

THE ASCPA: PLANNING FOR LEARNING WITHIN THE UNKNOWNABLE

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Society of Certified Practicing Accountants (ASCPA) has a complex membership base facing rapid change. Consequently, a strategic aim of lifelong, careers-related learning has been adopted. Research underpins all decision-making about learning provision to actively develop members' professional competencies. An incremental project-based strategy allows the ASCPA and its members to learn their way into the future.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Society of Certified Practicing Accountants is a professional organisation of over 90,000 members based predominantly in Australia, but with fast-growing Asian branches. Since 1985, as a pre-requisite for full membership, Associate members have been required to complete a five-subject, post-graduate 'licentiate' program, of roughly equivalent standard to a post-graduate diploma, together with specified practical experience. All members must then undertake continuing professional development.

The ASCPA has now established as one of its core strategic aims that members will embrace lifelong, career-related learning. This paper's discussion focuses on:

- 1) what is and can be known about members and their careers;
- 2) what is and can be known about their future business context;
- 3) previous ASCPA research into member skill, competency and program needs, and trends in the research findings and;
- 4) the ASCPA's role in member learning and career progression.

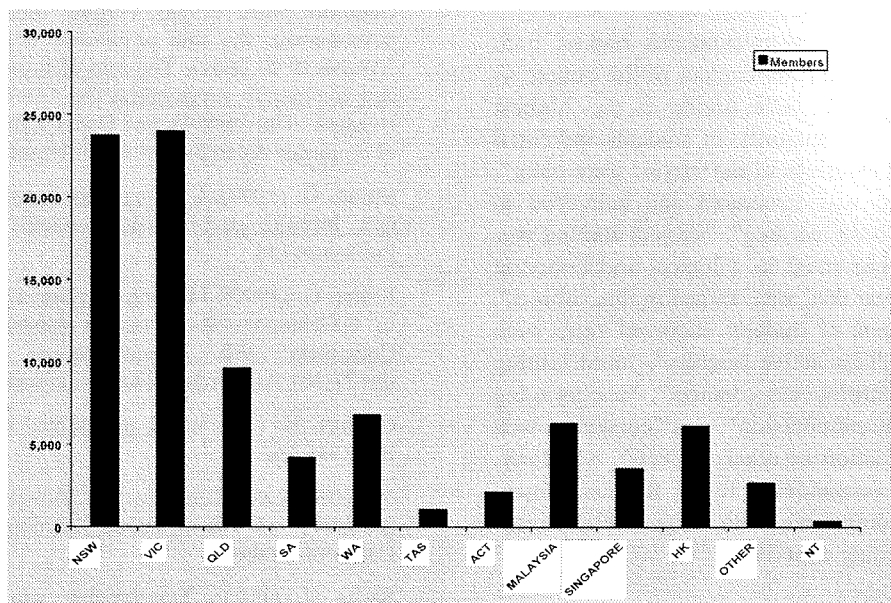


Figure 1: Member numbers by geographic location: October 1999

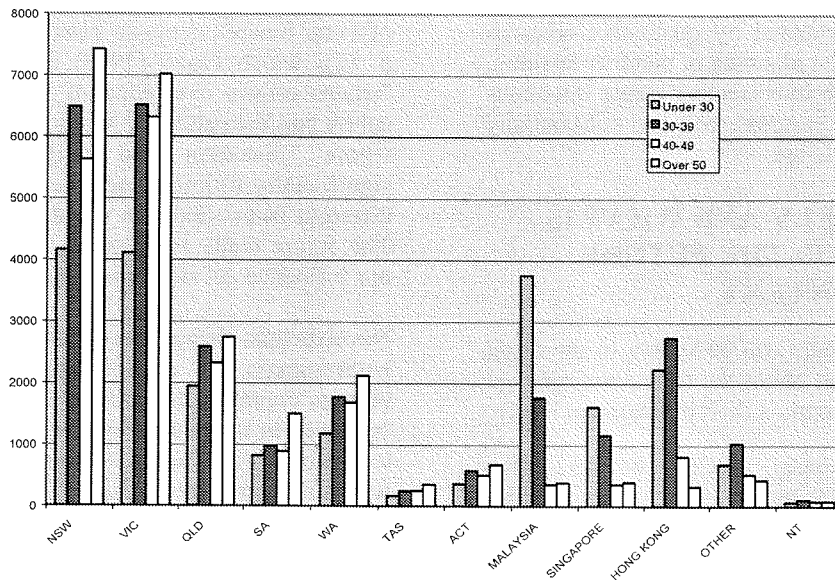


Figure 2: Member numbers by age and geographic location: October 1999

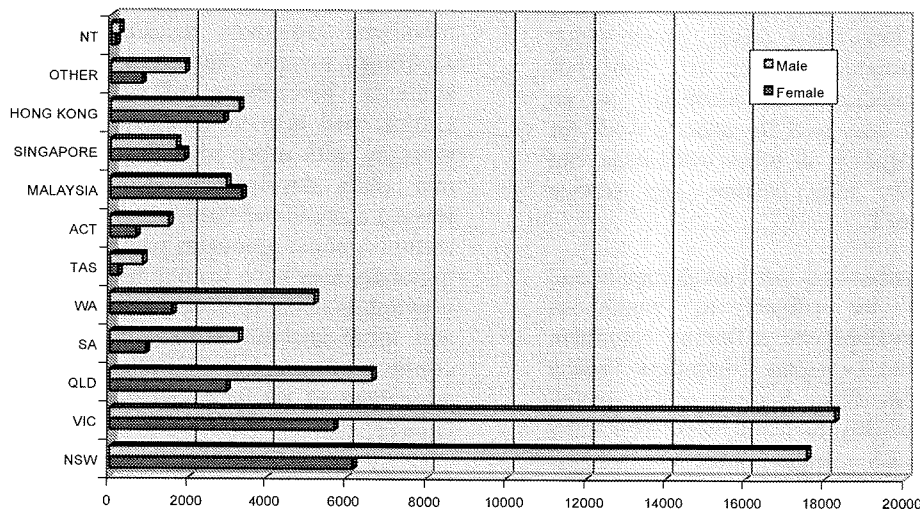


Figure 3: Member numbers by gender and geographic location: October 1999

The paper's subtitle deliberately echoes that of Flood's (1999) monograph *Rethinking The Fifth Discipline: Learning within the unknowable*. His book reviews systemic thinking, and chaos and complexity theory; includes action learning case studies; and proposes an approach to organisational and individual learning based on the view that the complex nature of the world in which we find ourselves is essentially unknowable. He argues that only things in the near future and in which we are immediately involved can really be known. "The more that we try to think global rather than local, the more we experience the resistance of complexity" (Flood, 1999, p 129). Two aspects of Flood's work – complexity theory and learning strategy – will help to frame this account of the issues confronting the ASCPA's Learning Continuum Project, which is tasked with carrying the lifelong learning strategic aim forward.

KNOWN AND KNOWABLE: MEMBERS

As a member organisation we have the advantage of very substantial information about our current members. The following statistical data on age, gender, and geographic location provides some idea of the likely diversity of their career aspirations, achievements, and learning opportunities.

Note that the majority of ASCPA members are aged 40+, 10% are retired, and that the average age of members located in Asia is much younger than for Australian divisions, reflecting the increasing numbers of Australian accounting graduates in Asia.

This kind of base statistical data about members is periodically supplemented by qualitative research for uses including the planning of member learning. Large-scale research into member career intentions that is currently in progress, will add substantially to our current knowledge.

WHAT IS LIKELY AND WHAT IS UNKNOWNABLE: THE FUTURE BUSINESS CONTEXT

If the current members can be known in the detail outlined above, what about the future environment in which they will conduct their professional lives?

In late 1999, another ASCPA project group conducted a literature review encompassing studies of the changing business environment confronting current and potential future members. Unsurprisingly, the resulting (internal) draft report identified multiple environmental, legal, economic and market factors, and intellectual capital resources as the key input drivers from which activity and performance drivers will flow. For example, disintermediation is identified as an economic trend. It may lead to reduced work for small firms that depend on other businesses, but giant intermediaries may become key service providers because of it.

The report also emphasised that human capital and knowledge must be subject to continuous refinement and development, a finding congruent with the aim of the Learning Continuum Project and consistent with Peter Senge's much quoted assertion that the ability to learn faster than one's competitors is the single most sustainable advantage an organisation can have (Senge et al., 1994, p 11).

Then, as 1999 drew to a close, newspapers filled their pages with predictions about the 21st century environment, and past predictions – especially those proven spectacularly wrong. Few of these 21st century predictions agreed beyond the level of broad trends. In the ASCPA's field of finance, business, and accounting advice, for instance, while the economic and customer driver 'e-tailing' is already sufficiently established to allow relatively confident prediction that the selling of things over the Internet will grow, it is far from certain what specific area has the most promise – notwithstanding the predictive research (KPMG/Nolan Norton Institute, 1999, p 12).

What competencies, what knowledge, skills, and personal attributes does it involve? Should we encourage our members to learn about it? (see Boritz, 1999). Should we devote resources to developing the capacity to teach it? (see Maloney, 1999). By contrast with the *detail complexity* of the

member data, this is the decision-making landscape of Peter Senge's *dynamic complexity* (Senge, 1992, p 71), which Flood (1999) describes as arising, "where effects over time of inter-relatedness are subtle and the results of actions are not obvious; or where short-term and long-term effects are significantly different; or where effect locally are different from effects on a wider scale" (pp 13-14). The future really is unknown, and largely beyond our influence, let alone our control.

Nevertheless, though we can't control the business environment, and even market research will not give us complete information about member needs on which to base decisions, the organisation can try to limit at least some of the unknowables with which it is dealing. One such is the definition of the population whose needs the ASCPA is attempting to meet, to the extent that we control member admission policy through qualifications, experience, and ethical requirements. There is thus some guaranteed minimum commonality among members. Moreover, research such as Beverley Jackling's present study (see Jackling, 1999) into students' perceptions of accounting as career choice, will help us to create our own future by working with other educators to shape knowledge and skills development at under-graduate level toward a *preferred* future. In a preferred future, for instance, under-graduates who are potential ASCPA members may have learned less factual information – which is likely to have a limited useful lifespan – and more analytic and reasoning capacity in the context of selected disciplines, which have the advantage of ready adaptability as circumstances change.

PREVIOUS ASCPA SKILL, COMPETENCY, AND PROGRAM-NEEDS RESEARCH

The large-scale research currently being conducted among members is intended to guide both the learning programs we ourselves develop and provide for members, and those externally provided that we accredit or otherwise recommend. Through this research and development we, as an organisation, are attempting to model for our members the faster, continuous learning that can provide sustainable advantage. "A learning organisation is one that continually expands its capacity to create its own future" (Flood, 1999, p 1).

Before conducting any new research specifically for the Learning Continuum Project, information was extracted from a variety of existing research results. Four studies of members are briefly outlined here, only one of which is published.

Two are quantitative, and two both qualitative and quantitative.

1) Like most professional organisations, the ASCPA conducts regular member satisfaction surveys. Early in 1999, 813 members, in Australia only and drawn from our Industry & Commerce and Public (Government) sectors, confirmed in professionally conducted telephone interviews that, after their actual professional credential, i.e., the right to identify themselves as a CPA, the most important component of their satisfaction with the organisation is the provision of Professional Update. This was defined as including professional development opportunities and access to the society's specialist Centres of Excellence and publications. Perhaps unexpectedly, in the professional development area, their interest focused on non-traditional accounting areas, especially communication skills. The mean age of those sampled was 39, with a gender split of 72:28 male to female.

2) In late 1999, the ASCPA conducted a benchmarking survey of the Chief Financial Officers of Australia's Top 800 Companies and Top 200 Government Business Enterprises (GBE)¹ (Sharma, 2000). Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) are defined as the primary financial contact in each organisation. The benchmarks 'aim to assist CFOs by providing hard evidence on the outlook, skills, needs and demands that are now required'. A response rate of 24% was achieved from the survey documentation that was forwarded. Of these respondents, 49.4% were members of the ASCPA. Their mean years of experience in their current roles was 6.2, and 11.2% held an MBA. Respondents' mean age fell in the range 35-49². Females constituted approximately 6%.

The respondents' ranking of the most important skills for a Chief Financial Officer is as follows.

- 1) Communication and presentation to senior management.
- 2) Communication and presentation to the board.
- 3) People management skills.
- 4) General management skills.
- 5) Knowledge sharing skills.
- 6) Cost management.
- 7) Change management.

- 8) Negotiation.
- 9) Project management skills.
- 10) IT – System usage.
- 11) IT – System delivery.
- 12) Strategic skills.
- 13) Business valuation skills.¹
- 14) Taxation.
- 15) Understanding and interpreting financial markets.

3) Also in late 1999, the ASCPA undertook a critical competency job analysis involving Malaysian members in two age groups, 27-29 and 30-32. Competency was defined as "a category of behaviours, knowledge and motivations associated with success or failure in a job or job level". The analysis was structured around technical and non-technical competencies. This study could be regarded as indicative only, since the actual sample of 44 members was relatively small. Nevertheless, for non-technical competency, both age groups rated communication competency as number 1, though in the younger group it tied with "Quality Orientation" and "Customer Focus." The technical core 'competencies' identified tend to more closely resemble practice areas, but there was one difference between the age groups that we found particularly interesting: whereas the older age group identified External Auditing as a core competence, the younger age group did not, rating it 9th out of 17. This marks a shift away from focusing on the most traditional specialist discipline areas. Both age groups rated General Accounting first – ranked equally with Financial Accounting for the younger members. Ranking on a combined scale, as in the study of CFOs, would be an informative next step for this study.

4) An informal survey of South Australian women members in October 1999 yielded 225 responses. Their ages ranged from 20 to 61+, 153 worked full-time, and 95 had children. Fifty-one of these members indicated that they believed they had been disadvantaged at their workplace because of their gender. Indicative situations reported included less qualified males restricting the member to very basic work, losing a promotion because 'the man had a family to feed', lower pay for equal work, redundancy

1 My thanks to Rob Sharma for making available data not published in his research report summary.
 2 A more precise figure is not available.

following maternity leave, and exclusion from marketing or education events focused on perceived male interests (e.g. a cricket match).

Nevertheless, a response by 141 of these members that they would be interested in professional development activities targeted at female members, is tempered by their actual comments. While access to crèche facilities, women's support networks, and potential mentors, specialised presentation skills seminars and the like were favoured; the members' comments indicate that separate professional update may only reinforce inappropriate stereotypes about women's capacities.

Trends in research findings

In terms of very broad trends, then, we are seeing increasing demand from members for 'soft-skill' learning opportunities. We believe this reflects members' recognition that after they have demonstrated their professional proficiency in their preferred field as CPA-qualified finance, business, and accounting professionals, career progression is increasingly more likely to depend on behavioural rather than technical or other cognitive skills in the workplace, and that these skills may be learned throughout their careers.

Their responses also suggest increasing awareness of the need for careful career planning, including a more discriminating choice from among the myriad professional development activities available. Certainly we believe that individual members want career-enhancing learning opportunities targeted to

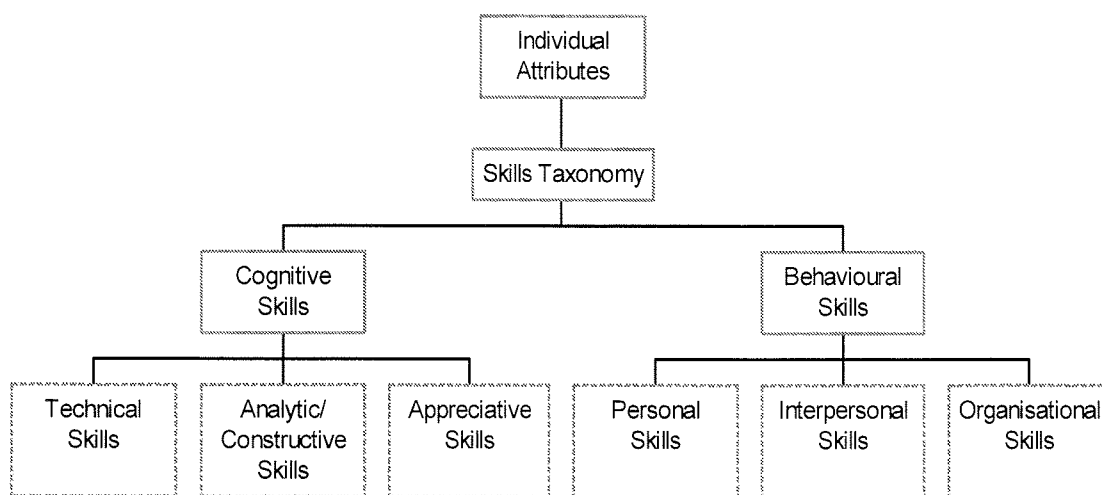
their specific, complex needs: whether as women members, newly-qualified members, mid-career members, members in management roles, members in the public sector, members in Asia, or multiple combinations of variables.

The research being undertaken among both Australian and Asian members in March and April 2000 will test our general hypotheses about factors affecting career decisions, current career intentions, and which learning programs and facilities members would find most attractive.

THE ASCPA'S ROLE IN MEMBER LEARNING AND CAREER PROGRESSION

It is because we are an organisation at the interface between employers and university educators that we are so well placed to assist our members to further develop their professional competencies throughout their careers. How is the education and professional development we offer different from that of the traditional tertiary sector? The essential differentiator is the direct relevance for career progression of our programs, based on our understanding of the work our members perform now and are likely to perform in the future.

That direct connection to employment was the reason for Professor W. P. Birkett's being commissioned in the early 1990s to map the competencies Australian and New Zealand professional accountants require in the workplace (Birkett, 1993). His detailed analyses of specific role functions at varying levels are founded on the following skills taxonomy:



(Birkett 1993 p 15).

For Birkett, competency is used to refer to "a relational notion – the way in which individual attributes (knowledge, skills, attitudes) are drawn on in performing tasks in particular work contexts" (Birkett, 1993, p 4).

Overseas, competence as defined by the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC), for accounting, is "the ability to perform the tasks and roles expected of a professional accountant, both newly qualified and experienced, to the standard expected by employers and the general public" (IFAC Education Committee, 1998, p 1).

Naturally, IFAC do not regard competence as static, but rather as evolving over a lifetime of learning. IFAC draw a useful distinction between competence-referenced education – which is more generalist – and competence-based education and training as follows.

"Many existing higher education programs promote only competence-referenced outcomes because their courses do not match the standards of the professional bodies. Competence-based outcomes require much more integration between higher education and work-based components of professional preparation than is commonly found in traditional programs. Competence-based qualifications are easier to implement when programs are underpinned by partnership arrangements between higher education and employers" (IFAC Education Committee, 1998, p 3).

Indeed, as Professor Gail Hart of QUT has recently written, "The most effective and enduring professional development is embedded in the experience of work..." (Hart, 1999, p 16) And as Dr Ruth Dunkin, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of RMIT, argued at a 1998 OECD conference,

"[university academics'] capacity to cater for the needs of working adults is limited to the extent that they do not contemplate the career needs and range of skills and competencies required to help people move between employers and sectors. The desire to work within disciplinary boundaries may provide satisfying work for staff and creativity in their research activities but may result in less integrated programs for the students" (Dunkin, 1999, p 18).

CONCLUSION: LEARNING WITHIN THE UNKNOWABLE

Clearly, there is much to consider and factor in when planning for learning on a very large scale.

As indicated above, for the ASCPA these considerations include member demographic factors, current member skills and knowledge, current functional requirements of the work members perform, and the members' career aspirations and likely future business context. Therefore, Robert Flood's argument outlined in the introduction that only things in the near future and in which we are immediately involved are really knowable, potentially has a dampening effect on enthusiastic educators with potentially very costly schemes in mind – even those armed with copious market research.

But, fortunately, Flood also proposes a way forward, a reduced-risk, incremental approach for learning a way into the future. It applies equally well for the planners and the planned-for: in our case ASCPA as learning organisation and professional development program provider, and members as individual career managers through learning.

Flood's process consists of an ongoing series of cycles with three steps each:

- 1) fully appreciating the current reality,
- 2) thinking about what the ideal future would be like,
- 3) setting up projects that address how to close the gap between current reality and ideal future.

As time steps elapse, each of the steps is revisited, adjusted and reset. Simple in theory, this process requires considerable rigour in practice, as we are finding.

In retrospect, it can be seen that this is the approach that has been taken by the ASCPA in setting up its project teams, and is being taken by the Learning Continuum Project in planning to provide programs and learning facilities for members. Individual members who embrace this approach to learning their way into the future that they themselves help to create, will be the best prepared to thrive on the challenges of future uncertainty.

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