

## Finance teams 'to take on wider role'

Finance professionals not 'bean counters', can help firms reach goals

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Speaking at the conference (from left): Ms Angeline Chua, CFO, IBM Asean; Ms Wong Lai Ping, regional finance director - Asia Pacific, element14; Mr Thomas Zipperle, CFO, SAP; Mr Luciano Pezzotta, managing partner, ECSI Consulting; Mr Ravi Arumugam, CEO and managing partner, RT LLP; Mr Jamie Lyon, head of corporate sector, ACCA. -- PHOTO: ACCA SINGAPORE

**BY ARIEL LIM**

FINANCE professionals should move beyond being "bean counters" and act as internal entrepreneurs to help firms reach their business goals.

The advice came from a range of speakers and panellists at the annual conference of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) yesterday.

Mr Jamie Lyon, ACCA's head of corporate sector, quoted a chief financial officer (CFO) who pointed out that emerging technology, social media and the entry of disruptive players had forced the finance industry to change fast.

Traditional businesses were also having to compete with new, innovative models. This meant that companies now had to be "much more entrepreneurial" to drive growth in a "competitive and volatile environment", which extended to the finance function, said the CFO cited by Mr Lyon.

Finance professionals who adopted this kind of approach - called intrapreneurship - would support ideas to drive profit in their companies and would be "creative" and "innovative", added Mr Lyon.

He emphasised the importance of technology, citing a McKinsey study which found companies that had embraced digitisation across the entire enterprise had revenues, profit

margins and stock prices 20 to 30 per cent higher than companies that had not done so. They also had a potential 50 per cent increase in their bottom lines over five years.

Mr Lyon later told The Straits Times that digital intrapreneurship was key because a company's growth was increasingly driven by intangible assets such as branding, talent, intellectual property and data. That means it is important for finance professionals to be able to manage these intangible assets by using technology and working with data. He added that this data could come from throughout the business, including numbers on marketing, sales and human resources.

But Mr Lyon warned that finance professionals should not lose sight of the basics, pointing out that a finance department in a company had "dual responsibilities" - to ensure the business was "effectively controlled" and to help "the business grow and make decisions".

The "right balance" had to be struck, he added.

The conference also featured a panel discussion of finance professionals.

IBM Asean CFO Angeline Chua raised the example of an automated tool created by staff, including fresh graduates, using analytics to evaluate candidates for mergers and acquisitions.

The panellists commented that intrapreneurship had a place even in traditional, stable organisations.

Mr Ravi Arumugam, chief executive and managing partner at accounting firm RT LLP, said finance professionals were not "bean counters" but could play an advisory role in organisations to help them guard against disruptive change and "know which way the headwind is coming".

ACCA deputy president Alexandra Chin JP said in her opening remarks that ACCA had identified recommended practices for CFOs and finance departments as part of its "smart finance" campaign.

She divided these practices into four parts - finance leadership; technology; human capital practices; and finance operations.

The one-day conference was attended by about 400 finance, business and accounting professionals. It was held at Raffles City Convention Centre.