



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The Awkward Office Love Affair of Bots and Bookkeepers

AI bots will speed data processing but businesses that let bots entirely replace humans will find it impossible to stay competitive.

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Business owners, be forewarned: The [AccTech](#) (accounting + technology) bots are taking over. But they're not the towering metal giants or eerily humanoid robots of sci-fi nightmares. These bots are

lines of code that grab information and communicate with humans about your business operations. They know (almost) everything before you've even whispered the thought, and they might want to take your bookkeeper's job -- or maybe just work alongside her.

I had a recent conversation with Jan Haugo, CEO and vice president of the Institute of Certified Bookkeepers USA (ICBUSA), who emphasized all the ways emerging technologies will transform the role of small business bookkeeping. In particular, we discussed how machine learning and artificial intelligence will enable accountants to interact with bots the same way they would with a human co-worker.

Accounting technology brands such as Xero are already capitalizing on this trend. It's continued its innovation by releasing AI tools that will minimize -- and ultimately eliminate -- the amount of transaction coding businesses must do. This may seem scary now (at least for a few old-school number crunchers), but as technology develops and people cozy up to the practice, bookkeeping bots will continue their industry domination.

The evolution of your company's bookkeeper.

Bookkeepers play a vital role in many organizations, but what happens when bots handle the flow of information and render several of their manual tasks redundant? The common perception of bookkeeping as a reactive role focused on tracking and managing data gets turned upside down.

Technology is reaching a point where humans don't need to be involved in data collection and management. [#ZeroDataEntry](#) -- meaning functions such as the recording of invoices can occur automatically and without human intervention -- is quickly becoming a reality for many accounting teams.

The bookkeepers of the future (and, perhaps, the future is now) will go beyond understanding debits and credits and your business's current software. Bookkeepers must be able to think about technology, address workflow issues and add value on the topics of finance and operational strategy. Evaluate the effects of tech on your company, and decide how your current bookkeeper fits into this future narrative. She can assist in future-proofing your business if you give her a chance to become that AccTech advocate.

According to Haugo, the U.S. lags behind other countries in this area, so how can you help to close the gap? With the shifting demands of the bookkeeper, do we have enough of the “right” candidates in the market? And what can you do to accommodate for this new role?

These are all important questions. So here’s some advice on finding (and retaining) bookkeepers who will drive your organization into the new era of accounting:

1. Know your skills gap -- and fill it!

According to a survey of [American executives](#), 45 percent believe a lack of skilled labor hinders growth, and another 30 percent believe it negatively affects their businesses’ profits. This is magnified when dealing with numbers professionals. So find out what’s missing, and identify the [skill sets](#) that are most critical to your company’s growth. Doing so will help you recruit the right people to fill the gap.

But don’t just hire a bookkeeper because your friend recommended her or because you share an alma mater. Instead, conduct your due diligence to ensure you’re building a strong, versatile team with each new recruit.

2. Recruit from a pre-vetted talent pool.

It’s more crucial than ever to hire *and* retain top-notch talent -- especially when direct replacement costs up to [60 percent](#) of the previous employee’s salary. But as a small business, you need people now, and you can’t rely on outdated educational institutions to generate the workforce you need. So start looking for candidates elsewhere.

If you’re not sure where to find top accounting talent, check out progressive industry resources. [Accountex](#) (formerly The Sleeter Group) and [Xero](#) invite top-level individuals to speak at their conferences. These panelists are change agents and leaders within the community, making them valuable additions to your network. If they can’t help you directly, they may have the resources to find the right person for you.

3. Go beyond the bank reconciliation.

Look beyond a candidate's recordkeeping prowess or whether she can complete a bank reconciliation. Instead, ask if she's familiar with Xero, and see if she can discuss any of the 400-plus apps that exist within her market.

Evaluate her attitudes around cloud accounting and the impact of technology on the industry. Knowing a few tricks with QuickBooks Desktop and Excel won't cut it, but familiarity with [Expensify](#), [Hubdoc](#), [Avalara](#) or [Zapier](#) indicate an awareness of how tech transforms bookkeeping.

Finally, have her share stories about how she's continued to hone her skills and what problems she's solved for previous employers. The future of bookkeeping is about managing data flow, working with tech and problem-solving. Her responses will give insight into how she'll approach the open position.

4. Develop talent, and make personnel changes.

Bots will [force changes](#) in how bookkeepers work. If your current accounting team is filled with smart people you'd like to retain, help them learn relevant skills or transition to new positions within the company.

Online education via AccTech products and organizations (such as ICBUSA) have expanded our access to future-forward bookkeeping training. Leveraging these resources for on-the-job training is crucial as companies help current accounting teams prepare for this shift. Those worth keeping will be excited by the opportunities to grow. Someone who's resistant to change might not be a fit anymore.

AI bots will facilitate better, faster data processing, but they can't do everything. Businesses that welcome the bot takeover and halt their investment in humans will find it impossible to stay competitive. People (still) matter! So strike a balance between talent and tech, and do your part in making this awkward love affair between bots and bookkeepers the thriving marriage it can be.