

Training the accountants of tomorrow, today

 By [Colin Timmis](#)

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South Africa's small businesses face an unprecedented range of challenges, and unfortunately due to the Covid-19 crisis, three out of four SMMEs are not expected to survive, according to new Heavy Chef [research](#). It's a bleak outlook, but with the right support and advice, this prognosis can be changed. Now more than ever, accountants have a vital role to play in supporting small businesses.



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The accounting community, equipped with the right tools and skills, can be among the most valuable advisors and key to restarting the South African economy.

Today's accountants can cut repetitive manual processes and improve efficiencies by using cloud technology and automation. Our recent research found that 87% of accounting firms use some cloud technology so that they can dedicate their time to adding value-adding activities like advising. This crisis has made the benefits of technology clear, and firms which use the cloud have had significant advantages.

However, the research found that two-thirds of accounting firms struggle to hire talent with the right skills to use new technologies. Future accountants will need to be equipped with all the right skills and tools, but how can we prepare them for an unpredictable future?

Training future accountants

In addition, 35% of the respondents reported that their firm already seeks candidates with cloud skills. Compare that to the 14% of recruiters that reported a skills gap in technical expertise, and it becomes clear that cloud accounting is a skill that is in high demand. Fortunately, universities are already stepping up to close this skills gap.

Preparing today's accountants

We've already seen a tectonic shift in the way accountants support their clients, moving from working exclusively with the numbers to offering insights and business counsel – and the Covid crisis has only accelerated this. In the future, 54% of firms expect to handle both finances and business advice, while 38% expect to be single-mindedly focused on telling clients exactly what they can do to make their business grow. Just 8% of accountants expect to remain solely focused on the

numbers.

It's great to see this positive shift happen, but for accountants to truly transition into essential advisors, they need the right skillset and a community of partners to help them meet their clients' needs.

More and more we're seeing accountants leaning on partners to help them become even more efficient and offer a wider range of support to their small business clients. For example, working with alternative lenders to help with access to capital, using smart apps to give real-time insights into cash flow and using bank feeds to automate financial data capture.

Prepare for the transition

Business' expectations of their accountants are undergoing a radical shift, as they move beyond merely handling finances and mould into business consultants and advisors. In fact, 37% of small business respondents expect their accountants to handle their finances in addition to providing some advice on ways that they can improve their business, while 28% expect their accountants to act as a business consultant. This is an increase from last year when 29% of the businesses we surveyed wanted to use accountants to handle finances and consultancy, and only 11% wanted to use them exclusively for consultancy.

At a time when it's unclear what the future holds, reliable advice is vital to keeping businesses nimble and adapting to changing circumstances. Far beyond ensuring compliance and crunching numbers, today's – and tomorrow's – accountants need to stay ahead of the technology curve and adopt the latest tools to successfully guide business leaders.

ABOUT COLIN TIMMIS,

General Country Manager at Xero SA

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