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## CONTRIBUTORS

# Creating a Data Culture

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Amanda Wilkie • Aug. 04, 2020



How do CPAs move from being historians to being advisors and consultants? One of the crucial ways to make that shift is by leveraging data.

CPA firms possess an incredible amount of data, and the tools allowing them to use that data are increasingly available. However, firms need a plan for using those tools to provide value to clients and create value for themselves. Part of creating that plan is to build a data culture.

## **What is a data culture?**

For firms with a strong data culture, it's normal, even automatic, for employees to use data in their decision-making processes. They have a consistent and repeatable approach for basing decisions and client recommendations on data rather than gut instinct.

Here are five ways you can work on guiding your firm into a more data-centric culture.

### **Set the tone from the top**

As with any aspect of firm culture, you need to set the right tone at the top. Lead from example. Encourage your teams to provide data to back up decisions and recommendations. This helps promote the use of data and provides opportunities for your team to develop their data skills and capabilities.

Communication is key, so share data-driven insights on performance in emails and meetings and recognize employees who find new ways to leverage data with their clients.

### **Focus on strategy**

One characteristic of a strong data culture is flexibility and the ability to spot alternative uses for data.

Often, this means employees will need to acquire new habits. For example, employees in the tax and audit departments may regularly come across client information they have no use for while preparing a tax return or performing audit steps. However, if employees in that department are trained to see that information within the context of a larger data strategy, they start to recognize links to other services the firm can provide, such as wealth management, strategic planning, process improvement initiatives, and risk management. So encourage employees to

find alternative uses for data beyond their own job responsibilities and reward them when they do.

Everyone in the firm needs to understand why you're implementing a data strategy and why this will be better than the way you've handled data in the past. This generates buy-in and helps people understand how data strategy will affect their role and the skills they need to develop and use. Ensure people understand how growing the firm's use of data will help them better serve clients, progress in their careers and improve the firm as a whole. Having a clear strategy will create a more receptive environment.

## **Invest in the right tools**

For your firm's data culture to thrive, you need to invest in the tools and technology that will support data-driven results and processes, now and in the future.

The most crucial step here is to ensure that your data isn't siloed. Silos of information are the enemy of a thriving data culture. Firm leaders must promote data as a flexible asset that's available to multiple departments, from tax and audit to marketing, business development and HR.

Your team cannot make data-driven decisions if all of the data you need for those decisions is in disparate systems that aren't connected to each other. You wind up with inconsistent and outdated information across multiple systems. This hurts both your own team members and the client experience because it slows down workflows and requires people to spend more time double-checking and cleansing data.

Some people in the firm may want to cling to familiar applications and processes, even if they don't support integration. CPA firms use an impressive number of solutions and apps, but the more unique, non-integrated applications you use, the harder it is to bring all of that data together.

There's no room for personal preference in a data culture. Ensure all of your systems are integrated and communicating with one another so you can have a complete and accurate view of the data throughout the firm. Ultimately, this will provide better information for people to make data-driven decisions.

## **Map the firm's use of data**

Educate employees on how the data they collect and use daily impacts other parts of the firm so they can see the bigger picture.

Draw maps showing how data sets are used by different departments and link that data back to your firm's processes. This map will become a framework for everyone in the firm to better understand how information is used.

This process can also help uncover other sources of siloed data that you may not have realized were there. For example, if your innovation team is working on new lines of service that your sales and marketing teams aren't aware of, they can't help the firm promote and sell the new services. If auditors are unaware of the tax planning conversations happening with a client, they may not understand why clients are structuring transactions in a certain way, and client service suffers. Identify those pockets of data and look for ways to bring it in.

Everyone in your firm needs to understand how data can help the firm and its clients. Support this knowledge with an easily understandable data strategy, data mapping and the right technology. That will set your firm up for success with a strong data culture.

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Amanda Wilkie, a consultant at [Boomer Consulting, Inc.](#), has a computer science background, but is not the average geek. With two decades of technology experience, Amanda has spent 13 years driving change and process improvement through innovative technology solutions working across firms of varying sizes in the public accounting profession. She has held strategic leadership positions in firms ranging from Top 50 to Top 10 including her most recent role as CIO of a Top 30 firm.

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