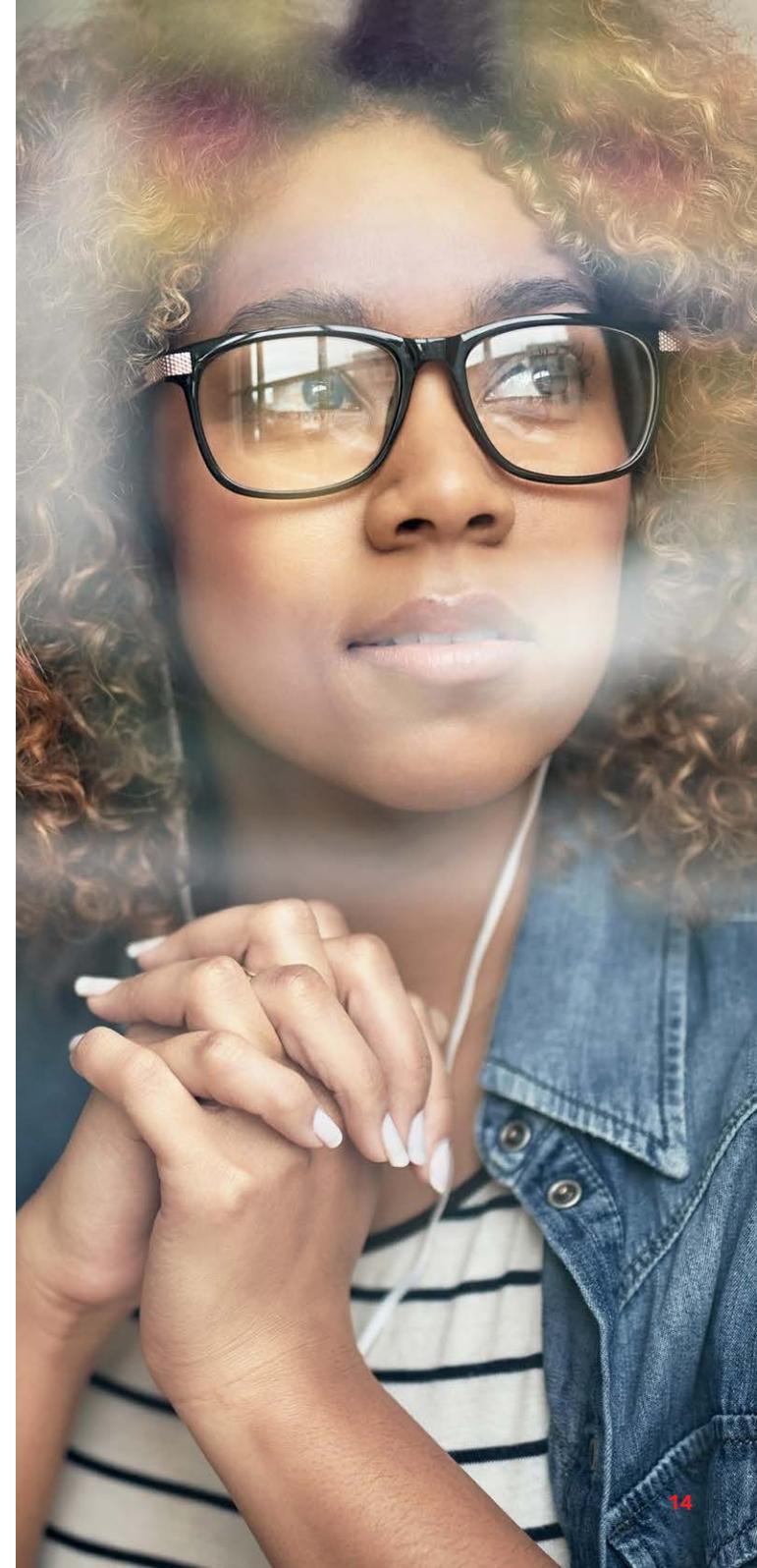
ASSURANCE PROVIDERS

CAREER ZONE 2:

ENTERPRISE ANALYSTS

CAREER ZONE 4:

STAKEHOLDER REPORTERS



Career zone 1: The transformation driver

The transformation driver thinks ahead. The roles they perform are essential to delivering organisational change to create and protect long term sustainable value.

This is the sustainable business and finance professional bringing new vision and transformational capabilities to the organisation as calls grow to build back better and businesses change to meet growing ESG commitments. They could be exploring new consulting or advisory roles in the face of rapid technological innovation and business change. They may be more specifically working as business advisers leading brilliantly innovative smaller and medium-sized accountancy practices (SMPs) that are transforming their client organisations. They could be entrepreneurs using their finance and accountancy skills to establish start-up businesses at the heart of sustainable local economies, or they could be driving major business change initiatives in global business service operations. They may be digital leaders seeking to introduce new technologies or drive enhanced data capabilities to transform businesses, or they may have already reached a chief financial officer (CFO) role / C Suite role, driving organisational change as part of the leadership team across the organisation. They may even be in education roles, helping transform the talent pipeline for the future. Whatever role they perform, their skills and capabilities are essential to driving transformational change in organisations as a catalyst for creating long term sustainable value.

Career zone 2: The enterprise analyst

The enterprise analyst brings data to life. This is the sustainable business and finance professional helping organisations create and protect value in various roles using their brilliant data and future insight skills.

They're always thinking ahead to improve the organisation understanding of the future. They could be finance business partners, the commercial advisers to organisations who partner across businesses using strong data skills to analyse investment cases, run the numbers on new channels to market or helping deliver new products or services to meet changing customer demands. They may be performance managers or financial analysts transforming performance management and planning processes at the heart of the sustainable business of the future, helping organisations make commercial and financial decisions that increasingly have environmental or social implications, or driving more accountability in public sector decision making. They could be project or programme accountants, brought in to support agile project teams by analysing the financial implications of major business programmes as organisations seek to innovate in the face of rapid disruption. They could be treasury professionals, using data skills and advancing technologies to help secure the organisation's funding and helping manage increasing financial risks as the business world is further disrupted.



Career zone 3: The assurance provider

The assurance provider is the sustainable business and finance professional bringing new levels of governance to organisations by helping protect and report on value in the different roles they perform.

Assurers' roles are essential for providing confidence to capital markets as well as giving assurance to investors and wider stakeholder groups. Their roles are critical for demonstrating to the outside world that the organisation is well controlled, ethically led, and attractive for investment and securing capital. Roles in this career zone may focus on enterprise risk management, helping businesses think ahead and understand the growing risks that are emerging and threatening longer-term business performance. The assurance provider could be at the forefront of shaping forward-looking audit practices to meet the assurance needs of the organisation's stakeholders as auditing practices transform through technology. They could also be moving into the exciting and fast-growing area of ESG assurance to bring greater confidence in, and transparency to, organisations' management of ESG risks or the way they capitalise on ESG opportunities. Or the assurance provider may be playing a critical role in public sector audit teams to help bring more accountability and trust to governments and public sector organisations in the wake of stretched finances from the Covid-19 crisis.

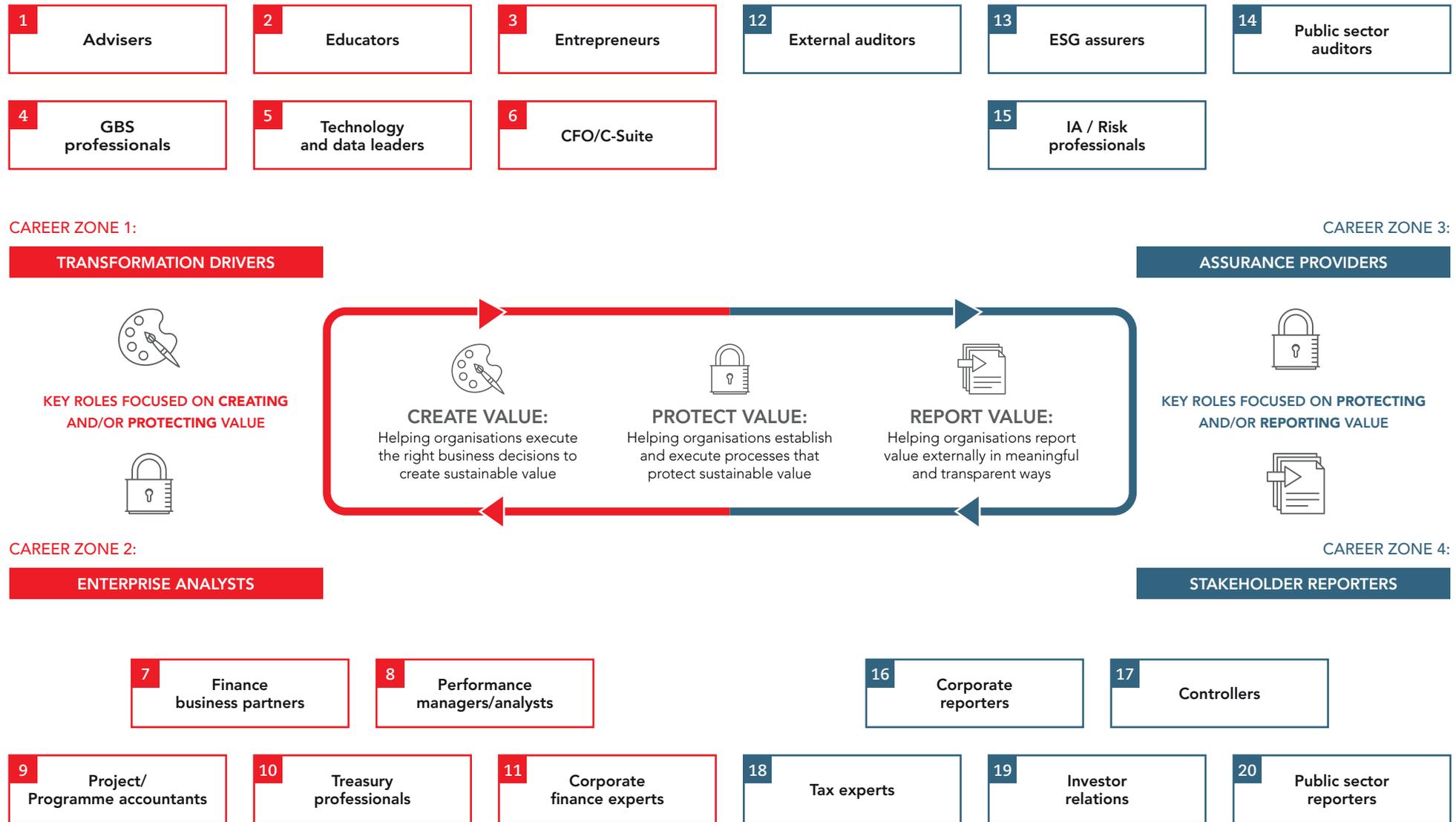
Career zone 4: The stakeholder reporter

The stakeholder reporter is the sustainable business and finance professional at the heart of the organisation, reporting performance externally in more meaningful ways in the face of growing stakeholder demands.

The stakeholder reporter may be working in corporate reporting or public sector reporting, leading change in the way organisations report their value creation story within the financial statements and beyond. Here they could be playing an increasingly important role in supporting wider reporting initiatives such as carbon or ESG reporting, responding to growing stakeholder demands for more transparency on organisational impacts and outcomes. Or they could be employed in financial controllership roles, working at the heart of sustainable organisations to ensure strong governance and stewardship over organisational finances. They may be involved in more specialist roles such as leading tax compliance and reporting initiatives as tax regulation continues to evolve. Or they could be leading investor relations activities, helping businesses respond to the changing investor landscape with an increasing focus particularly on ESG issues as investors become more aware and engaged, wishing to invest capital in organisations that have purpose and that are environmentally and socially aware, and that seek to produce sustainable returns with positive societal impacts.



FIGURE 3: 20 future key roles identified at the heart of sustainable organisations



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