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It's possible this isn't the time to be thinking about the so-called "soft" business skills. Or maybe it's exactly the right time.

The conversations I'm having with hundreds of people in small businesses — all of them facing the brutal realities of the pandemic — keep bringing me back to soft skills in a time of hard decisions.

We're all still absorbing the magnitude and astounding speed of what's happening.

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people — especially people who built careers at the end of the business spectrum occupied by digits, data, tracking, accounting and forecasting.

I'm one of them. I became an accountant because I wanted to learn the foundation of the numbers and support small businesses. However, I quickly found that most of the work was data crunching and providing insights far too late for them to be meaningful. And soft skills were an afterthought.

Yet even in those safer and more stable times, accountants and bookkeepers were hearing some version of a message that sounded like: "That day is passing. There's got to be more to what you do. Change or get left on the side of the road."

We heard the suggestion: acquire new skills and deliver a different kind of value, but resisted. It was an invitation extended at the point of a sword; change veiled in a threat, but not absolute, existential urgency.

That might be changing – whether it's just because we desire to be better people, or because that invitation to evolve is an idea whose time has come.

I believe it's inevitable that traditional accounting will evolve to become a more fully developed business advisory role. And in that scenario, the "minimum viable offering" will include more emotional content and a requirement to engage our customers with a more genuine, human connection, awareness and understanding of their situations.

Exactly what might that new profile look like? It's going to look a lot more familiar than we might think.

Does it seem that talking about awareness and human connection is too soft? Then let's make this as tangible as our home field in tax management; that depth of understanding and fundamental connection to any customer's business.

- That's nothing new, and certainly doesn't feel scary or intimidating. We've always

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- Who is in a better position to understand a business's pressures and opportunities? Why not take on the role of advisor on topics that fall beyond the expertise of the owner, like the relevance of advanced technologies – digital platforms, blockchain, robotics, the cloud; or apply that same level of insight to advise on the availability of employee resources in areas spanning individual financial planning, elder care or mental health.

Is emotional intelligence too esoteric? Then let's reduce it to change management.

- We all know that in any change program, the big issues are about people – and are addressed via communication and clarity; listening and addressing what threatens people or activating what motivates them.

I tend to think the profession is farther down this path than most accountants and bookkeepers realize. Not everyone. Not across the board, and certainly not because the profession has been super intentional about embedding training in those areas during those long years of training on the path to a CPA.

Right now, every small business is forced to play the ultimate short game – not as a matter of competitive advantage, but as a matter of survival — sorting out how to preserve staffing, adjust supply chains, defer payments, or negotiate collections.

In any one of those situations, how fully will they be able to empathize with the situations of a trading partner that's facing an identical situation and making the same trade-offs. What's the basis for decisions on relaxing terms and conditions? When taking on a new customer, do we have the required analysis and insight on their financial situation and prospects?

And if we had a deeper, broad-based, collective sense of empathy, awareness and

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soft skills may be what makes the difference when we get our report card in the way of future business.

Final point.

Empathy isn't sympathy or pity, any more than this near-term set of conditions is permanent. Empathy is insight and understanding, and the long game of building sustainable businesses that create value and employ people remains.

The choices we make now are choices we'll live with far beyond the current crisis. These so-called soft considerations matter, in the short and long term, perhaps now more than ever.

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Ben Richmond is a chartered accountant and US Country Manager at [Xero](#) where he is responsible for driving Xero's growth in the region. He started his career in a large regional accounting practice before joining New Zealand's largest telecommunications company working on SEC compliance and investor reporting. He joined Xero in New Zealand in 2013 where he led the country's national growth and spearheaded Xero's global agriculture strategy. Ben moved to Denver in 2017, where he previously served as Vice President of Business Growth on the Xero Americas leadership team. In 2019, Ben was recognized by CPA Practice Advisor as a "20 Under 40 Influencer" and he was named to Accounting Today's "Top 100 Most Influential People in Accounting." Ben earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree in Accounting Finance and Information Systems from the University of Canterbury.

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