



An India perspective

About ACCA

ACCA is the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants. We're a thriving global community of 227,000 members and 544,000 future members based in 176 countries that upholds the highest professional and ethical values.

We believe that accountancy is a cornerstone profession of society that supports both public and private sectors. That's why we're committed to the development of a strong global accountancy profession and the many benefits that this brings to society and individuals.

Since 1904 being a force for public good has been embedded in our purpose. And because we're a not-for-profit organisation, we build a sustainable global profession by re-investing our surplus to deliver member value and develop the profession for the next generation.

Through our world leading ACCA Qualification, we offer everyone everywhere the opportunity to experience a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management. And using our respected research, we lead the profession by answering today's questions and preparing us for tomorrow.

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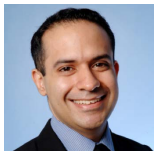


LEADING INCLUSION

Since its founding in 1904, ACCA has had a core value of facilitating a profession that is open to all. Inclusion, along with integrity and innovation, are now ACCA's three core values, which link back to the unique reasons for the creation of ACCA more than a century ago. They reflect the difference ACCA has brought to the global profession, and express them in a way that reflects our world today. Nonetheless, we must never be complacent in this area. Ensuring that accountancy is a profession that is open to everyone and that it enables us all to play a full and valuable role in society is fundamental to our reason for existing. It strongly supports our ethical stance.

The report is part of the global report which is based upon series of roundtables, including one conducted in India, and a survey of ACCA members, affiliates and future members that was conducted in October 2020 and elicited 10,049 responses from our global community and 756 responses from India.

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Foreword



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As organisations look towards building a sustainable business model there is a growing recognition of the need to have a strategy and culture underpinned on the principles of diversity and inclusion (D&I). Organisations are realising that diversity and inclusion are not just a good to do exercise but rather recognising it as an inherent strength and a driving force towards corporate success.

Today, with the world becoming a global village there is an ardent need to have a diverse and inclusive workforce to unlock creativity, drive innovation, comprehend different cultural milieu and foster sustained growth by enabling decision making reflective of the customer base. There is a growing realization that diversity of thinking and inclusion is critical in maintaining organisations competitiveness and bringing in the innovation mindset.



Neha Jain
Director, Michael Page

This report highlights that a substantial number of the respondents feel that the accountancy and finance professionals see themselves as part of an inclusive profession but at the same time think that much more needs to be done. There is also a strong linkage and alignment of responses in India with global counterparts, underlying the ever-growing interconnectedness of economies.

In India, a large part of the corporate agenda and culture is influenced by the social fabric of the society which is composed of people from different backgrounds, different socio-economic condition and different family values, thus the aspect of diversity and inclusion is of utmost importance to bring social justice and to treat everyone in an equitable manner. Additionally, with more than half of India's population below the age of 25, corporates in India will see a push in the diversity and inclusion agenda once this generation comes into the profession, lending its strong voice for diversity, inclusion and equity.



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One thing is clear, that the most innovative, successful and progressive companies of the future will be the one who are able to understand and harness the true value of diversity and inclusion. Those who work towards this endeavour will be able to maximize the potential of every employee, create a differentiating factor and drive business growth.

Achieving inclusion – an India perspective

Since its founding in 1904, ACCA has had a key role in facilitating a profession that is open to all as a core value. Inclusion, along with integrity and innovation, are now ACCA’s three core values which link back to the unique reasons why ACCA was initially created more than a century ago. They reflect the difference ACCA has brought to the global profession and express them in a way that reflects our world today. However, it is important never to be complacent in this area. Ensuring that we are a profession that is open to all and enables us to play a full and valuable role in society is fundamental to our reason to exist. It strongly supports our ethical stance.

Accountancy and finance professionals – a role in achieving equity

ACCA received over 10,000 responses from a survey of its members, affiliates and future members that was conducted in October 2020, including 756 respondents from India. In addition, approximately 20 roundtables were held in a variety of locations across the globe reflecting the views of members and future members including one in India and the comments in this summary are drawn from that roundtable. The key results from the survey are shown below (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Key responses from ACCA survey



In interpreting the results for India against those for the global population it is important to consider the profile of those who may have answered. The ACCA membership in India is more reflective of those who work in large or multinational organisations. As such these tend to have programmes that address the issues.

One roundtable participant commented 'India has a lot of diversity. It is threaded through into the family. But that said, I think India has deep pockets of challenge around inclusion. This is in the social fabric as well. When you bring that to the corporate world it is may be 20% to 30% of the organisations understand it. But there is a large part of the corporate agenda that is still influenced by the social fabric and the lack of inclusion in pockets of Indian society. So, there is probably a lot more work to be done.'

Another roundtable participant agreed by saying that 'the MNC (multi-national corporations) and a few Indian companies actually want to make progress, a large portion is actually being left out because of the social fabric.'

One panellist commented, 'I see, in India, a sudden change: a pride. I see more and more people from different backgrounds, different socio-economic conditions, different family backgrounds. There are communities that have been in business over the generations, but their children are now coming into the professions. I see a lot of changes that augur well for the future. When we talk about diversity and inclusion, I see these people being adaptable and flexible. As leaders it is important to give that space.'

Another commented that, 'In India we need to realise that we are a pampered profession. A doctor's salary is less than an accountant's in a shared service. We are in a very diverse situation and we need to realise it.' They complemented this by sharing their own experience. 'I worked for a software company and we had Norwegians visiting. They saw poor people constructing beautiful buildings. They asked, "how can you accept this?". That is an eye opener for all of us.'

Why is this agenda important?

As an organisation that has diversity and inclusion at its core it is important that we strive to continue to impact this agenda. The pandemic has, in many cases, reinforced some of the challenges that societies face. The need to bring social justice and to treat each other in an equitable manner are fundamentals of the societies that we live in. As accountancy and finance professionals we need to be at the heart of that agenda. Our survey suggests that nearly three-quarters of the respondents saw themselves as part of an inclusive profession. For many roundtable participants this was principally defined by the geographic spread of the profession and how opportunities could be created for all. Yet is this enough? Just under two thirds felt that there was more that the professional should be doing. Perhaps through providing more opportunities to those who do not have a strong educational background, those with unseen disabilities that may challenge their examination performance or to work to equity in other issues such as gender and race where for many locations around the world there are issues to be dealt with. Acting as a strong voice for social justice is essential.



Yet managing by metrics may not be the best solution. As one roundtable participant noted, ‘when we normally talk about diversity, we assign a lot of percentages. I keep reminding people that at the end of the day we should be hiring the right people because they deserve to be in their roles.’

It is all by merit. When we start coding by numbers it feels like a numbers game rather than by performance.’ Another commented, ‘we do have targets but what we realised is that we need to build networks. It is a very complex world but it is also a very connected world.’

Biases

Our brains take short cuts in our thinking. They can process about 40 pieces of information every second consciously, but as many as 11 million pieces unconsciously. These unconscious processes are taken based on past experiences, our history and our background. This is where we introduce unconscious biases. They are a reality. Understanding the impact of these biases is important.

As individuals we can never eliminate biases, we can accommodate them, and we can do this by appreciating how they impact our perceptions and the views that we take, the networks that we form and the approaches that we take.

Inclusion in the workplace

Accountancy and finance professionals have fundamental roles in our workplaces. Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents saw a strong link between the diversity and inclusion agenda and organisational success. For half of the respondents the link to diverse teams was one of their top three factors with just over 40% making the link to better decision making. Whether we are finance business partners at the heart of facilitating growth in organisations or are audit and assurance professionals working with clients we need to approach our work from an inclusive perspective. To ensure that a range of views and opinions are included. Decision making that is representative of our customer base is essential in today’s consumer centric economy. The pandemic has reinforced the ethical lens that many consumers apply to organisations through the 3Ps of purpose, people, and profit. Having a strong purpose centric lens that focuses on people (the human capital) and the good that is contributed to society are important.

A roundtable participant commented that ‘what we can do as a profession is to articulate to our MD and general manager that diversity and inclusion makes good business sense. I think that is the language that they understand. As long as you are able to articulate that and lay out the entire framework the MD or general manager will take it as a priority.’

Another participant reiterated that ‘it has got to start at the top. It has got to be the business conversation rather than being an enterprise programme that somebody else runs. It has got to show the value that it brings.’

A further participant commented that, ‘Organisations need to bring [diversity and inclusion] into the entire fabric of how they operate. Create the right environments and the right frameworks. Create the right spaces where everybody feels safe to challenge each other, respect each other and collaborate. Organisations of the future need to be agile.’

Fulfilling our potential

Just over half the survey respondents either did not know, or were uncertain, as to the appropriate steps to take to support the diversity and inclusion agenda. Doing the right thing is often a challenge but doing nothing is not acceptable. Having a focus on what we should do is important. A roundtable participant reminded us that, ‘it is not one person’s responsibility, but every individual has got to take accountability.’

A roundtable participant made the link between the skill set of the individual and the ability to be inclusive. They commented that ‘the pandemic has taught us many things such as taking more technology and what we see in terms of the skills that we have [as individuals]. This reskilling is a way of addressing diversity. There is going to be a paradigm shift in terms of getting those things right.’ Another added of the pandemic that it had, ‘taught us to adapt, and has asked us to slow down and still get the work done. So, hopefully, this will cause a lot of positive moves in terms of change in diversity to happen. We need to understand our real priorities.’

To ensure that, as accountancy and finance professionals, we know how to play our full part we should consider the following:

- Do we know the diversity goals of the organisation and how these align to the business goals?
- Whether we participate in surveys and discussions as honestly as possible?
- Do we do enough to actively engage – can we become a mentor and / or mentee?
- Do we take time to appreciate diversity?
- Do we treat people as they wish to be treated rather than how you would be treated yourself?
- Do we speak up when something is wrong?
- We should welcome ideas that are different to your own; to support our colleagues.
- Understand what we can bring to the organisation.
- We should commit to continuous improvement.
- Above all, we should help others.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion are the bedrock to ensure that we are shaping a better, fairer and more sustainable future which truly reflects the societies we operate in.

Modern India stands as one of the most diverse countries in the world. With such diversity at heart and inclusive culture as its soul, it is essential that corporates operating in India embrace and reflect this in their strategy and operations. Organisations are realising that diversity and inclusion are an inherent strength and a driving force towards corporate success rather than just a tick box activity.

As accountancy and finance professionals we need to play a pivotal role in shaping this agenda by leading from the front. The profession must ensure that it is not complacent and continue to ensure that it brings social justice and treats everyone in an equitable manner by lending its strong voice for diversity, inclusion and equity. This is fundamental to the role professionals play in the society and our reason to exist.

THE PROFESSION MUST ENSURE THAT IT IS NOT COMPLACENT AND CONTINUE TO ENSURE THAT IT BRINGS SOCIAL JUSTICE AND TREATS EVERYONE IN AN EQUITABLE MANNER BY LENDING ITS STRONG VOICE FOR DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND EQUITY.

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