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Rise2040: A human-led profession built on trust

Learn why thousands of finance and accounting professionals say judgment, ethics, and foresight — not just technology — will determine long-term relevance.

By Jeff Drew

Today



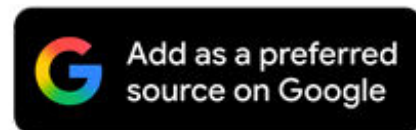
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are sitting in the same virtual breakout room. They have never met. They work in different regulatory systems, different economies, and different stages of their careers. Yet within minutes, they find themselves agreeing on where the profession is headed over the next 14 years.

When asked what will matter most in 2040, they answer at the same time: trust.

That illustrative scenario, which encapsulates the spirit of countless conversations at more than 90 meetings worldwide, captures the essence of Rise2040 — a sweeping, profession-driven

effort to understand how finance and accounting are evolving and how the profession can shape its future rather than react to it.

This is not a vision imposed from the top. Rise2040 reflects what more than 6,000 professionals across 25 countries said about what is changing, what is not, and what the profession must do next.

The most important takeaway: Humans, not technology, must lead the finance and accounting profession into the future.

WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO RISE

The timing of Rise2040 is intentional. It comes at a natural inflection point for a profession being reshaped by transformative forces including artificial intelligence (AI), demographic shifts, and increasing complexity in virtually all areas of business.

The initiative began last year after nearly three decades of formal visioning efforts — the 1997 CPA Vision Project, which projected the profession through 2011,

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and CPA Horizons, which covered 2011 through 2025 — had run their course. Those projects had articulated the profession’s core purpose as “Making sense of a changing and complex world.”

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With Rise2040, the discussions across all sessions in all locations consistently and clearly established “forward-looking strategic business partner” as the identity for finance and accounting professionals. The question was not whether another vision statement was needed. It was whether the profession could move beyond episodic forecasting toward something more durable: an ongoing capability for foresight.

Rise2040 was designed to enable finance and accounting professionals worldwide to set a future course for the profession. Rather than polling a small group of leaders, the initiative facilitated structured discussions across regions, roles, and career stages. Rather than dabble in hopes and beliefs, the discussions focused on what participants anticipated for the future and how the profession should respond.

This article explores major themes of the Rise2040 project and captures key insights from the newly released report *Rise2040: Shaping the Future of Finance & Accounting*, which can be accessed at aicpa-cima.com/rise2040.

FROM AGILITY TO ANTICIPATION

For years, agility has been the dominant management mantra: respond quickly, pivot often, adapt constantly. But as futurist Daniel Burrus of Burrus Research emphasized during the Rise2040 sessions, agility alone is insufficient in an era of exponential change. What’s required is anticipation.

Using the trademarked Anticipatory Organization framework that Burrus developed, participants

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distinguished between hard trends, which are based on “future facts” that will happen, and soft trends, which may happen but can be influenced by strategic choices. Examples of hard trends include rapidly improving AI capabilities, expanding data volumes, and regulatory evolution. These are happening now, and they are not reversible.

The distinction between hard and soft trends changed the tone of the Rise2040 conversations. Instead of debating whether disruption would occur, participants focused on where stakeholders in the profession retain the ability to effect change.

While perspectives varied by geography, sector, and role, several themes surfaced repeatedly across the global conversations:

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- Trust, ethics, and integrity were described as non-negotiable anchors. Participants emphasized that ethics must endure even as delivery models evolve.
- Technology was viewed as a strategic imperative, not a side project. AI adoption is uneven, but participants consistently framed AI literacy as a mission-critical leadership competency. The greatest risk, many argued, lies not in technology itself but in resistance to change.
- The profession’s identity is shifting. Historical reporting and rule execution are giving way to forward-looking insight, anticipatory and scenario modeling, and decision support. Rise2040 participants spoke of moving from historian to strategic adviser.
- Talent pipelines are under strain. Traditional apprenticeship and mentorship models are fraying as automation absorbs routine work. Compensation expectations, licensure pathways, and early-career

development all surfaced as areas requiring intentional redesign.

WHAT EMERGED WAS NOT FEAR, BUT CLARITY

Despite the challenges, optimism dominates. Across thousands of responses, participants expressed strong confidence in the profession's long-term relevance — provided it continues to evolve.

Across regions and roles, Rise2040 participants consistently rejected the idea that technology is an existential threat to the profession. Automation and AI were seen not as replacements for professionals, but as tools or assistants that would act as force multipliers for efficiency and effectiveness.

Human skills will differentiate the profession. Critical thinking, emotional intelligence, relationship building, and ethical judgment were consistently identified as irreplaceable.

Routine compliance, reporting, and reconciliation work is expected to become increasingly invisible — embedded, automated, and continuous. The opportunity is not to compete with machines, but to architect, supervise, and govern them responsibly.

As one participant put it: “The value isn’t in doing the work faster. It’s in knowing what the work means — and when it’s wrong.”

Finance and accounting professionals also will need to know how to analyze large datasets, such as real-time business transactions for a client or employer. This will require analytics skills to glean insights from the data and storytelling skills to articulate those insights in a way that provides clients and employers with the understanding they need to make real-time decisions.

TRUST STILL DEFINES THE PROFESSION

When participants were asked what will not change by 2040, the answers were strikingly consistent: trust,

integrity, quality, accuracy, human judgment, and accountability.

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In a world saturated with AI-generated output and misinformation, trust was repeatedly described as an appreciating asset. The more technology can do, the more valuable human discernment becomes.

Participants emphasized the importance of finance and accounting professionals acting ethically and with excellence to maintain:

- Trust in individual ethical judgment.
- Trust in organizational integrity.
- Trust in capital markets and public reporting.
- Trust in data and intelligent systems — when properly governed.

The profession already enjoys a position of trust with individuals and organizations, in tax and audit, in capital markets and on Main Street, in accounting and advisory firms, and on finance teams. The challenge, participants said, is extending that trust into new domains — AI assurance, data validation, ESG reporting, and algorithm oversight — without diluting what makes the profession credible.

THE IDENTITY TAKING SHAPE: HUMANs IN THE LEAD

Looking ahead to 2040, participants described a finance and accounting profession that no longer defines itself by tasks, but by outcomes. The dominant identity that emerged was the trusted, anticipatory adviser — a professional who blends finance and accounting expertise with data fluency and strategic insight and foresights, coupled with human-centered leadership.

With routine compliance work expected to be largely automated, the professional's role shifts to guidance, interpretation, ethical oversight, and foresight. Participants used phrases such as “dot-connector,” “strategic navigator,” and “translator of complexity.”

Participants envisioned a future where finance and accounting professionals:

- Provide strategic guidance through anticipatory and scenario modeling, stress testing, and decision enablement.
- Supervise and audit AI systems rather than simply use them.
- Translate data into insight and insight into action.
- Deliver human-centric advisory grounded in trust and judgment.

Even entry-level professionals in 2040 will be expected to manage AI agents capable of processing far more information than any human could alone, shifting the definition of “experience” from repetition to interpretation. This evolution is already well underway.

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THE TENSIONS THE PROFESSION IS CHOOSING TO HOLD

Rise2040 did not smooth over disagreement, and that was intentional. Participants agreed on direction, but not on pace. Some see urgency bordering on existential risk; others view the transition as evolutionary.

Automation removes routine work, but it also disrupts traditional learning pathways. New models — including simulations, redesigned mentorship, and structured experiential learning — will be required.

Value-based pricing is widely endorsed, yet billable-hour inertia remains powerful. Remote work offers flexibility but raises concerns about professional and soft-skill development. And while the talent pipeline challenge is widely acknowledged, there is no consensus on how licensure pathways should evolve.

Rather than resolve these tensions prematurely, Rise2040 surfaces them transparently, reflecting a profession actively shaping the future rather than reacting to it as it unfolds.

THE CENTRAL PARADOX

The most repeated insight across the initiative can be summarized simply: The more technology can do, the more trust in humans matters.

As Burrus told Rise2040 participants, “There is no such thing as artificial wisdom.” Wisdom is knowing when data is misleading, when an answer is technically correct but ethically wrong, and when a client needs insights for a problem or opportunity that they can’t yet articulate for themselves. That insight reframes the role of technology.

AI is not the profession’s replacement. It is its amplifier when humans remain in the lead.

FROM REPORT TO RESPONSIBILITY

Rise2040 offers something more valuable than a single road map: clarity about what is inevitable and where choice still exists.

The future will be shaped — deliberately — by those willing to anticipate rather than react.

The issuance of the Rise2040 report is not the end of the initiative. Further focus groups will dig deeper into the various areas of the profession, as will happen on each track at the ENGAGE Conference this month. New insights continually will be added to the report database.

The message from thousands of professionals worldwide is clear: Trust remains the profession's most valuable asset. Human judgment remains irreplaceable. And the future belongs not to those who resist change, but to those who lead it.

Join the discussions in Rise2040 community

Interested in helping to shape the future of accounting? In the Rise2040 global community, you can connect with other forward-thinking finance and accounting professionals, access resources, and stay up to date on events. Learn more at connect.aicpa-cima.com.

Rise2040 chatbot

Interact with Rise2040 data and insights through the Rise Navigator AI tool, accessible at aicpa-cima.com/rise2040.

About the author

Jeff Drew is editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Accountancy*. To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact him at Jeff.Drew@aicpa-cima.com.

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