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Leading Through Change: The Forces Shaping the Future of CPAs

Report prepared by CalCPA





A Message from Our CEO

The accounting profession is undergoing a profound shift—driven by new technologies, evolving market expectations, and increasing complexity across the business landscape. At the same time, demand for trusted professional judgment has never been higher. In moments of uncertainty, the public isn't just looking for information—they're looking for assurance.

As automation and artificial intelligence make it easier to generate and validate data, trust becomes more—not less—important. The public needs professionals whose responsibility to it is unwavering, whose judgment is earned through education and experience, and whose work is grounded in ethics and accountability. Trust must be earned, not automated.

This idea guided CalCPA's Leadership Forum this fall, where leaders from public accounting, industry, academia, and emerging practice areas came together to examine the forces shaping the future of our profession and our economy. The message was clear: CPAs are uniquely positioned to lead in this environment—but doing so will require adaptability. It means expanding our roles, developing new skills, attracting new talent, and reaffirming professional standards as signals the public can rely on.

The work CPAs do cannot be reduced to validation alone. It depends on human judgment, professional skepticism, and a commitment to serving the public interest. In a time when confusion is growing and trust is under pressure, these qualities are essential to economic stability.

This research captures key insights from those conversations and outlines both the risks of eroding trust and the opportunities ahead. It is a call to action—and an invitation to shape what comes next.

I encourage you to explore the findings and join us in this work. Together, we can ensure the profession continues to set the benchmark for trust, integrity, and leadership when it matters most.

Denise DeLuc Froemming
CEO and President, CalCPA

Introduction

The accounting profession stands at a pivotal moment—one defined less by disruption and more by possibility. Emerging technologies, new market expectations, and evolving career pathways are reshaping how CPAs serve, lead, and create trust. To seize these opportunities, this fall CalCPA brought together leaders from across the profession for a day of strategic dialogue and forward thinking.

In September, CalCPA convened managing partners, industry leaders, and innovators for a Leadership Forum designed to explore the profession's future. Facilitated by strategist [Lowell Aplebaum](#), CEO of Vista Cova, the forum examined four key forces driving change:

- 1 **Trust** – preserving independence and integrity as the foundation of professional credibility
- 2 **Technology** – transforming the CPA's value from efficiency to insight
- 3 **Talent** – preparing professionals for new tools, interdisciplinary teams, and lifelong learning
- 4 **Transformation** – the profession's expanding role in new markets and assurance areas

The purpose of the Forum was to move beyond simply reacting to challenges, but instead to anticipate the opportunities ahead—to see around corners and shape the next chapter of the CPA profession. Through candid discussion and collective visioning, participants identified ways to redefine trust in a digital economy, position CPAs as ethical leaders, and ensure accounting professionals continue to set the standard for excellence and innovation.

What follows distills those insights into actionable themes and leadership opportunities—charting a path for the profession to thrive in a future defined by trust, technology, talent, and transformation.



The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that employment of accountants and auditors is projected to **outpace the average for all occupations, growing 5 percent** from 2024 to 2034.



Key Findings

- Preserving public trust requires CPAs and the broader accounting profession to clearly articulate and reinforce the ethical foundations of the profession—especially as new technologies play a growing role.
- Clearly demonstrating the value of the accounting profession and its diverse career paths, while strengthening outreach to aspiring professionals
- Training, education, and events must equip professionals with the knowledge and skills to effectively apply emerging technologies.
- Build foundational awareness and develop the skills needed to meet market expectations in emerging areas such as ESG, AI governance, and cybersecurity assurance.

Just as the Forum was intended to be future-focused, so is this document. We invite you to share your thoughts about this report and its findings, which will inform CalCPA's ongoing work to support and serve its members. To learn more and get in touch, please visit [CalCPA.org](https://www.calcpa.org).



1

Meeting the need for greater trust.



"Trust is the CPA profession's most valuable asset. Ethics isn't a requirement we fulfill, it's the promise we keep."

- Denise Froemming, CalCPA President & CEO

1 Meeting the need for greater trust.

In disruptive times, reliable information is essential. Today's accounting professionals play a key role in helping institutions and companies demonstrate their trustworthiness of the information, and to customers.

"Trust" isn't simply a matter of getting the numbers right. The CPA's job is to communicate reliability and trustworthiness, and to deliver insights that help leaders make effective and positive decisions.

As discussed in further detail later in this report, generative AI also plays a substantial role in the perceived value and trustworthiness of the profession. This happens on two fronts. First, CPAs are being called on to validate AI-generated reporting and demonstrate appropriate oversight of AI-assisted work. As technology evolves, ensuring accuracy remains paramount—but the methods for evidencing that accuracy are shifting.

Secondly, AI's growing use means CPAs are now shifting into a more interpretive role as data analysts. Professionals will increasingly be asked to not just validate numbers but provide reliable guidance around them — reflecting an expanded role and a higher level of expectation for accounting professionals.

In addition, competing credentials risk eroding the relevance and authority of the CPA profession. Clients are now increasingly free to "opinion-shop" for guidance from professions with different backgrounds and levels of expertise, some of which aren't backed by licensure and other certifications. This environment requires the profession to clearly articulate the CPA's role and proactively distinguish it from competitors.

The accounting profession has an opportunity to be proactive about demonstrating and advocating for the trustworthiness of their work. CPAs need to be increasingly vocal and visible about the importance of transparency and ethical application of technology tools, doing more to promote their work to a public that still holds trust at a premium despite witnessing an erosion of trust in their daily lives.



Recommendations for **Building Trust**



Establish clearer standards.

CPAs have an opportunity to serve as a “trusted broker for the trusted brokers,” communicating the integrity of the profession to the public while supporting the work of its members in the face of challenges that seek to down play ethics and erode trust. For instance, firms and professionals should assess professional standards to clarify their positions in relation to the changing state of the industry in terms of private equity involvement, AI, and more. Professionals need clearer guidance around managing conflicts of interest, and playing the role as the “human in the loop” for any work done with AI.



Promote the unique value of the CPA License.

Leaders in the profession can do more to showcase the work CPAs do, as a way to support public trust, and the value of the CPA licenses itself—which also has added benefits of attracting more students to the profession and serving as a bulwark against “on-demand” credentials that introduce confusion into the marketplace and undermine the CPA profession’s long-standing position of trust. CPAs should advocate for innovation and best-practices that promote trust in a CPA’s work product, such as transparency dashboards and digital verification tools. Making accountability and trust visible will help CPAs reinforce their unique value proposition and clearly differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace.



Emphasize Communication Skills.

One Forum participant suggested that in this new world, the CPA now serves as a “financial therapist”—a new role that the qualifications in the profession, and communications around it, may need to do more to spotlight. In many cases, this will require CPAs to develop more “soft” skills such as stakeholder communication, relationship management, and narrative building, discussed in the next section.



2

Closing the Talent Gap



2 Closing the Talent Gap

Enrollment numbers in accounting programs have declined in recent years, as potential CPAs pursue alternative career paths in adjacent data and finance fields that provide quicker entry into the profession and more immediate earning potential, or misperceive accountancy as a profession with narrow career paths that offer limited opportunities outside traditional accounting roles.

To that end, the profession needs to rethink how it recruits, develops, and retains talent. Firms and organizations like CalCPA can help create environments where reskilling is continuous, interdisciplinary teams are the norm, and professional development is better integrated into the CPA's job role.

Achieving substantive change will require balancing technical expertise with the professional skills demanded of the modern CPA. In addition to the core data-centric needs of the job, CPAs need training around communication, leadership, management, and storytelling. The new wave of accounting students need training on systems management and how to responsibly and effectively interact with generative AI. More experienced accountants need an enhanced portfolio of skills as well, which means changing the nature of their professional development. Firms need to be forward-thinking about workforce education, assessing future needs for the profession and working to train their people around it.

“The profession becomes less attractive to new talent if it is seen as a dated or legacy profession.”

- CalCPA Leadership Forum Participant

As CPAs increasingly work in multidisciplinary contexts, training should prioritize teamwork and team-management skills. Given the breadth of emerging domains, client services will increasingly rely on blended teams with specialized expertise in data science, cybersecurity, and other fields.





This evolution should be a net positive for both the profession and the public. Employers benefit from CPAs who are prepared to operate across a broader range of professional contexts, while the accounting profession strengthens its relevance by moving beyond the perception of being stable but static. In this environment, CPAs must be positioned—and prepared—as problem solvers who apply professional judgment and insight, not solely as technicians focused on transactional outputs.

Achieving this shift cannot rest on individual practitioners alone. It will require coordinated short- and long-term initiatives, including updates to curriculums and educational pathways as well as firm practices. In the near term, progress can be made through targeted upskilling and reskilling initiatives supported by stronger professional infrastructure—such as mentorship and peer learning—to ensure both students and practicing professionals are prepared to meet evolving market and public-interest expectations.

“Other providers will fill the need in the market if we don’t.”

- CalCPA Leadership Forum Participant



Recommendations for **Attracting Talent**



Develop future-focused education.

The profession should serve as the advocate for and provider of training that reflects the current and future needs of CPAs. Programs focused on AI, analytics, automation, leadership, collaboration, and more should all be available as part of the CPA's toolkit.



Communicate the profession's vibrancy to its future practitioners.

Leaders in the field should spotlight the diverse roles that CPAs play in the profession, such as through partnerships or case studies that reveal the ways CPAs work with technologists, data scientists, and other adjacent fields to serve the needs of firms and clients. That message should be aggressively targeted to students in high school and college, as they weigh their career choices.



Guide CPAs toward being leaders and team players.

Leaders can present the profession as one where CPAs are more than just accountants; rather, they are leaders, advisors, and problem-solvers who are essential to a variety of firms, teams, and industries. Mentorship efforts can be expanded to emphasize this dynamic to students and emerging professionals.



3

The New Technology Environment





3 The New Technology Environment

New technologies present both opportunity and constraint for today's CPA. AI and cloud-based automation have shifted many tasks once central to the profession, freeing CPAs to take on more advisory, analytical, and judgment-driven roles. Yet the profession has not been fully integrated as the trusted professional navigating rapid technological change. This leaves open questions about whether CPAs will function primarily as data processors or as trusted interpreters of information. As a result, the profession faces a defining moment in clarifying the CPA's role and where CPAs are best positioned to lead.

“CPAs will play a key role in filtering, sorting, and reviewing data to ensure its integrity.”

- CalCPA Leadership Forum Participant

Core accounting tasks—such as financial recording and reporting—are increasingly being automated. This shift is changing both the nature and cadence of CPAs' work. As AI enables continuous monitoring and predictive forecasting, the traditional “busy season” may give way to a model where ongoing, or “always-on,” assurance becomes more valuable.

This technology-driven transformation creates an opportunity for CPAs to move into higher-level analytical work. Their role is shifting from “spreadsheet compiler” to “data storyteller”—providing context, insight, and meaning that help clients and leaders make informed decisions.

“Accounting is still accounting. How we do it will change.”

- CalCPA Leadership Forum Participant

One technology-focused speaker at the Forum emphasized that, while this is a disruptive moment for the profession, the core skills of the CPA will remain essential. As the speaker noted, accounting fundamentals endure—even as the ways in which the work is performed continue to evolve.

The range of services that CPAs provide which are augmented by transformative technology, as explored in more detail in Section 4. Technology democratizes access that allows CPAs to serve in new markets. As the cadence of work changes, so too can the nature of firm business models and client relationships. The profession no longer needs to be locked into compliance work. Instead, it can pursue opportunities for new means of value creation.

But as much as tools such as AI can streamline tasks and create new opportunities, it presents notable risks. There still needs to be a “human in the loop” to validate outputs, challenge assumptions, identify biases, and ensure that client data is secure. One Forum participant likened AI to a junior staffer that requires supervision. As another put it: **“We have to be accountable for what AI is producing.”**

Looking ahead, technology will require CPAs to place greater emphasis on judgment and insight. They will be responsible not just for using new tools, but for stewarding them—ensuring they are applied responsibly and effectively. As technology reshapes regulatory expectations, CPAs will increasingly serve as in-house “data ethicists,” bringing transparency to data quality and advocating for accuracy, meaning, and security. A future-ready firm is adaptable and technology-first—and, most importantly, knows how to turn information into value.





Recommendations for **Engaging With New Technologies**



Establish the profession as a market leader.

The profession provides a support system for its membership around these technological shifts. It should develop frameworks for technology utilization and oversight that guides CPAs on AI governance, bias mitigation, and accountability. This at once provides them with tools for today's challenges, demonstrates publicly that CPAs are following the trends, and reinforces the image of the CPA to the public as a trusted voice around responsible use of AI, maintaining the profession's reputation for authority and reliability. The message should be straightforward: CPAs provide sensible, responsible judgment around new technology.



Rethink service delivery.

The profession should recognize that service models have changed, and that it can think outside the box. Rather than thinking in terms of a la carte services like audits, tax accounting, etc., firms should be equipped to provide more dynamic and tailored services where conventional tasks are blended with more analytical ones meeting client's needs. To do that, CPAs will require expanded educational resources around technology-driven needs, such as analytics, data storytelling, and use of AI platforms.



Consider ethics around these shifts.

As the technology changes, so too do the ethical challenges. Codes of ethics may need to be revisited, updated, and more actively communicated to ensure CPAs understand and uphold emerging standards around the use of AI, continuous monitoring, and modern reporting practices.



4

CPAs and Emerging Markets





“For any process where data is coming in and being used for decisions, there is a role for the profession to provide trust and insights.”

- CalCPA Leadership Forum Participant

4 CPAs and Emerging Markets

The themes discussed in the previous three sections— the importance of trust, the need for fresh talent/skills, and new technologies—all feed into how CPAs need to support their clients. The work is harder to break down into specific parts now—compliance, tax, annual audits—and requires CPAs to play a more holistic role. Forum participants discussed how these changes have opened up new lines of value generation for firms.

This marks a sea change for the profession, as CPAs now have the potential to provide more services in areas like ESG or AI governance, which were once considered well outside of CPAs’ ambit. This provides an enormous opportunity for the profession as it looks for new revenue opportunities. But this shift also brings new challenges. CPAs are being asked to do more, operate in more complex environments, and demonstrate both reliability and capacity for innovation. Meeting these expectations will require clear standards for how trust is demonstrated in new roles, along with targeted training that equips CPAs to apply judgment, technology, and ethics effectively in these evolving settings.

The possibilities outweigh the challenges. Technology now facilitates firms working in the role of global advisors, working across multiple geographies and industries. And expanding service lines such as ESG, AI, and supply chain management provide plenty of opportunities for assurance professionals to provide value. Forum participants recognized that these industries will represent the next wave of core services for CPAs. CPAs will expand to serve as data-integrity professionals, helping to set standards in maturing fields.

As responsibilities evolve, so do client relationships. CPAs are increasingly expected to serve as strategic advisors, providing long-term guidance across a broader range of business issues. That requires being responsive, accessible, and forward-looking—able to anticipate risks and opportunities before they fully emerge. At the same time, the nature of the work is changing. CPAs are now assessing and assuring more intangible assets, such as cryptocurrency, emissions, and AI systems. The future-focused CPA will develop the tools and insight needed to help clients understand, protect, and create value in these areas.



Recommendations Around **New Markets**

The challenge here is particularly urgent. Taking a leadership role in new markets doesn't just offer opportunities for accounting firms, it prevents other industries from co-opting them. Forum participants stressed the importance of educating CPAs around these shifts and embracing new client needs.



Explore opportunities.

Accounting leaders should develop frameworks, resources, and training for CPAs around ESG, AI governance, and cybersecurity assurance. Its education should also include a global lens, informing members about cross-border regulations, cultural competence, and data security for international firms.



Develop dynamic business models.

As new markets emerge, firms will adopt new models for delivering services. CPAs will increasingly support subscription-based advisory offerings, engage with clients on a year-round basis, and operate within evolving, more competitive billing structures. To succeed in this environment, firms will need benchmarking tools that reflect the financial realities of these models, along with targeted education on how to design, price, and deliver these services effectively.



Promote market-readiness.

The profession also needs to promote itself as prepared to work in this new environment. It should be using its position to elevate CPAs roles as not just common accounting roles but also as professionals who can deliver audits of "intangible" assets. It can stand up forums as means to publicly discuss these efforts, and how its community is prepared to meet next-gen challenges.



Conclusion

The accounting profession is at an inflection point. While its reputation as a trusted and reliable figure in the economic ecosystem remains solid, its range is often perceived as narrow and not fit-for-purpose for an emerging range of assurance needs and disruptive technologies. AI is transforming how CPAs do their work; rival professions are competing for the kind of analytical roles that CPAs fill. How audits are done, what gets audited, how the work is presented, and what decision-making roles they will play will be radically different from a CPA's day-to-day work of even a decade ago.

It is the profession's responsibility to guide the industry through this period of change. Trust—hard-earned over generations—is the profession's greatest asset and cannot be assumed in disruptive times. The path forward for CalCPA and the profession is to build on that foundation of credibility while equipping today's professionals with the skills and confidence needed to lead the next generation.

Learn more at [CalCPA.org](https://www.calcpa.org)

