

a human touch

Seeing a need, CPA firms add HR-related services

By Jennifer Vogelsong
Contributing writer

Angel Ludwig works at a public accounting firm, but her job has nothing to do with numbers. Instead, the Simon Lever LLP employee spends her days focusing on issues such as employee engagement, workplace culture and leadership development.

Her title is director of organizational development and her job is to help clients of the Manheim Township-based firm with the intangible aspects of business that affect their bottom line.

As automation affects the need for traditional CPA services such as tax preparation and audits, more public accounting firms are adding other professional services to their offerings and looking at aspects of business that aren't as easily interpreted as a ledger sheet.

"The role of accountants is changing, and I think that's why they are looking at the future a little dif-

ferently," said Kristi Weierbach, who was hired two years ago as director of workforce advisory solutions for Stambaugh Ness, an accounting firm in Springettsbury Township, York County. "CPA firms are realizing that their clients have more than just a financial component to their organization."

Jon Fry, partner at Simon Lever, said his company's professionals have spent a lot of time defining what they are about and decided their role is not only to provide CPA services, but to maximize the success of the clients they work with.

"How we help them do that is constantly changing," he said. "They have asked us to be more involved in their business and their culture."

Fry said while numbers are often highlighted in the business world, ask any CEO what makes his or her compa-

ny stand out and the answer will invariably be that it's their people. So it only makes sense that companies are starting to focus on more intangible aspects of their organizational development.

"Now that we can also help them with some of the softer people skills along with that financial and tax piece, we can get data they never had before and present a pretty complete picture to them," he said.

Kedren Crosby, founder of Work Wisdom, an organizational behavior practice in Lancaster, said she can understand why accounting firms want to enter the management consulting space where she has worked for years.

"The world is waking up and recognizing what we have known forever: that the way we behave and communicate at work, and the culture of a company, impact its bottom line and organizational well-being in general," she said. "There has been so much research underlying the need for this."

Claudia Williams, a Harrisburg consultant whose company is called The Human Zone, said there is plenty of work to go around, so the entry of accounting firms into the more human side of business will be good for the field as a whole.

"I applaud people and organizations who want to help other businesses and organizations be and do better," she said. "Things like leadership development and employee engagement are things that will continue to be priorities for CEOs."

Steve Haffner, managing partner at PwC in Harrisburg, said offering organizational development and other professional services makes an accounting firm more of a

full-service adviser to its business clients.

"They already know and have a relationship with us," he said. "We bring an independent view to everything we do, including these consulting services. That objectivity is critically important because when you're looking for advice on a significant project, it's good to have someone you trust who you know is going to tell you the truth."

Clayton Suydam, director of firm management with Acuity Advisors and CPAs in Lancaster, said his company changed its name 12 years ago to put "advisors" first because they saw their role beginning to shift even then.

"Typically accounting services are backward looking," he said. "They deal with what has already occurred. What we find more valuable and useful for our clients is to look forward with them and strategize about what we want to have happen. It's a different kind of mindset."

Elizabeth Foose, a communications specialist at accounting and consulting firm RKL LLP, said her firm already had a robust business consulting services group when she joined it in 2015. RKL recently launched a formal human resources consulting practice.

"This is something we have been doing for our clients for a long time – helping them with a whole host of people issues that aren't in the traditional scope of our work," she said. "At the end of the day those things play into a company's overall performance because things don't happen in a vacuum. They are looking to us to play a bigger role in their business strategy. ■"

