

Abstract

Recent field research has documented the role change of management accountants from scorekeepers to change agents or from 'beancounters' to 'business controllers' (Granolund and Lukka, 1997; 1998b; Järvenpää, 1998; see also Burns and Baldvinsdottir, 1999; Friedman and Lyne, 1997). Large sample professional surveys of management accountants have supported the view that the tasks and competence requirements of accountants have indeed changed (Phillips and Ross, 1996; Russell et al., 1999; Siegel and Sorensen, 1999). These research papers and surveys have not, however, focused on how companies are trying to develop the competencies of their financial staff. Similarly, potential problems related to these development efforts have not been discussed. This paper addresses these research voids by presenting results from an explorative case study

The findings of this study suggest that while previous literature has solely concentrated on the business controller, or the 'change agent', also people operating with financial accounting activities are facing several competence development challenges that resemble those of business controllers. Moreover, it was found that the role of experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984; Jönsson, 1996) is of paramount importance irrespective of the accountants' position. Nevertheless, the adopted competence development means differed considerably. In the case of financial accountants, relatively well-structured competence development means, such as information databases and teaching others, have been used to leverage knowledge and skills levels. Somewhat paradoxically, the development of business controllers' and financial managers' knowledge and skills— which are more closely related to the core competencies of the company - was less controllable and the responsibility had been left to the individuals. In addition to foreseeable problems with competence development (such as heavy workload and organizational turnover) it was found that reluctance or inability to change at the individual level may hinder competence development as well as the views and impositions of superiors and other managers.

Key words: role of accountants, knowledge management, competence development, shared service centers, accounting change