

LEARNING MORE EFFICIENTLY



The Indiana CPA Society created a suite of online tools and interactive courses, called the CPA Center of Excellence, in 2014.

CPA Society Tackles Status Quo

By Charlee Beasor

It's evident that 2016 is a very different time from, say, 1970.

From technology to pop culture, to the economy and world markets, many aspects and expectations have caught up to the advancements the internet has summoned.

Others lag behind.

One such delay: how Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) learn and renew their licenses to practice in the state of Indiana. The current system of Continuing Professional Education (CPE), which the Indiana General Assembly codified in 1979, is a compliance-based model that is built purely on participation.

Indiana CPA Society (INCPAS) President and CEO Gary M. Bolinger, CAE, asserts that as today's technology has surpassed the abilities of the 1970s, an updated style of learning for the profession is long overdue.

"The system is an antiquated system. I like to say that it's a system that's as old as the transistor radio. And nobody I know is

still listening to music on a transistor radio. But we expect people to learn in the same way they did (back then)," Bolinger laments.

INCPAS, in an effort to modernize the CPE system and move toward a competency-based model, created a subsidiary (featuring tools and online, interactive courses) in 2014 known as the CPA Center of Excellence.

While "CPA" is in the name, Bolinger and others contend the CPA Center of Excellence isn't just for accountants.

A winding path

In 2011, INCPAS and its board of directors undertook a project about knowledge management. The goal: to collect and share information among the

organization's nearly 8,000 members.

"The notion of knowledge management began with a fairly simple thought: How can we leverage what all of our members know, for the benefit of all of our other members? If you look back at the history of professional societies – guilds in medieval times, for example – those people got together because that's how they learned," Bolinger explains.

It became evident that today's CPAs need to have not only a different way of learning, but a focus on so-called "soft skills" (including communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving, among others) to remain competitive.

The CPA Center of Excellence is helping develop those skills.

"I want to emphasize that we're not talking about accounting technical skills. This whole Center of Excellence effort is applicable to any kind of profession at any level in their career," Bolinger maintains.

To assist in its mission, INCPAS hired Wales-based David Griffiths, Ph.D., a knowledge and learning advisor, talent manager and founder of K3-Cubed. He

helped identify some of the CPA Center of Excellence tools and the *Quick Start Guide* outlining necessary core competencies. Griffiths also teaches the human resources-focused Talent Academy course.

He points to the alarming thought that, at some point, CPA duties could be entirely automated. That's why the focus on the core competencies and "soft skills" is vital.

"When you talk to CPAs, they talk about rainmakers, the people in the business that have the 'X factor' – they can sell, engage people, they're networkers. If you advertise a job, and you've got five people

current model isn't working. In fact, Bolinger comments, 93% of the respondents say the model isn't responsive to their needs.

"It supports our efforts to change the compliance model to something that's more responsive to what's going on in the environment," he adds.

CPA Center of Excellence Strategist Jess Halverson Bowyer stresses that tools reach across demographics – including ages. She spoke recently with a member in Fort Wayne who is nearing retirement and reports he has become a champion of the CPA Center of Excellence



During an event in September, over 100 Indiana Wesleyan University juniors and seniors joined with Indiana CPA Society consultant David Griffiths and students from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (via the internet) to be introduced to the Insight Toolkit. It offers students and others a 360-degree assessment.

sitting in front of you, how do you differentiate that something different?" Griffiths questions.

"The 'X factors' are competencies. Good communicators, good critical thinkers. And that's what we focused on ... competitive advantage over technology solutions."

Not just for CPAs

Clark Crowell, an Indianapolis business consultant, utilized another CPA Center of Excellence resource: the Insight Toolkit, which creates a 360-degree assessment of skills. His wife, a CPA, introduced him to the tool.

"The reason for me to take advantage was simple. In a consulting role, you literally have no real feedback besides whether or not you still have a client. So you take advantage of getting feedback from peers, supervisors and subordinates; it's what others perceive of me," he asserts.

"It is truly 360. I'm rating myself, seeing how peers rate me, former supervisors rate me. It's a full circle of feedback."

Bolinger maintains that competency-based education (CBE) could be utilized in a variety of professions that focus on serving the business community (think attorneys, engineers, general business consultants). He points to Western Governors University as a well-known entity that utilizes CBE.

"We're not here to tell you that's the only way to develop factors. ... Some people still prefer to sit in a room and prefer to learn that way," he remarks.

CPAs on board

A survey of Indiana CPA Society members revealed that the

style of learning and the online courses.

"Before, there wasn't the technology available to create courses like this," she says. "Now there is new technology and we can make courses that have complex content and are interesting."

A big selling point for the online courses is the ability to complete the work anywhere, at any time, and within 90 days. Take it in 10-minute increments, if that works for your schedule. That's one of the reasons Christy Gelback-Diaz, an accountant for Ivy Tech Community College, enjoyed taking the ethics course.

"I liked that it was really interactive and it was relevant," she recalls.

Noting that she completed the course in two or three sections at a time during evenings or weekends, she found herself to be a more engaged and active learning participant.

"(For) someone who already has a lot of knowledge in that area, it will require them to dig deeper into that. For others, it's building on what they do know. When I first did the course, it took me a little bit longer than the traditional time frame of four hours. I probably spent just a little longer trying to get a better grasp on the concepts and re-reading certain areas," she observes.

Kent Williams, CPA and CGMA, an associate professor of business at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, was part of the INCPAS task force to explore the idea of knowledge management.

Using the tools in his classroom has opened up new avenues for teaching.

"A year ago, I had a group of our accounting students – I think about 19 in the class – and it was a current topics of accounting course, just a one-hour course. I had them go through and use the Insight Toolkit," he recalls.



In October, the Indiana CPA Society was the first state CPA organization to win the “Power of A” Summit Award from the American Society of Association Executives. The award, the highest honor bestowed by the association, is given for utilizing resources and talents to solve problems.

Griffiths recently led the Talent Academy, a five-day human resources course (broken up into two-day and three-day increments separated by six weeks) that targets CPAs and chief financial officers who are often thrust into the role of human resources manager.



Once students completed the skills assessments (which included anonymous feedback from professors, coaches, peers, etc.), the class used the *Quick Start Guide* and developed specific plans to enhance their abilities.

Williams took another class through the critical thinking-based online course, participating alongside them.

“All my years in teaching, I’ve never experienced anything like that. It was collaboration, cooperation, sharing knowledge, learning from each other,” he exclaims.

Over 100 Indiana Wesleyan University juniors and seniors, along with students from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, recently took part in an introduction to the online Insight Toolkit. Once the 360-degree assessments are completed in November, the data will be evaluated in an academic research project.

“From a professional point of view, this is one of the most rewarding experiences to be part of,” Williams shares.

‘Baby steps’

The CPA Center of Excellence and INCPAS continue to receive national accolades, including the highest honor given by the American Society of Association Executives. The group traveled to Washington, D.C. in October to receive the “Power of A” Summit Award.

But the INCPAS group points to an even more exciting development – the result of a pilot program allowing new competency-based options for meeting ethics education requirements for Indiana CPAs. The new rule (signed by Gov. Mike Pence in September and adopted by the Indiana State Board of Accountancy) became effective in October.

“We’re the first state in the country that has adopted language that says a competency-based educational experience would qualify to renew your professional license in accounting,” Bolinger states.

Sherrill Rude, CAE, vice president of advocacy for the Indiana CPA Society, has been working on the rule promulgation.

“The Indiana Board of Accountancy has been brave in looking at the pilot program and taking on the rule change,” she declares. “Their job is to protect the public. And in looking out for the public’s best interest, they feel that having competent CPAs who are able to apply all the skills they need in today’s world and continue to stay up with the changes that happen – this is an opportunity to help the public in the long run.”

The dream is to have every state adopt such rules. However, Rude acknowledges that it will take “baby steps” to change an entire system.

Noting he’s making a “bold statement,” Bolinger contends the compliance-focused model is a hindrance to professional learning.

“If I’m a CPA, or an attorney or engineer, or whatever, and the law requires me to comply by spending X number of hours sitting in the classroom – that may be time that I could better spend learning something that’s more relevant and more effective methodology than the antiquated system that has been arbitrarily regulated by state government,” he proclaims.

RESOURCES: Gary Bolinger, Jess Halverson Bowyer, Sherrill M. Rude, Indiana CPA Society, at www.incpas.org | David Griffiths, K3-Cubed, at www.k3cubed.com | Kent Williams, Indiana Wesleyan University, at www.indwes.edu