Finance Leaders: Take Up the Challenge of a Brand New World

It’s hard to keep abreast of all the changes in technology, collaboration, and opportunities facing you in the 21st Century. In advance of the Shared Services for Finance & Accounting Conference and Expo, we wanted to share 10 tips on how to incorporate all that is new into your day-to-day role.

While the challenges besetting global markets have always been there (and, who are we kidding – they’ll continue for the foreseeable future) what defines this transition period we find ourselves in is the incredible speed of digital data, the immense pressure to justify investments, and the imperative to decide on a strategy for growth markets in the East. The key internal figure that has emerged as holding the answers to many of these challenges in their hand is the Finance leader.

No-one else sits quite at the right intersection that enables them to direct an efficient and effective, financially aware enterprise to address both the challenges and opportunities of the external market, while at the same time still keeping the house in order with regards to compliance.

Roles have changed, definitions have evolved, and new ways of doing business –or thinking about opportunities – have suddenly cropped up that many of today’s leaders could not have dreamt of, as they were working their way up the corporate ladder. While the Gen Y force waiting in the wings may be better equipped on that front, here’s how you can turn some of the big changes into practical wins.

1. You’re not a corporate accountant – you’re a corporate decision-maker.
   Adding and subtracting columns aren’t really what it’s about any more. You have systems for that. But your role today is crucial in driving decisions based on your knowledge of the health on internal operations as well as external opportunities. As a result, the skill set that is becoming most important is the one that enables you to propose and back up strategies: retrenching, rebranding, refocusing, resourcing, and re-inventing, for example.

2. Reporting is no longer about sharing numbers about today – it’s about explaining how the data impacts your business tomorrow.
   What you know about business capability needs to be matched against data that covers your clients’
behaviours, market trends, procurement challenges, and workforce productivity. And it goes a lot further than that. You have to weigh sourcing options (in-house or out of house; near shore or offshore?) against new technological solutions; supplier shifts against growth geographies; training and development against buying in the skills you need. Preparedness is the word of the day. The more you leverage your influence across functions and business units, the better the decisions you’ll make for the organization.

3. **Paper and PPT are passé.**
   Meaning: move away from the past – the glossy brochures, the PowerPoint presentations – and embrace what’s out there now. The reduced attention span of our private life applies to the workplace in the same measure. Use visuals to convey the “story” and redefine how to transfer the meaning of your reports. It’s a well-established fact that people are more ready to buy into a pie chart than a numerical table. Leverage that to your advantage. Heard of Prezie? You’ll never look back. And learn from people who are blazing the trail in innovative communications: David McCandless has written a book called Information is Beautiful. It’s about data visualization and infographics, and it will make you question everything you thought you knew about presentation and reporting.

4. **Learn to read the signs.**
   It’s true: we are swimming in data. Train yourself to focus on out-of-the-box sources of information to be ahead of what other research can tell you. There are applications out there that monitor social chitter-chatter for key phrases or names (any number of BPO providers are now lining up to offer this service). Even Instagram is not just for the children. Information is coming at us from Twitter and newsfeeds – with these quick and easy channels generating some of the more valuable information. If you are not yet properly online, there’s really no excuse. Be selective in choosing whom to follow. It takes a bit of time, but once you’ve got your system established, you’ll never be caught out again.

5. **Despite the virtual world, relationships still rule.**
   Finance leaders should be allocating specific hours a week to maintaining the relationships that count. LinkedIn is not just for college friends – it’s also increasingly being used in-company. Leverage your team, build and share information, and don’t miss an opportunity to influence. Your new role requires you to take on more “running” rather than “managing” of the business, so extend your influence outside finance through collaborative partnerships. Your CIO is a vital partner. So is the head of HR.

6. **You are only as strong as the foundation you build on.**
   That’s not just a biblical reference – it goes for enterprise architecture, too. Yes, you may be anchored to expensive legacy systems but there are ways to get more flexibility out of them, too. Investigate In-Memory solutions that are scalable. Take an hour a week to be briefed by someone wanting to pitch you a new technology. Follow #FinanceTechnology on Twitter.
7. Yes they are narcissists and they feel entitled, but Gen Y has a lot to offer.
They’ll be running tomorrow’s world so you may as well be clever about accessing them now. Hire folks that are smarter than you in the areas where you have the biggest gaps. Gen Y are all-rounders and love taking their own lead so allow them to expand their roles and see what it brings you. Give them the broadest briefs possible and let them leverage their networks.

8. Push for new ideas.
Not in R&D necessarily, but across the organization. Ask how you could better collaborate? Compare achievements? Leverage outside services or solutions. Encourage the team to come up with new ways to recognize synergies, or to troubleshoot procurement practices. Solutions are all around you and in the new business environment, it would be wise to structure your department so that old-fashioned notions of authority, pecking order and rank do not drown out some of the exciting new ideas bubbling at the bottom. Ever take a look at the average age of the CEOs of today’s blockbusters? Enough said.

9. Control your brand.
Not the controls you are used to, but proactive controls. It’s not about “forbidding”, it’s about “diverting” or “diluting.” The ubiquity of social media means news about your operations travels fast – and part of your job is to act as its steward. For all of its business value, social business may also expose publicly traded companies to increased compliance risk. Plan for this and be prepared.

10. And finally … some things never change.
You’ll still need to make decisions on whether to opt for incremental change or a big bang. You’ll still need to set a clear direction to prioritize competing demands, as failure to do so is a clear barrier to improving finance effectiveness. And you’ll still need to balance the benefits of efficiency (leveraging business intelligence) against effectiveness (cost and time). But you’ll be a whole lot closer to where you need to get to.

Resources
A Seat At The Table: Transforming The Finance Function, KPMG, 2011
KPMG Finance Function Insights, Issue 6
Finance Leaders on Sourcing Success, ACCA/HfS Survey, 2012

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