Accounting and Management Information Systems
Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 40-52, 2009

HOW DOES ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AFFECT THE ACCOUNTANTS' ROLE? AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH ON TWO ROMANIAN SETTINGS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Romania's opening towards the West generated not only an important inflow of foreign capital, but also harmonization in regulations and new management (accounting) techniques. Conducting research on accountants' role is important in order to understand the modern society. Our aim is to assess the impact of the organizational and accounting change on the Romanian accountant in business. Through unstructured interviews, this study analyzes the impact of IFRS adoption and ERP implementation in Romania-based companies onto the work of accountants in business. Findings confirm the results of previous research, in that accounting professionals seem to be affected in their work by recent changes suffered by both the Romanian society and companies. There is some evidence of a shift in accountants' work from 'bean-counters' to 'business consultants' and to information providers to operational managers, from simple accounting treatments to business analysis and support for complex decision-making. This study contributes to current research as it brings a new perspective into research conducted on the Romanian accounting profession by documenting a process of hybridization of accounting tasks and significant changes in the accountants' role.

Change, accountant in business, IFRS, ERP

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[1] Some parts of this study were included in papers presented at the International Conference of Management Accounting Research Group, Aston University, United Kingdom, 15-16 November 2007, at the 31st Congress of the European Accounting Association, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 23-25 April 2008, and at the Paper Development Workshop hosted by the ACCA and the IAAER, 3rd International Conference on Accounting and Management Information Systems, Bucharest, Romania, 19 – 20 June 2008.

INTRODUCTION

The present business environment creates opportunities and threats to both accounting and accountants. Globalization of economies, IT developments, dynamics of change, the increased importance of intangible resources impose to the business environment alterations of both management and accounting. Romania is a country that undergoes a transition process for two decades already, a process that presumably affected the companies' accounting systems and the roles of accountants in business. Romania's opening towards the West generated not only an important inflow of foreign capital, but also the harmonization in regulations and new management (accounting) techniques.

The reform of the financial accounting system begun in Romania in 1993-1994 with an accounting system based on the French model, followed by a system of "Anglo-Saxon" inspiration starting 1999 and a dual accounting system starting 2005: a legislative framework based on the 4th European Directive for the majority of enterprises, and IFRS for public entities in consolidated accounts. Even if previous studies analyze the process of IFRS implementation in Romania (for example, Ionaşcu *et al.*, 2007), little is known about the impact of the reform on the organization of the accounting function, given that the changes in financial accounting may contribute to improvements of management accounting (Haldma & Lääts, 2002). Also, other factors presumably affect the roles of accountants: the western accounting practices brought by foreign companies and the use of integrated systems such as ERP.

Conducting research on accountants is important in order to understand the modern society as they have become a major economic and social force (Cooper & Robson, 2006). Under these circumstances, our aim is to assess the impact of the organizational and accounting change on the Romanian accountant in business. In order to bring some light on the nature of these changes, we use unstructured interviews. The choice of this method is justified by the fact that change is a complex phenomenon and surveys provide a limited understanding (Caglio, 2003: 124).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the first section describes the current trends documented within the accounting profession, followed by sections that discuss the research method and present results. Finally, contributions and directions for future research are presented.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The accountant's role has changed over time within organizations, and this evolution is presented in a variety of countries in literature. Scapens *et al.* (2003) document the change from bookkeeping, organizational policeman or financial historian towards a business partner, having responsibilities in strategic decision-making. Xydias-Lobo *et al.* (2004) have studied relevant literature and have identified the following roles for the accountant: financial analyst, internal consultant, change agent, information supplier, performance controller, information system responsible, guide and trainer, complexity manager. As for the recorded evolution, the focal point seems to be increasingly the resource management (forecast, analysis and control), change facilitator.

Changes within the organizational environment determine a shift in the role professional accountants play within organizations, and a modification of tasks accountants execute within their role. A subject already studied in literature is the hybridization between the competencies of financial and management accountants, and between accountants and other professions (Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Granlund & Malmi, 2002; Jones & Luther, 2005).

One of the factors identified as triggering hybridization is the adapting of the international financial accounting reporting standards (IFRS) (Jones & Luther, 2005). The international harmonization process mainly implies embracing an Anglo-American model (IFRS) which corresponds to the alignment to "global financial accounting practices" and adopting an American type of management (or management accounting) style, as already documented by Jones and Luther (2005) in Germany, a country with a rich tradition in both financial and management accounting.

Another factor reported is the introduction of an integrated management system that would be possible to determine hybridization (Granlund & Malmi, 2002; Caglio, 2003). Enterprise Ressource Planning (ERP) software is characterized by integration, standardization, routinization and centralization (Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Scapens & Jazayeri, 2003). Caglio (2003) demonstrates that, through ERP implementation, many of the accountant's tasks are either automatically done, either taken by non-accountants. Previous researchers studied the impact of ERPs upon the accounting profession. For example, Burns and Baldvinsdottir (2005) observed in a field study that ERP centralized the accounting function and decentralized control to many people in the company who became "hybrid accountants". Also, Scapens and Jazayeri (2003) found that there were changes in the role of management accountants after ERPs' implementation, particularly: the elimination of routine jobs; line managers gaining accounting knowledge; more forward looking information; and a wider role for the management accountants.

Caglio (2003) conducted a case study within an Italian company in order to understand the way the implementation of an ERP system challenges the definition of the expertise and roles of accountants. The author found three major consequences of ERPs' implementation: a higher degree of standardization of accounting activities and practices; a stronger need for integration and interfunctional collaboration; and a more prominent role for the accounting department in the management of the new IT system. Jack and Kholeif (2008) analyzes the role of management accountants after the implementation of an ERP and finds that the role was returned to that of data custodian and information provider for others who controlled the organization, despite the more fashionable and dynamic dispositions of those actually appointed to the posts.

Also, some papers analyze the process of change and its impact on accounting practices. Järvenpää (2007) studies the way a company tried to achieve an increasing business orientation and the cultural interventions associated to this process. The author concludes that the change process does not represent only the implementation of new management accounting tools, but also includes a whole array of cultural changes.

In Romania there has been limited but increased interest with the accounting profession; research has been conducted on several topics: the evolution of the Romanian accounting profession (Tiron Tudor *et al.*, 2007); studies of the impact of various economic and social phenomena upon the accounting education and profession (Ionaşcu, 2006; Olimid & Calu, 2006; Ţugui & Ţugui, 2004), limited analysis of competencies and training (Albu, 2006 a,b; Năstase *et al.*, 2004). Also, a process of hybridization between financial accounting and management accounting positions was already documented (Albu & Albu, 2007, 2008) through job-offer analysis.

As an overall remark, we may say that a process of change within the tasks and the role of the accountant in business is documented in literature. The changes are associated especially with IFRS or ERP implementation. All the above-mentioned reasons justify our quest for studying the extent to which changes within the business environment in Romania have (or not) affected indeed these roles.

2. THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research framework usually employed for studying change is the institutionalist theory, given its power of researching this complex phenomenon. The institutional approach emphasizes the importance of institutions, as well as such related phenomena as rules, habits, routines, norms and culture. In recent years there has been an increased interest in institutional theory across the social sciences. Institutional theory has been adopted in the accounting literature to explain accounting choice in both the public and the private sector, identifying and explaining the sources of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of accounting systems, the interplay between institutional and technical environments, and the power and actions of individual organizational actors to respond to the institutional pressures (Tsamenyi *et al.*, 2006: 410).

Also, the institutional theory has recently emerged in the literature on management accounting change, particularly through the framework designed by Burns and Scapens (2000), which places organizational rules and routines into the focus of analysis. Management accounting practice is depicted as a collection of relatively stable rules and routines. By rules, Burns and Scapens (2000) refer to the formal ways in which 'things should be done', being necessary to co-ordinate and give coherence to the actions of individuals or groups. Routines refer to the informal practices actually in use. Whereas rules become changed by explicit decisions at discrete intervals, routines have the potential to become changed in a cumulative implicit process of daily action. Compared to rules and routines, institutions – a third major element of the framework – have a more generic character. They are the socially constructed and shared 'taken-for-granted' assumptions which identify categories of human actors and their appropriate activities and relationships, shape and constrain rules and routines within an organization, and determine the meaning structures and values of individual actors. The fourth key category of their framework, the realm of action, refers to the participants' specific everyday behaviors in the organization.

A commonly used definition of an *institution* is: 'a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people' (Hamilton, 1932, p. 84, cited in Burns & Scapens, 2000). As such, institutions can be regarded as imposing form and social coherence upon human activity, through the production and reproduction of *settled habits of thought and action*. An institutionalized structure is a structure that has become taken for granted by members of a social group as efficacious and necessary.

Järvenpää (2007) shows that taken-for-granted assumptions (as described by Burns & Scapens, 2000) and culture clearly matter in the case of accounting and might be worth studying. He identifies different kinds of change: adaptation, adjustment, development, going backwards, innovation, shifting, replacement, reorganizing and redesigning (Järvenpää, 2007: 111). In order to study cultural change, Schein (1985 cited in Järvenpää, 2007: 111) identifies two categories of cultural interventions: (1) primary interventions such as: the issues top managers pay special attention, how top managers react to critical situations, how they allocate scare resources, rewarding systems, and (2) secondary tools related to organizational models and structures, managerial practices, rituals, mission statements.

In order to gain a general image of the expectations from accountants in business in Romania, we needed a method to collect data from enterprises. To gain some in-depth understanding on the specific implications of the change process, we interviewed two accounting professionals.

This study is exploratory being a preliminary investigation on the impact of particular practices adopted by companies on the accountant's work. Ryan *et al.* (2002: 144) show that exploratory studies enable to generate hypothesis about the reasons for particular practices. The interviews are the type of evidence most usually associated with case research (Ryan *et al.*, 2002: 154).

Because there were different case settings, we used unstructured interviews. Initial contacts were made with two accounting professionals through lectures given by the authors of this paper for professional bodies and graduate programs. During these initial contacts, discussions emerged on topics of interest for both sides. The first accounting professional (AP1[i]) is controller in an important Romanian production and distribution company, recently acquired by an important foreign player on the market. The discussions with him lead the authors of the paper confirm the major difficulties encountered by Romanian firms undergoing privatization in general, and by Romanian accounting professionals involved in the change process in particular. Therefore, an interview was proposed to AP1, on the theme of the current trends identified within the Romanian accounting profession. One unstructured interview was conducted with AP1 on March the 5th, 2008, the length of which was of approximately one hour, followed by two e-mail conversations regarding some details.

The second accounting professional (AP2) was at the moment of the interview employed by a software company in Romania, being involved in ERP software implementation. Discussions emerged as one author of this paper was the dissertation tutor of this professional in a graduate program. These circumstances led the co-author of the paper have several discussions in February and March 2008 with AP2 concerning her opinions on the matter of the changes through which Romanian companies implementing ERPs are going. Several rounds of discussions took place, and some comments were made that were subsequently used for the purpose of this paper.

3. CASES ANALYSIS

The first interviewee participated in initiating, designing and implementing the process of change in Focus company A, process started with the privatization of the company. The interviewee started working in the controlling division of the production division – the largest one and with by far the most complex one of company A. The interviewee was involved in roles and tasks definition and assigning, and in the severance of the controlling function out of previous accounting departments pre-existing in company offices.

The focus company A is a large productive and distribution, recently privatized company. After the privatization, the investor – a large foreign company that bought the controlling package of the case company – initiated a massive restructuring and modernization process in order to align the company at European standards. Restructuring the organization also meant the modification and redesign of all economic processes. Given the taxonomy described by Järvenpää (2007), this process can be considered as a reorganizing and redesigning kind of change. The change process is imposed by external factors, thus the resistance to change is somehow reduced (Burns & Scapens, 2000).

The transparency required for listing the company on the Romanian stock exchange resulted in the need for tight deadlines and the provision of accurate and standardized financial reporting (as the company must be IFRS compliant). The need for company alignment to industry standards and practices, the need for increasing financial information flexibility and the tight deadlines for reporting financial information to the headquarter (complying with IFRS) called for the implementation of an Enterprise Resource Planning software. In this context, we may analyze the impact of implementing both IFRS and ERP on the accounting roles.

Besides the analysis and optimization of the regular industrial processes, the investor envisaged also rethinking and redesigning the accounting information flow. In this context, the analysis of tasks previously required from accountants and budget analysts induced change and transformation onto the accounting work and its separation from controlling activities. The need for efficient control generated the centralization of decision-making and authorization lead to the centralization of financial statements preparation. Company A also introduced a central information processing department at headquarter, which in turn generated a massive impact upon the accountants functions. This impact is described as follows by the interviewee:

> *As any other change process, ours has neither been easy nor entirely successful. We already are aware of people's inertia and resistance to change. The change was indeed drastic and supposed relocating a large number of people to Bucharest, with the central information processing department. The drastic severance of accounting from business services provoked sometimes conflicts and compromises in the implementation of the ERP software.*

The change process as described before is characterized by both primary and secondary interventions on culture as described by Schein (1985 cited in Järvenpää, 2007: 111). We identify as tools: the issues managers pay attention and what they measure, how they allocate resources, organizational structure and systems, and managerial practices. The structural interventions (centralization/ decentralization) were a major way to change the cultural values and the concrete actions of the accountants.

> *The accountant's work is aimed presently at satisfying the management's need for future-oriented information. Accounting standards applied at present, a more permissive environment, as well as the severance of accounting from taxation rules changes the accountant's image. Managers have also understood that their decisions depend upon the accuracy of the accountant's work and upon their ability to follow trends and evolutions.*

The work of accountants also was affected from the standpoint of their tasks and competencies. As such,

> *Management accounting offers some Key Performance Indicators characteristic to every division, KPIs that need to be reconciled with financial accounting data. Variance analysis starts from financial accounting, but results obtained in financial accounting may sometimes only be explained through management accounting based analyses and the contribution of controllers that became the liaison persons between productive personnel and the accountants in order to be able to offer managers qualitative information.*

Another reason for hybridization seems to be the IFRS compliance, which „may only be made at headquarter due to lack of knowledge and experience in subsidiaries". The conversion of financial statements into IFRS-compliant ones and the consolidation are therefore made at headquarter by the compiling and reporting team.

> *This conversion affects financial accounting, but management accountants and controllers must segregate these conversions so that they are correctly reflected at the lowest possible level in order to compute the KPIs.*

The second interviewee is working as an ERP implementation consultant for a Romanian company. This company dedicates important amounts of money and time to research and development activities, launching every year an improved version of its integrated package. The company was founded in early 1990s and over the last years managed to increase its turnover by an annual rate of 40 to 50%. The company has over 500 employees, of which 45% involved in development and 35% in business consulting and technical support.

The latest product is a soft prepared to support the adapting process of Romanian companies after the EU adhesion. The product is competitive with other European ERPs and is entirely developed in Romania, given the clients' requirements and the market conditions.

> *Implementing ERP software underpins the preparation of each Romanian company that wants to achieve performance after EU adhesion. Given the experience of previous countries joining the EU, Romanian companies will encounter serious problems if they lack a long-term vision and strategic investments in technology.*

The company reports as clients large Romanian companies, Romanian companies with foreign capital, foreign companies but also SMEs. Regarding the reasons for implementing ERP software in Romanian companies, the interviewee said:

> *The main reasons are integration of financial information, integrating the customer management processes, integrating operational information resulting from different departments, inventories management, standardization of information concerning employees, a decreasing deadline for processing and analyzing data and for reporting, eliminating redundancies between different sources of the information, obtaining timely reports and increasing the activities' efficiency. An ERP implies a policy of thinking and acting in line with the economic processes, and is therefore being considered as a strategic management solution.*

This statement confirms the conclusion of previous studies regarding what we usually expect from an ERP: it integrates and controls all personnel, material, monetary and information flows of a company and supports real-time reporting (Granlund & Malmi, 2002), it assures integration, standardization and routinization (Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Scapens & Jazayeri, 2003). The influences of ERP implementation upon the accounting process are described as follows:

> *Given the data integration, non-accountants operate the system and generate accounting effects, without any accounting culture at all. Also, the automation reduces the time used for accounting jobs; an ERP implementation may generate automation of up to 95% of the accounting operations.*

Implicitly, ERPs affect accounting jobs and the persons exercising those jobs. The system may lead to hybridization between accounting as bookkeeping and operational tasks, as non-accountants (line) impact upon the accounting system. Also, the time used for each type of job modifies; the reduction in the required time used for bookkeeping may be used for analysis and performance reports. Caglio (2003: 123, 124) already noted that "accountants' traditional role within organizations is declining since accounting literacy, through ERPs, has become easily transferable to non-accountants", yet "accounting professionals are developing a broader role for themselves". The new accountant is more involved into offering timely and more complex information to managers, and less involved into primary treatment of information for the financial accounting purposes.

ERPs also may affect organizational behaviors through their effects on people:

> *In some companies, many employees such as storekeepers never saw computers before and they did not even know how to turn them on. After the ERP implementation, they are trained to use computers and the system, and they become confident and responsible for the information provided. Also,*

they realize that they are a part of a company because their information is being used by or it affects other people. The ERP systems enhance communication and employees' self esteem.

Burns and Scapens (2000) describe the process of enactment of rules and routines and show that may be subject to resistance, especially if the rules and routines challenge existing meanings and values. Finally, a process of institutionalization will occur, meaning that "the rules and routines become simply the way things are, i.e. institutions. These institutions will then be encoded into the ongoing rules and routines and will shape new rules, and so on" (Burns & Scapens, 2000: 11).

This is a result of a change process that occurs in every organization when a system is changed. The shared values and the mental frameworks are affected and the employees may become more business-oriented (Järvenpää, 2007). But the extant elements of the organizational culture and routines are embedded, and therefore the change process may encounter resistance.

Usually, the employees manifest resistance to change and reject the new system until they are convinced of its advantages. In order to make employees sensitive to these advantages, usually the managers require reports that can be easily obtained (only) with the new system. Like this, the employees are "tricked" into using the system, and since they are able to deliver their report on time, they will integrate the system in their future work.

This also confirms previous findings; Järvenpää (2007: 100) also noticed that ERP systems affect the roles of accountants because the accountants accomplish more effectively the routine activities and they report data faster and in a more flexible way.

CONCLUSION

This study intends to make a contribution to the particular field of research of the accounting profession. The subject discussed in this paper is the impact of organizational changes on the roles of accountants. Being an exploratory study, its role is to raise some hypothesis or research questions for future research.

Through unstructured interviews, this study analyzes the impact of IFRS and ERP implementation into Romania-based companies on the work of accountants in business. Findings confirm the results of previous research, in that accounting professionals seem to be affected in their work by recent changes suffered by both the Romanian society in general and companies in particular. There is some evidence of a shift from 'bean-counters' to 'business consultants' and information providers to operational managers, from simple accounting treatments to business analysis and support for complex decision-making. This study contributes to current research as it brings a new perspective in the research conducted on the Romanian accounting profession by documenting a process of hybridization of accounting tasks and significant changes in the accountant's role.

The limits of this research are linked primarily to the research method. Smith (2003: 139) synthesizes the disadvantages of this type of research: closeness to unique events, limited opportunities to classify and generalize the data, the unrepresentativeness of the sample, subjective personal observations which may have limited validity. Also, the timing for the interviews may introduce bias to the research, as probably only now and in the immediate future Romania might actually experience the changes arising from the EU adhesion. The crisis also might impact the role of the Romanian accountant in business. Therefore, future research addressing the role of accountants in Romanian companies is needed. Studies of various factors which impact (trigger or hinder) the change of the accountants' work in existing Romanian and/or Romania-based companies are required. The background of managers, the source of capital or the world crisis might be such factors.

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[i] Both accounting professionals required anonymity for their contribution. Therefore, we could not disclose supplementary information about the name and the characteristics of the firms.