

From Compliance to Impact:
ASEAN Accountants Driving
Sustainable Futures



From Compliance to Impact: ASEAN Accountants Driving Sustainable Futures



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In a world reshaped by uncertainty, accelerating regulation, and rising expectations for accountability, the profession once again faces a defining question: What does it truly mean to create value in a sustainable future? Today, compliance is no longer the finish line. Stakeholders—governments, markets, and communities—are calling for impact that can be measured, verified, and trusted. This is the moment when the role of the accountant becomes not only technical, but transformational.

This 16th edition of AFA Connect explores that transition. Building on a theme that continues to attract global attention, “From Compliance to Impact: ASEAN Accountants Driving Sustainable Futures,” this issue reflects the growing recognition that ASEAN accountants are not merely adapting to change—they are shaping it. As sustainability reporting matures and expectations broaden,

our profession must move from aligning with standards to enabling meaningful outcomes for organisations and society.

Across the region, we see an evolution in conversations around sustainability: from questions of what must be disclosed to what difference the disclosure makes. It is here that ethics, professional judgment, and technical competence converge. Accountants are increasingly at the centre of decisions that influence long-term resilience, resource allocation, and public trust.

AFA Connect 16 serves as a platform for leaders, prominent accountants, practitioners, and AFA member organisations to share perspectives on the latest sustainability developments. This edition highlights:


-  the ISSB’s progress, including implementation of IFRS S1 and S2 and the emerging industry-based guidance
-  the rapid development of green finance, carbon accounting, and biodiversity reporting
-  ASEAN’s pivotal responsibility in empowering SMEs, the backbone of our economies, to engage meaningfully in the sustainability journey.



These topics go beyond technical updates. They require us to reflect deeply on how the profession can support businesses in transitioning from regulatory compliance toward measurable impact—and how, collectively, we can prepare our region for a future defined by sustainability, innovation, and ethical leadership.

As the AFA representing the ASEAN accountancy community, AFA remains committed to strengthening regional connections, amplifying ASEAN's voice in global standard-setting, and ensuring that international frameworks reflect the realities and aspirations of our member states. Through the insights shared in this edition, we aim to foster dialogue, inspire collaboration, and encourage action across our region.

Let this edition of AFA Connect be a reminder that sustainability is no longer a peripheral agenda—it is a professional responsibility and an opportunity to lead. By moving from compliance to impact, we contribute not only to the resilience of our organisations, but to the sustainable future of ASEAN.



The next chapter of the accounting profession in ASEAN



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Sustainability has moved far beyond its early framing as a corporate responsibility agenda. Across ASEAN, it is rapidly becoming a structural force—shaping regulation, shifting investment patterns, transforming business models, and redefining the expectations placed upon organisations. In this changing landscape, accountants find themselves at a unique intersection. Their role, once narrowly defined around financial reporting and assurance, now extends into navigating climate challenges, interpreting complex sustainability metrics, and guiding organisations toward decisions that create long-term value.

This transformation calls not only for technical adaptation, but for a mindset shift. The question is no longer “What must we report to comply?” but “How do we contribute to real-world impact?” It is this shift—from compliance to impact—that will define the next chapter of the accounting profession in ASEAN.

Sustainability Reporting: More Than a Requirement, It's a Mindset Shift

With the emergence of global sustainability standards such as IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards, organisations across

ASEAN are learning to speak a new “language” of sustainability. These standards not simply reorganise how companies report but they influence how companies think. Preparing disclosures on climate risks, emissions, governance processes, or sustainability strategies forces leaders to look deeper into their own operations and long-term plans.

For many organisations in ASEAN, especially SMEs, this journey is not always easy. Capacity gaps, data limitations, and varying levels of readiness remain real challenges. Yet sustainability reporting is proving to be a powerful internal driver. It encourages better risk management, sharper decision-making, and greater accountability. When reporting is done well, it helps organisations move from guessing to understanding, and from reacting to planning.

And this is where accountants play a crucial role. They turn sustainability goals into measurable information, ensure accuracy and consistency, and help organisations recognise what their data is truly saying. In short, sustainability reporting becomes a strategic tool, not just a compliance exercise.

Green Finance: Where Good Information Unlocks Real Change

High-quality sustainability information has another important function: it builds trust. Investors today want more than financial numbers—they want to know how prepared an organisation is for climate risks, how committed it is to transition pathways, and how responsibly it manages its resources. This creates a strong link between sustainability reporting and the growing world of green finance. When information is reliable and transparent, capital flows more confidently toward sustainable projects, such as renewable energy, green buildings, low-carbon innovation, and beyond.

Across ASEAN, this trend is gaining momentum. Green bonds, sustainability-linked loans, and transition finance instruments are becoming more common, and demand from investors continues to rise. But these opportunities depend heavily on the quality of sustainability data. Without credible disclosures, markets remain cautious; with strong disclosures, the door opens wide.

Here again, accountants serve as a bridge—turning sustainability information into something investors can trust. Their expertise helps reduce the risk of greenwashing, strengthens market confidence, and ensures that sustainable finance genuinely supports sustainable outcomes.

Technology and Talent: The Twin Engines of Sustainability Progress

As sustainability expectations grow, organisations are discovering that traditional tools are not enough. Technology has quickly become a central enabler of sustainability progress. Artificial intelligence helps analyse emissions data or predict climate impacts. Blockchain strengthens traceability across supply chains. Digital platforms make reporting more efficient—even for smaller organisations with limited resources.

But technology is only one part of the equation. The other part is people.

Accountants today need new skills: ESG data literacy, an understanding of climate-related risks, familiarity with sustainability taxonomies, and the ability to interpret non-financial information with professional judgment. These skills don't replace the foundations of accounting—they build on them. Ethics, objectivity, and integrity remain as important as ever, especially as sustainability reporting becomes more complex and highly scrutinised.

For ASEAN, investing in people is essential. The region's sustainability transition depends on equipping professionals with the training, guidance, and tools they need to support businesses of all sizes. Strong human capital ensures that sustainability is implemented not only at policy level, but on the ground—within companies, supply chains, and communities.

Why ASEAN has a unique opportunity

ASEAN's sustainability journey will naturally look different from other regions. With its youthful workforce, strong digital adoption, and diverse economic landscape, ASEAN has the chance to chart a path that is practical, inclusive, and suited to its realities. One of the biggest opportunities lies in empowering SMEs. When sustainability becomes accessible to smaller businesses—through simpler tools, clearer guidance, and affordable technology—the entire region benefits. This is where professional accountants can make a meaningful difference: by helping SMEs understand what matters, what is feasible, and how sustainability can strengthen—not burden—their operations.

ASEAN's strength has always been its ability to collaborate. As sustainability expectations expand, regional alignment, shared learning, and coordinated action will become even more important. When ASEAN

speaks and moves together, the impact is not only stronger within the region, but also more influential on global sustainability conversations.

What's Next?

What makes this moment exciting for the accounting profession is that sustainability aligns perfectly with its core identity. Accountants have always been responsible for trust, integrity, and clarity. Now, these same qualities are needed to support society's transition toward a more sustainable economy.

Moving from compliance to impact means embracing a larger purpose. It means understanding that sustainability is not only about reporting—it is about shaping decisions, guiding capital, and improving the systems that support long-term wellbeing. Accountants have the opportunity to lead this movement, helping organisations turn ambitions into actions and data into meaningful progress.

As ASEAN steps into a future defined by sustainability, the accounting profession will be one of its strongest partners and most influential voices. The work we do today—building capacity, strengthening reporting, enabling green finance, and adopting technology—will shape the region's sustainable story for decades to come.



From Compliance to Impact: ASEAN Accountants Driving Sustainable Futures



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One of the world's most dynamic economic blocs, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is positioning sustainability and circularity as key levers for long-term competitiveness. Regional blueprints such as the Framework for Circular Economy for the AEC (2021) and the AEC Strategic Plan 2026–2030 emphasise sustainable economic practices, harmonisation of standards, and resilient supply chains that enable circularity across industries and borders. Key to achieving this is the availability of high-quality, decision-useful data—an area in which the accountancy profession excels.

As sustainability gains traction in ASEAN, accountants are increasingly taking on expanded roles as custodians of sustainability information, providers of reliable disclosures, and assurance partners to businesses navigating the transition to low-carbon and regenerative models. From embedding lifecycle and circularity metrics into business planning to assuring green finance and equipping SMEs with realistic sustainability roadmaps, the profession is expected to be at the vanguard of shaping the region's sustainable future. But this calls for significant upskilling to address the requirements for enhanced sustainability disclosures, and shift mindsets beyond compliance toward sustainable value creation.

Aligning with Global Standards – Enabling Value-Driven Disclosure

The rapid advancement of sustainability reporting globally pivots around the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) standards, namely IFRS S1 on general sustainability disclosures and IFRS S2 on climate-related disclosures.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA) as the regulator and developer of the profession is advocating strongly on the implementation of the National Sustainability Reporting Framework (NSRF) that is aligned with IFRS S1 and S2. MIA views the NSRF as a catalyst to strengthen corporate resilience, improve market competitiveness, and ensure Malaysia remains attractive to global investors. In addition to preparing accountancy professionals for the NSRF, MIA has issued, for adoption in Malaysia the International Standard on Sustainability Assurance (ISSA) 5000, by the International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (IAASB), which will provide a global baseline for high-quality, consistent and credible sustainability assurance engagements.

MIA's stance, as articulated in the MIA Sustainability Blueprint for the Accountancy Profession (issued in 2024),

is that accountants are uniquely placed to embed sustainability into governance, risk management, strategy, and performance, driving long-term value creation. Guided by the MIA Sustainability Blueprint and MIA Sustainability Roadmap (2025–2029), MIA is delivering 169 initiatives over a five-year span for advocacy, competency and capacity building, including structured upskilling, CPD programmes, and technical tools and guidance to equip members with new competencies in sustainability reporting, sustainability assurance, sustainability-related risk management and others.

Yet capacity gaps, immature data, and compliance costs—especially for smaller entities—remain as significant barriers across ASEAN. This underscores the need for scalable, affordable, and technology-enabled solutions.





These challenges are exacerbated by resistance to change. Accountants are trained to measure, disclose and comply, but sustainability demands more than technical competence. Success requires a mindset shift to strategic and integrated thinking. In particular, IFRS S2 emphasises the integration of climate risks into enterprise risk management (ERM) and strategic planning to enable organisational resilience, innovation, and long-term value. Governance is critical to reinforce this shift. Strong sustainability governance and tone from the top are the key factors ensuring that insights from data inform decision-making and sustainable outcomes in the long run.

Preparing the Profession for Green Finance, Carbon Accounting and Biodiversity Reporting

Complementing the move to sustainability reporting, MIA is emphasising upskilling on green finance, carbon accounting, and biodiversity reporting which are key to delivering on decarbonisation targets. As part of their expanding roles, accountants are increasingly expected to measure,

verify, and interpret emissions data, assess environmental risks, and advise on climate strategies.

To upskill its more than 41,000 members, MIA's initiatives include:

-  Convening the inaugural MIA Sustainability Showcase in December 2025, bringing together finance leaders, regulators, and technology providers to discuss emerging developments in sustainability frameworks, assurance, green financing, and ESG solutions.
-  Launching the MIA Certificate of Sustainability for Accountants, a structured three-day learning pathway designed to equip accountancy professionals, finance leaders, and sustainability practitioners with the essential technical and practical competencies required for ESG and sustainability reporting, climate-related disclosures, assurance, and strategic advisory.
-  Providing the MIA Sustainability Software Database, a curated repository of ESG reporting tools, carbon accounting software, GHG tracking systems, and risk analytics to help practitioners move to data-driven sustainability practices.
-  Providing technical guidance on the new ISSA 5000 and on ISAE 3410 (GHG Assurance), which will be withdrawn once ISSA 5000 is effective, and capacity-building on sustainability reporting.

Key to the transition is familiarising accountancy professionals with the data-intensive and technology-enabled nature of sustainability reporting. Drones, satellite imaging, AI, lifecycle software, and continuous data monitoring are increasingly used to capture accurate, credible, and comparable sustainability information. Accountants must therefore be comfortable analysing and assuring digital data streams, assessing technology-derived metrics, and integrating sustainability risks through ERM and strategic decision-making.

As these capabilities advance, the profession must also ensure that all organisations—including SMEs—can participate meaningfully in the sustainability journey. Limited resources, lack of expertise and high compliance costs mean SMEs need guidance to implement meaningful sustainability practices. Accountancy professionals and small and medium practices (SMPs) are pivotal in helping SMEs overcome these hurdles, ensuring that sustainable transformation is broad-based. By supporting SME inclusion, the profession helps build a more resilient, diverse, and inclusive regional economy where sustainable practices benefit many stakeholders.

Conclusion: Positioning ASEAN Accountants as Trusted Advisors and Drivers of Sustainable Value

ASEAN stands at a crossroads. With global supply chains demanding credible sustainability performance and investors expecting trustworthy ESG disclosures, the region's competitiveness increasingly hinges on the quality and accessibility of sustainability information. Accountancy professionals—embedded in every organisation—are central to meeting these expectations.

By aligning with ISSB standards, embracing digital tools, enabling SME participation and strengthening assurance and governance, ASEAN accountancy professionals are becoming strategic enablers of sustainable value. Their ability to integrate sustainability risks into decisions, assure green finance and leverage technology for transparent reporting positions them as indispensable partners in building a future-ready ASEAN.

To sustain momentum, the profession must continue to upskill, collaborate, and shift decisively from mere compliance to driving impact. Anchored by strategic frameworks and a shared commitment to ethics and sustainable development, ASEAN accountants are well positioned to help lead the region toward a more resilient, inclusive, and competitive future.

Beyond Compliance, Beyond Numbers: Turning Sustainability Disclosure into Decision-Useful Storytelling



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With the issuance of the IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards (ISSB Standards), the conversation on sustainability reporting is not slowing down. If anything, it is becoming more consequential, because reporting expectations are increasingly linked to investor confidence, comparability, and capital allocation decisions. For accountancy professionals, the question is no longer whether sustainability reporting will matter, but how to make it decision-useful in a world of rising expectations, limited time, and imperfect data.

A more strategic question surfaced: how can companies move beyond compliance in a way that strengthens decisionmaking—rather than simply producing longer reports or more metrics? Going beyond compliance is only meaningful if it improves decision-usefulness; otherwise it adds cost without commensurate benefit.

Beyond compliance is not about producing more numbers. It's about producing more decision-useful information, through the right mix of narrative and evidence, tailored to the entity, transparent about uncertainty, and connected to strategy, risk, and value creation.

It is not that companies should disclose 'more' in general, but that disclosure should become more decision-useful for capital providers—because comparability strengthens investor confidence and can influence capital allocation and financing conditions. Accordingly, the technical focus should be on relevance, connectivity, and credibility, rather than the volume of metrics.

Achieving this outcome is a shared responsibility. Preparers must raise the quality of judgments, connectivity, and transparency, but regulators also play a critical role in shaping incentives and implementation approaches. When adoption is framed primarily as box-ticking compliance, reporting efforts can drift toward volume. When implementation is framed around decision-usefulness, proportionality, and clarity, entities are more likely to invest in disclosures that genuinely improve comparability and market confidence.

In that sense, IAI's tagline—*see beyond the numbers*—feels increasingly accurate. Not because numbers are unimportant, but because the new reporting paradigm demands that numbers serve the story, not replace it.

Why “beyond compliance” matters now

Sustainability disclosure is entering a phase where it is no longer treated as a reputational “add-on.” Under ISSB-aligned approaches (and Indonesia’s Standar Pengungkapan Keberlanjutan (SPK) direction), disclosure is being pulled closer to the core of the business: governance, strategy, risk management, and financial implications.

That shift changes what “good” looks like. A sustainability report that reads like a collection of disconnected topics won’t meet expectations for decision-usefulness. Investors and other capital providers are looking for coherence: What are the material sustainability-related risks and opportunities? How do they affect the business model? How does management respond? What does it mean for resilience and future performance?

If “compliance” is the minimum baseline, “beyond compliance” becomes the capability to translate sustainability complexity into something decision-useful without false precision or unnecessary complexity.

The temptation: more quantitative = more mature

One of the most common instincts in sustainability reporting is to equate maturity with quantification. If disclosures are largely qualitative, some preparers worry they’ll be seen as vague or incomplete. If disclosures are quantitative, they feel more concrete and “serious.”

There is truth in that. Quantification can raise accountability, strengthen comparability, and reduce the perception that sustainability reporting is merely narrative. In some cases, going beyond compliance does mean moving from generic qualitative statements to measurable indicators, targets, and performance explanations. However, a critical lesson from early implementation is equally important.

Quantitative does not automatically mean better.

If the metric is not relevant to the entity’s material risks or opportunities, it becomes noise. If the cost of measurement is high while the benefit to users is low, it can be inefficient at best and misleading at worst. And if the numbers attempt to portray deep uncertainty with excessive precision, they can create a false sense of confidence.

In scenario analysis especially, the goal should not be to impress with complicated models. The goal is not to choose qualitative or quantitative by preference, but to choose the approach that best supports decision-usefulness, comparability, and a credible assessment of resilience. As highlighted in early implementation lessons, judgments must be explicit and boilerplate wording is no longer sufficient.

Scenario analysis: resilience, assumptions, and uncertainty





Climate-related scenario analysis is a perfect case study of why “more numbers” is not always “more useful.” In IFRS S2 (and PSPK 2 in Indonesia), companies are expected to disclose the resilience of strategy and the business model to climate-related changes, developments, and uncertainties using climate-related scenario analysis—yet uncertainty is, by nature, difficult to quantify precisely.

The expectation is not to avoid scenario analysis or to substitute it with general statements. The expectation is to disclose the resilience of strategy and the business model under climate-related scenarios, and to be transparent about the assumptions, methods, limitations, and uncertainties used. A qualitative approach is not a shortcut, it is acceptable only when it is the most decision-useful way to communicate material information, consistent with the principle of clarity over complexity.

This does not give companies a free pass to

stay high-level. Instead, it raises the bar on transparency: where quantification is feasible and decision-useful, it should be pursued; where it is not, companies should provide a clear qualitative explanation anchored in materiality, supported by assumptions and rationale. In many cases, the most decision-useful disclosure is not a single precise number but an explanation of:

what scenarios were considered (and why those scenarios),

-  what key assumptions were used,
-  what parts of the business are most sensitive,
-  what management actions would be taken under different conditions, and
-  what uncertainties remain and how the company is monitoring them.

The key point is this: the more reporting attempts to force exact numbers onto deep uncertainty, the higher the risk of false precision. Two analysts using different assumptions can produce very different “precise” outputs. Disclosures may look quantitative, but comparability can be illusory unless assumptions, judgments, and limitations are explicit.

That’s why a well-constructed qualitative explanation can be not only acceptable but sometimes superior, if it is anchored in materiality, specific to the business, and explicit about the judgments involved.

Beyond compliance is not one-size-fits-all

Another insight that deserves more attention is this: beyond compliance cannot be one-size-fits-all. Companies differ in business models, data maturity, exposure across the value chain, operational complexity, geographic risk, and stakeholder expectations.

For one company, beyond compliance might





mean strengthening governance and internal controls so that existing data becomes reliable enough for assurance. For another, it might mean improving the linkage between sustainability risks and financial planning. For another, it might mean refining scenario analysis to focus on the few uncertainties that truly drive strategic vulnerability. And for some companies, the most valuable “beyond compliance” move might actually be to simplify: reduce immaterial disclosures, tighten the logic, and make the report more navigable and comparable.

This is where cost-benefit thinking belongs at the center of the conversation. If ‘beyond compliance’ is treated as a race to add disclosures, the result will be volume, not value

The reporting paradigm shift: “tell a story,” don’t just publish data

IFRS Foundation’s Educational Materials¹ emphasize that the sustainability disclosure does not have to follow a mechanical paragraph-by-paragraph order. Instead, companies should present sustainability disclosures in a way that tells the story of their sustainability-related risks and opportunities, enhancing connections and avoiding duplication.

That is a powerful message for preparers who are nervous about structure. It signals that the goal is not to reproduce the standard in report form. The goal is to communicate:

-  What matters (material risks and opportunities)
-  Why it matters (link to strategy, business model, and enterprise value)
-  How it is managed (governance and risk management)
-  What it means (current and anticipated impacts, resilience, trade-offs, uncertainties)

¹ <https://www.ifrs.org/content/dam/ifrs/supporting-implementation/issb-standards/disclosing-information-anticipated-financial-effects.pdf>

Numbers still matter, but they play a supporting role. They provide evidence, boundaries, trend signals, and accountability. They should not become the whole narrative.

To reinforce beyond-compliance outcomes, regulatory approaches should emphasize decision-usefulness over checklists. This includes clear guidance on proportionality, explicit expectations for transparency about assumptions and uncertainties (especially in scenario analysis), and implementation support that helps entities progress without incentivizing boilerplate.

See beyond the numbers

Beyond compliance is about quality, not quantity. The quality of reasoning, quality of linkages, quality of transparency, and quality of relevance. In the end, seeing beyond the numbers doesn't mean rejecting numbers. It means refusing to treat numbers as a substitute for thinking. The most credible sustainability disclosures in the ISSB era will be the ones that tell a coherent story—supported by the right evidence—about how the business remains resilient, creates value, and navigates uncertainties.

How Agile Accountants Become Smart Change Agents in Carbon Accounting and Strategic Sustainability Action



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As global sustainability standards rapidly reshape business operations, the accounting profession is transitioning from a compliance-driven function to a strategic catalyst for environmental and economic transformation. This paper examines how agile accountants can serve as smart change agents, integrating carbon accounting into core business strategy and accelerating sustainable outcomes at organizational and national levels.

Introduction

The global shift toward sustainability has created unprecedented expectations for transparency, accountability, and climate-related risk management. International frameworks such as IFRS S1 and IFRS S2, the GHG Protocol, and region-specific regulations are positioning environmental disclosures alongside financial reporting. This evolving landscape demands a new type of accounting professional—one who is adaptable, strategic, and capable of interpreting complex sustainability information with the same rigor as financial data.

The Strategic Imperative of Carbon Accounting

Carbon accounting has moved beyond regulatory compliance to become a driver of competitive advantage. Organizations increasingly rely on emissions data to assess financial exposure to carbon taxes, border adjustment mechanisms, energy transition risks, and capital market expectations. Accountants who master carbon accounting provide vital insights into cost optimization, risk mitigation, and long-term strategic planning.

Core Competencies of the Agile Accountant

To transition from compliance specialist to sustainability strategist, accountants must cultivate four clusters of competencies:

1 Technical Competence

Agile accountants must understand emissions measurement methodologies, apply international standards, and ensure the robustness, traceability, and auditability of carbon data.

2 Digital Competence

The integration of financial and non-financial data requires proficiency in analytics, dashboarding, and sustainability reporting platforms.

3 Strategic Competence





Accountants must connect environmental performance with long-term financial outcomes, enabling carbon-informed decision-making in investment, operations, and supply chain management.

4 Change Leadership Competence

As integrators across business functions, agile accountants must facilitate collaboration, communicate insights, and support cultural transformation toward sustainability.

Accountants as Change Agents in Strategic Sustainability

The modern accountant functions as an “impact architect,” influencing governance, investment priorities, and enterprise-wide sustainability integration. Key contributions include:

-  Embedding emissions data into financial analysis
-  Designing internal controls for sustainability reporting
-  Supporting credible assurance and risk management
-  Aligning financial decisions with national and organizational climate commitments

National and Global Implications

Agile sustainability accountants play a vital role in achieving national climate targets, strengthening supply chain competitiveness, and attracting sustainable finance. In emerging economies, accountants are essential to enabling SMEs to meet ESG expectations, thereby supporting inclusive and resilient economic growth.

Conclusion

The shift from compliance to impact requires a transformation in the accounting profession's identity and capabilities. Agile accountants equipped with sustainability, digital, strategic, and leadership competencies will not only ensure high-quality reporting but also drive meaningful environmental and economic progress. These professionals are poised to shape a sustainable future for their organizations, their countries, and the world.

From Compliance Miser to Strategy Steward



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For decades, accountants have been viewed as meticulous rule-followers—professionals who operate within the confines of compliance, internal controls, and documentation. Yet the world around us is changing at a pace humanity has never experienced before. Just as astrophysicists have discovered that the universe is expanding at an accelerated rate, our world at large is undergoing rapid transformation — fuelled not by dark energy, but by AI and biotechnology.

The last two years demonstrate this vividly. While many feared that AI tools such as ChatGPT might replace professionals over time, the deeper truth is that the long-term impact of AI will be far more transformative than anyone anticipated.

I foresee the following trends unfolding over the next 20 years and beyond, and I have attempted to analyse these developments and their impact on the accounting profession across four phases.

Phase 1 (2025–2030): AI supercharged by quantum computing, agentic AI & blockchain provenance

The first major shift we will experience is the convergence of three transformative forces: AI, agentic AI, and quantum computing.

Unlike traditional AI systems that respond only when prompted, Agentic AI represents a new class of autonomous systems capable of taking independent actions, coordinating with other AI agents and completing complex tasks without continuous human instruction. Examples include workflow bots such as UiPath and Power Automate, are currently used to “self-run” month-end closing process. This shift means AI will move from “predictive text” to “proactive execution,” reshaping workflows in finance, audit, and corporate reporting.





At the same time, quantum computing—such as Google’s Willow chip—enables processing power thirteen thousand times faster than classical computer chips. Traditional processors operate like ON/OFF switches; quantum processors behave like dimmers, enabling infinite states and parallel computation. Early quantum services in cloud, including IBM Quantum, Google Quantum APIs, are currently used experimentally for portfolio risk and fraud pattern optimisation. This breakthrough will accelerate machine learning, risk modelling, and fraud detection.

Blockchain technologies will also become intertwined with AI, providing trusted provenance and an auditable trail of how data is used, transformed, and embedded

into AI. Permissioned blockchains, such as Hyperledger and Quorum, are currently used to store tamper-evident audit logs and track invoice provenance.

Accountant's evolving role in Phase 1

Accountants become digitally augmented professionals who supervise autonomous, agentic, and quantum-accelerated systems. Their responsibilities shift to:

-  Validating outputs from agentic AI systems executing multi-step finance tasks,
-  Governing automated processes that self-learn and adapt,
-  Providing assurance on blockchain-based data lineage, and
-  Mitigating AI model risk, bias, and ethical concerns.

In this era, the accountant becomes an AI supervisor & integrity guardian—not performing the work manually, but ensuring the automated systems perform it accurately, ethically, and transparently.

Phase 2 (2030–2035): Edge computing & embedded assurance

As we enter the 2030s, data processing will increasingly shift from centralised cloud servers to edge devices—IoT sensors, autonomous machines, smart meters, industrial robotics, and retail systems. Data will be processed at source, enabling instantaneous insight without latency, bandwidth strain, or cloud dependency.

Financial, operational, and ESG data will begin to flow instantaneously, creating a world where transactions, emissions, asset utilisation, and supply-chain metrics are captured in real time.

This phase will mark a fundamental break from traditional external assurance:

1 Assurance becomes embedded directly into the accountant's role

As systems generate real-time data, accountants will no longer need to wait for the annual audit cycle. Instead, they perform continuous and integrated assurance as part of everyday financial operations.

2 External assurance evolves alongside smarter systems






As data validation happens inside systems continuously—supported by edge analytics, AI consistency checks, and device-level controls—the nature of annual external audits will naturally shift. External auditors will take on a more strategic oversight role, but the centre of gravity of assurance shifts inward, into finance teams and autonomous systems. This creates a continuous and collaborative assurance environment.

3 Machine-assisted internal controls replace manual testing

Sensor-level controls, automated reconciliations, embedded anomaly detection, and self-validating data sets will reduce the need for manual sampling and substantive testing.

Accountant's evolving role in Phase 2

Accountants transition into Real-Time Assurance Leaders responsible for:

-  Validating IoT-generated transactions and sustainability data at source,
-  Interpreting continuous data streams,
-  Designing and monitoring device-level internal controls,
-  Ensuring accuracy in automated, high-frequency financial flows, and
-  Integrating assurance into day-to-day operations rather than year-end events.

The accountant will become the primary assurance provider, while external assurance

becomes a complementary high-level oversight mechanism rather than the primary driver of trust.

Phase 3 (2035–2045): Pervasive AI and ambient intelligence

In this phase, AI will become woven into the background of daily life—ubiquitous, context-aware, autonomous, and predictive. Retail stores will personalise promotions before customers enter. Smart hospital rooms will monitor patients without wires. Vehicles will adapt performance based on driving behaviour. AI anticipates needs and acts pre-emptively.

This period approaches what futurist Ray Kurzweil terms the singularity—when AI surpasses human cognitive ability and begins to self-improve exponentially.

Accountant's evolving role:

Here, accountants will become predictive strategists who guide organisations using AI-generated foresight. Finance systems will become largely autonomous, adjusting budgets, forecasts, and resource allocation dynamically. Accountants lead ethical governance for AI embedded across an organisation's value chain. They oversee predictive sustainability systems, algorithmic risk monitoring, and automated compliance.

The accountant will become the ethics steward and strategic navigator for AI-driven enterprises.

Phase 4 (2045+): Bio-digital convergence & cognitive integration

Beyond the singularity, human and digital intelligence will begin to merge. Brain-computer interfaces will support thought-based interaction, and health systems integrate data from behaviour, genetics, and the environment. Autonomous AI may handle financial or tax decisions at speeds that surpass human ability.

Accountant's evolving role:

In this era, accountants will serve as architects of human–AI governance, ensuring fairness, responsibility, and transparency across bio-digital ecosystems. They evaluate neuro-data risks, oversee cognitive-analytics systems, and design policies for autonomous financial and sustainability decision-making.





Their role centres on ethical mediation, governance, and stewardship of trust in human–machine symbiosis.

The IFRS Skills Framework for the Next Generation Accountant

Across all phases, one theme is clear: the accountant's value shifts from technical compliance to strategic stewardship.

To thrive in the coming decades, accountants must cultivate a broad, future-ready skill set grounded in the "IFRS" framework:


I — IT or AI

-  Understanding neural networks, data pipelines, and quantum-enhanced analytics,
-  Supervising AI systems and validating model outputs,
-  Ensuring data provenance using blockchain and cryptographic trails, and
-  Designing governance frameworks for algorithmic accountability.





F — Financial Reporting

-  Interpreting AI-generated financial statements and integrated performance dashboards,
-  Ensuring accuracy in real-time financial streams,
-  Providing assurance over autonomous finance systems, and
-  Integrating financial, operational, and sustainability indicators.

R — Risk Management

-  Evaluating AI and model risks,
-  Managing cybersecurity, privacy, and ethical risks,
-  Applying predictive analytics for financial, climate, and supply-chain risks, and
-  Designing enterprise-wide governance frameworks for intelligent systems.

S — Sustainability

-  Implementing ISSB-aligned climate and ESG reporting,
-  Validating IoT-generated emissions and supply-chain data,
-  Designing AI-enabled sustainability dashboards, and
-  Guiding organisations toward long-term ethical value creation.

Conclusion: The Profession's Defining Opportunity

The accounting profession stands at a pivotal inflection point. As technology accelerates, society will depend more—not less—on trusted human professionals who can ensure responsibility, integrity, and sustainability. AI may become the calculator of the future, but accountants will remain the architects of judgment, ethics, and long-term value.

I would like to thank Samir Patel, Director of Majorix Capital, for his insights in this article. Samir has over 30 years of global experience in technology, sustainability, and private equity beginning his career as an aerospace engineer at NASA before leading national digital and green-economy initiatives across countries such as Singapore, Brunei, and the Middle East.

The perspectives shared in this article represent my personal reflections and interpretations of the technological trends. They do not reflect the official positions of any organisation I am affiliated with. As with any future-looking discussion, the scenarios and implications described should be viewed as exploratory frameworks rather than predictions and readers are encouraged to form their own reasoned judgments.

Sustainability Reporting: Track Your Progress to Create Decision-Useful Information



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As sustainability reporting gathers momentum across ASEAN, regulators, standard-setters and professional bodies are working to align with emerging global baselines while responding to domestic priorities. Against this backdrop, ACCA's new global study, *Sustainability reporting: track your progress to create decision-useful information*, offers timely insight for the region's policymakers and the accountancy profession.

The report is the latest output from ACCA's sustainability reporting hub. It draws on responses from over 1,000 professionals in 113 jurisdictions, supplemented by interviews and eight global roundtables, to assess how ready organisations are to create and use sustainability information that genuinely supports decision-making.

The research finds that many organisations are still in the early stages of their sustainability journey, experimenting with metrics and narratives while simultaneously developing and improving data quality, system integration and internal governance. Of those polled, 39% were yet to commit to creating or use sustainability information. At the same time, a growing group is beginning to embed sustainability into strategy, budgeting and performance management,

treating sustainability reporting not as a compliance burden but as a source of better decisions, stronger access to capital and greater resilience.

ACCA's report identifies a practical maturity pathway that helps organisations locate themselves along this spectrum. At one end sit entities responding reactively to individual stakeholder requests, producing standalone disclosures with limited internal integration. As they progress along the spectrum, organisations begin to formalise data collection, clarify roles and responsibilities and connect sustainability information to risk management and governance structures. At the most advanced stage, sustainability data becomes part of the core information architecture of the organisation, feeding into strategy, capital allocation and business model innovation.

Within the ASEAN region, this progression is not an abstract concept. Economies are growing, capital markets are deepening and sustainability-related risks – including the recent devastating floods – are already being felt in communities and supply chains. Regulators and standard-setters across ASEAN are moving to align with international developments, including the ISSB's IFRS S1 and S2 standards. As ACCA's 2025 report

Sustainability Reporting in ASEAN showed, several jurisdictions are working towards mandatory or phased sustainability reporting regimes meaning around 85% of regional GDP is publicly aligned with ISSB. Against this backdrop, the accountancy profession in ASEAN, led by AFA members, has a vital role to play in helping organisations climb the maturity curve in a measured and credible way.

The report sets out ten thematic recommendations to help organisations move from ad hoc sustainability disclosures to decision-useful, resilient reporting. One recommendation is to avoid threats to resilience by making sure organisations understand for themselves how sustainability regulation applies, instead of simply relying on figures produced by others. Another theme is to integrate sustainability into leadership discussions: although 33% of those surveyed recognised the importance of sustainability strategies, only 27% use this information for operational decisions and just 16% say senior management uses it, pointing to a clear leadership gap. The report also calls for more support to provide climate-related information, noting that while 33% of corporates can meet climate data requests, only 18% of SMEs can. Other recommendations include leveraging regulatory developments as a practical starting point, understanding end-to-end key resources and who provides them, baking sustainability into stakeholder engagement, and urging professional firms and SMPs to be proactive as demand for sustainability reporting and assurance continues to grow.

One of the central messages of *Sustainability reporting: track your progress* is that finance and accounting professionals are uniquely placed to bridge the skills gap between aspiration and execution. They understand systems, controls and assurance; they are used to working at the intersection of business strategy, data and regulation; and they have a long tradition of applying ethics and professional scepticism

to complex judgements. When finance teams are actively involved in shaping sustainability reporting, disclosures are more likely to be consistent, and connected to financial performance.

At the same time, the report is realistic about the pressures professionals face. Many respondents highlight limited resources, competing priorities and gaps in specialist knowledge as significant barriers. In some organisations, sustainability is still seen as a side project rather than an essential, core capability, leading to fragmented ownership and ad hoc data collection. Progress tends to be fastest where senior leadership clearly articulates why sustainability reporting matters, invests in skills and systems, and empowers finance professionals to work in partnership with sustainability, risk and operational teams.

For professional accountancy organisations and regional bodies such as AFA, these findings carry clear implications. They underline the need for sustained investment in skills, from basic sustainability literacy for all finance staff to advanced expertise in climate-related risk, scenario analysis and evolving reporting standards. They point to the importance of collaboration between regulators, standard-setters and the profession to ensure that new sustainability reporting requirements are interoperable, proportionate and practical, especially for small and medium-sized entities that form the backbone of ASEAN economies. And they highlight the opportunity for the profession to position itself as a trusted advisor on sustainability, not only to boards and management but also to governments and public institutions.

Crucially, the report argues that progress should not be measured simply by the volume of disclosures. Good sustainability reporting is about quality and usefulness: whether it helps decision-makers understand where the organisation is exposed, where it can lead and how it can create value over

the long term. Done well, it can strengthen access to capital, support participation in global value chains and enhance trust with citizens and communities. In the public sector, it can improve transparency around how public money is deployed to deliver sustainable development outcomes; an issue of resonance in ASEAN.



Official Publication of the ASEAN Federation of Accountants (AFA)
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