advancetrack

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Inside OUTSOURCING®

The newsletter for forward-thinking professionals

Your clients, your people

Leverage new tech and new thinking to deliver efficient and high-quality services – while keeping your people happy.

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Time to talk: how to dive deeper with your clients

Ditch the sales pitch and spend more time getting your clients to open up about their hopes and fears.

GETTING YOUR CLIENTS TALKING takes skill and patience. Expecting them to open up and divulge their experiences, issues and goals within the first meeting isn't easy. Here at Advancetrack, we've devised a five-stage funnel system.

The key is to start with simple, easy questions, working your way up into larger, more detailed conversations that cover a range of topics and provide a chance to advise. This prevents your client from feeling overwhelmed or leaving you without answers. In turn, you can use those initial answers to expand on ideas with them and create an atmosphere of understanding and mutual collaboration. Let us take you through each stage of the funnel.

STAGE ONE: MULTIPLE CHOICE

Begin this first stage by presenting multiple choice questions that allow your client to see some options so they can be gently prompted into answering. This stage should be easy for the client to provide insight without overarching pressure or delving too deep too quickly.

Some examples of these multiple choice questions are:

Q What is one thing you keep looping back to when it comes to your finances right now?
1. Cash flow
2. Tax time stress
3. Growth and risk assessment
4. Work/life balance

Q How long has this been on your mind?
1. It's been getting more prominent over time
2. Since the very beginning
3. It's seasonal

Q When it comes to tax season, which statement rings true for you?
1. I'm reactive and deal with it when I need to
2. I prefer to plan ahead
3. I'm not confident I'm doing it correctly
4. I need help ASAP

> "Each client has an emotional attachment to their business. Ask them questions that open up discussions about how their business is making them feel, and listen carefully to their responses"

Multiple choice is a great way to gain a deeper insight into your client's way of thinking and how they might react. It presents a moment to gather valuable data about their processes and illuminates how you can step in with your services based upon short, sharp answers.

STAGE TWO: CLARIFICATION

Use the first stage to get them thinking, and the second stage to get them talking. Ask detailed questions about their answers in Stage 1 so you understand where the pain point is coming from. Ask for examples in practice where some of the issues they have taken place.

Some example questions you can use are:

Q What stops you from being ready to submit your tax on time?

Q Are there particular clients or seasons that cause cash flow pressure?

Q Is there a specific opportunity in front of you that you want to explore but aren't sure how to assess your finances to achieve it?

Q Do you feel confident enough to be able to step away from your business and let your team run it? Why/why not?

Q Can you walk me through the last time this issue occurred – what happened?

If this is the first meeting with a new client, ask them about their financial/business history before they began working with you so you can understand their answers in Stage 1 of the funnel.

STAGE THREE: LISTEN AND ADVISE

This part of the funnel process requires an exploration with your client after easing them in with multiple choice and clarifying questions (as shown in the example questions above). Each client has an emotional attachment to their business. Ask them questions that open up discussions about how their business is making them feel. Listen carefully to their responses and come from an empathetic viewpoint when offering advice.

A client may respond by flagging stress challenges within their business and emotional overwhelm when it comes to tax time. You can offer packages that offer their capacity concerns and work with them to find solutions for their pain points.

Perhaps a client wants to grow their business, but doesn't know where to begin. You can offer business advisory services to bridge the gap between compliance and strategy.

- Investment advice
- Partnering them with solicitors or financial advisers
- Working on business strategy together to ensure steady growth

STAGE FOUR: WHAT ELSE?

A great way to keep the conversation flowing and diving deeper once topics have been covered is to always follow up at the end of each answer with 'what else?'. You can adopt this strategy throughout any of the five stages to keep the discussion flowing and inspire definitive thoughts from your client.

After each answer, ask them 'what else?' and those moments can often reveal more than expected. The last three or four pieces of information that come from asking this simple question can often be the most important aspects of the conversation. The goal is to use this discussion to draw out as much information from your client as possible so that you, as their adviser, are able to provide the highest level of service with the most insight about your client.

> "If a client wants to grow but is worried about the risk, you can help to review their current business structure against the growth they want to take on"

STAGE FIVE: TAKE ACTION

Now is the time to show your client where your advice matters. If they're concerned about their cashflow, suggest setting up invoice reminders over a weekly and fortnightly basis to chase up payments and build a 14-day cashflow forecast to assess what needs tightening up. If tax time stress is what keeps your client in a state of anxiety, advise them on setting up a savings account to input a small amount per week so the quarterly bills don't overwhelm them.

If a client wants to grow but is worried about the risk, you can help to review their current business structure against the growth they want to take on. Assist them with the risks involved and what to do next so their decision is based upon fact, rather than feel. ■

Managing client expectations as technology advances

Five ways in which firms can stay ahead of the tech curve.

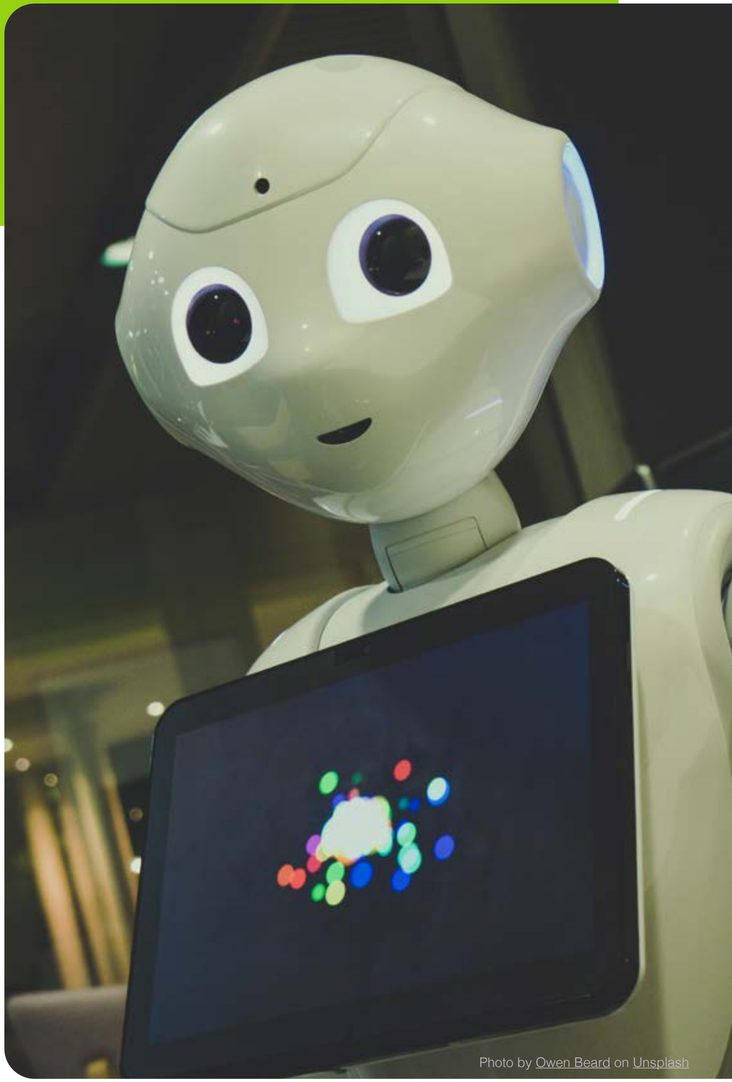


Photo by Owen Beard on Unsplash

AS AI, AUTOMATION AND ACCOUNTING SOFTWARE EVOLVES, it's natural that you might be fielding more questions from clients about how you are using AI and tech, and how they can make the most of it in their firms too.

Technological advancements are shifting the accounting industry faster than anticipated and clients are taking note. Questions may arise about how their tax return is being processed and if AI has played a part. Perhaps clients are wanting to manage their own compliance work using technological advancements despite not knowing the true scope of what's involved and how to keep everything secure.

44% of practice leaders believe they will need more accountants as a result of AI.

Source: Advancetrack Accounting Talent Index 2025

Accounting software giants are integrating automation as an option for accountants to streamline their work. This cannot be a fix-all solution though and is unlikely to redefine the role of an accountant or the ability to maintain an elevated career trajectory. According to Accountants Daily, 68% of accountants reject the idea of replacing their workers with AI at all.

Embracing the current trend of technological evolution is key to maintaining a client relationship built with confidence, transparency, and managed expectations. Here are five ways you can stay ahead of the curve.

1 EDUCATE YOUR CLIENTS PROACTIVELY

Clients may assume that if a firm is using AI that this means they are paying for a product that is worth less than what they've signed up for. This is a great moment to check in with your client and inform them about what AI-assisted software can and cannot do for intricate, judgment-based tasks around tax strategy and planning, or audit.

Your clients need to understand how you are incorporating AI and the benefits for them and their firm. Set realistic expectations around what is currently offered through the technology your firm uses and remind your client of the value your services are able to provide through experience, training and skill. Tech and AI are used as enhancements to the service offering, not as a replacement.

2 BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT YOUR TECH STACK

As technology evolves, so does the software your accounting firm adopts. The goal is to keep your client informed when

Photo by Igor Omilaev on Unsplash

"Educate your clients on how technology is refining your work, not replacing it, and re-establish your value as their adviser"

your tech stack changes and how it will affect them. We've devised an example case study of a regional Australian firm that keeps on top of client communication so they can manage their expectations about their offerings and how new technology impacts them:

- **Tech stack change:** A firm has decided to integrate automation processes for clients who engage their services to send invoices to their customers as part of accounts receivable (including late-payment reminders). It's imperative that you communicate this change in a clear and informative way and field any questions as they arise.
- **Inform your clients:** Communicate relevant new technologies to your clients and outline how they will impact them and provide even more benefits. Be sure to field any questions that arise in a clear and informative way.
- **Testing:** This involves both the firm and the client. Explain to your client what their involvement in the tech stage change is going to be and how it benefits them and their own clients. Testing tasks would differ depending on the tech change.

- **Follow-up:** Collect feedback on the process from your clients and make tweaks where necessary. Automation on software like Xero can have a testing phase of anywhere between a few days to a couple of weeks, but your client can approve the template prior to testing while you monitor the results. Feedback can be provided through regular check-ins in the initial stages with your client to assess improvements in cashflow and communication.

3 REFRAME YOUR OVERALL VALUE AS THEIR ADVISER

Some clients may bristle at the thought of using AI or automation as part of your services, and not without good reason. In Australia last year, Deloitte found itself in a tough spot after using AI in its reporting processes. This oversight that saw a submission of a report to the Government filled with AI errors came with a AUS$290,000 fee paid back to the taxpayers. It's a reminder that AI is a tool, and not a truly 100% reliable resource that therefore needs to be proofed.

AI can be used to enhance your services, but not as the true bread and butter of a successful firm. Use this opportunity to educate your clients on how technology is refining your work, not replacing it, and re-establish your value as their adviser. Clarify that your judgement relies upon strategy, experience, skilled interpretation, the collection of valuable data and reporting it in a palatable way. Position yourself as a trusted adviser first and foremost, and not something that can be replaced by technology.

4 BECOME A YEAR-ROUND COMMUNICATOR

While many clients are known to reach out during peak periods like the end of financial year (EOFY), many are expecting year-round communication to stay ahead of their finances. Some ways to do this are:

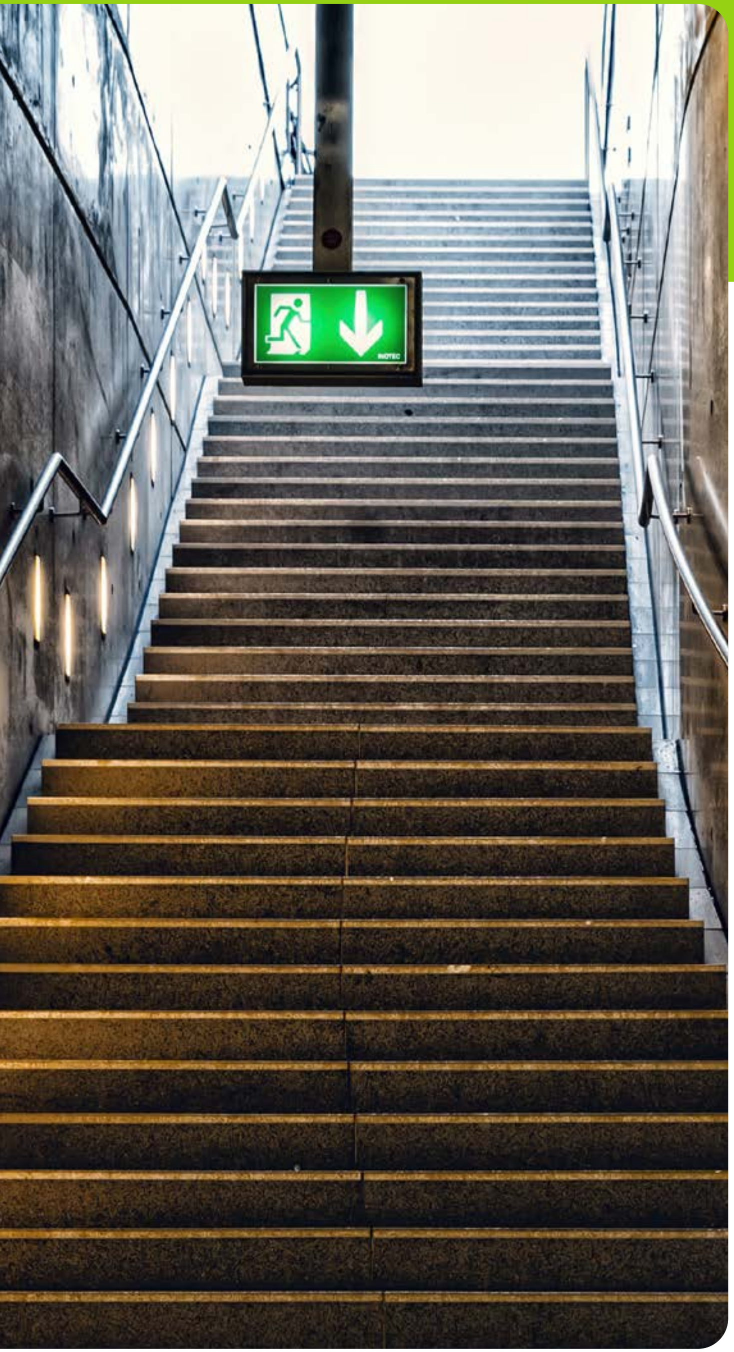
- Schedule regular check-ins either via video chat, phone or in person to discuss how their year is tracking for them. Any communication, even if brief, is usually welcomed, especially when it results in the success of their business.
- Send a quarterly email tailored to individual clients or businesses based upon their size to give them insight into any changes that may be coming up. This could encapsulate emerging regulations, tax expectations, new technology stacks you have adopted or services that are expanding.
- Host a short, educational quarterly briefing for all clients who wish to attend. Allow for a 15-minute Q&A at the end of each session so attendees have the chance to ask specific questions. Some firms have regular Q&A sessions where attendees can drop in and out if they have questions.

5 MANAGE TURNAROUND TIME EXPECTATIONS

Speed doesn't always offer simplicity and it's important your client knows that even though technology is advancing and making tasks simpler, this does not change your turnaround time. If a client flags that using AI should produce instant results, gently remind them that technology is only a tool, and all data needs to be checked for accuracy, which takes time.

The data will also need to be deciphered and translated so your client can understand your findings. The client needs to understand that things that sit with them could delay each task. This could include out-of-date books, changes in employment or incomplete documents.

This is especially true during peak tax periods, when expectations can become overwhelming for both clients and accountants alike. Managing the belief that technology speeds up your collective process is essential throughout the year so that demands lessen during the busy season.



Spot the warning signs

What are the tell-tale signs that your people are thinking about pastures new – and how to persuade them to stay.

NO ACCOUNTING FIRM chooses to lose a great team member. Often, these moments are unexpected, but not without some form of reason. When ensuring a solid, talented and tenacious team of accounting professionals, it's imperative that your processes are built to withstand issues that may appear.

Being able to take an objective look at the way a firm is running means more time for career development, new services, happier team members and a strong record of staff retention. The key is to be able to *see it coming*. We're here to help you pre-empt team members leaving and guide you toward a clear path on how to avoid it.

Talented, high-performing staff are usually seeking a path forward. Where there is no clear career progression, instances of burnout can increase. If you want a team member who strives for more, make sure you are conducting regular check-ins to gauge what they would like their career progression to look like.

One subtle sign your team member has hit a plateau and has mentally checked out is they no longer show interest in development opportunities. This is why monthly check-ins are so important. It makes your staff feel valued, heard and excited about their future while giving you the chance to inspire motivation and fix any issues that may affect their performance and/or happiness.

PEAK SEASON PRESSURE

The extreme deadlines and seasonality of the accounting industry can add stress and pressure to a sometimes already strained situation. Issues arise when firms neglect their team by creating an environment that has:

- No flexible time during off-peak periods
- Lower compensation than other firms
- Absence of recognition and appreciation
- An atmosphere devoid of support, communication and check-ins

The answer here may seem simple, but it takes being able to look outside of your current workload to take care of your team during peak season. Encouraging a workplace that is comfortable delegating to other members, approaching a senior employee for help, and being able to voice their concerns when stress increases is crucial. This comes down to a firm actively working on their internal culture and prioritising their team's wellbeing both inside and out of peak periods.

UNREALISTIC CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

Managing client expectations is one of the most integral skills a successful accountant can acquire. Being unable to handle those expectations can lead to a loss of good staff through lack of skills, burnout or feeling overwhelmed by demands. Communicate these expectations early in the onboarding process and have your client agree to what you've outlined to manage the relationship.

Setting clear boundaries about how you handle client requests, what time they are able to get in touch with you, and pricing for scope is just as important. Some ways clients can add to staff turnover and how to combat this are:

- **Unreasonable turnaround time requests:** Brief your team on how to clearly communicate to their clients about what is realistically able to be achieved within agreed timeframes. If anything is classed as a rush, inform the client of any additional costs before the work starts to cover your team's time.
- **Hostile behaviour:** Conflict/resolution is an incredible soft skill to possess. Educate your team on how to stay calm and professional, look to de-escalate the interaction through empathetic language, and identify solutions that work for both parties.
- **High maintenance, low margin:** A client may require an excessive number of calls, emails and unnecessary demands. First, run the numbers to confirm that the data you have is correct. Following this, revise their pricing to reflect time spent handling their account. Support your staff by communicating directly to the client about their requests and what your firm can realistically provide. Finally, if no resolution can be found, you can seek to exit the professional relationship amicably.
- **Too many clients, too little time:** If a team member is feeling overwhelmed by the number of clients under their management, look to alleviate the pressure elsewhere. Outsource work to create space within their schedule, help them achieve turnaround expectations, and use the outsourcing provider as a valuable buffer for unpredictable tasks that may arise.

LACK OF FEEDBACK FLOW

The best accountants are observational and analytical by nature. When feedback only flows down the line, and team members don't feel a reciprocal ability to communicate their observations, team loss can occur.

A warning sign is if a member of staff is giving generic, similar answers to cultural surveys each year or during regular check-ins. The lack of interest in voicing their opinion should be a *giant red flag*.

This can often signal that their feedback has not been taken seriously, and changes haven't been made. Ensure the workplace culture is one that encourages regular, honest feedback without fear of repercussions. Not only does this mean your team will feel comfortable to share if mistakes are made, but it means the firm is able to run to its highest capacity, with exceptional support at its core.

INCONSISTENT FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility within the industry is an important draw for talented staff. Many Australian

> "Be deliberate in your approach to create a team that is ambitious, supported and excited about what their career can offer them"

firms offer flexi-time, work from home (WFH), and hybrid working arrangements. When arrangements such as these become inconsistent, staff will look to other firms to bridge the gap. Quiet resentment, loss of trust and high stress can result from these inconsistencies, adding to team losses. Some ways to stay consistent to workplace related promises can be:

- Include flexible working arrangements in their contract and outline expectations clearly so both the firm and the staff member are mutually beneficial.
- Base arrangements on productivity, not seniority. Performance should dictate flexibility rather than time spent within the firm.
- Review which communication software works best so that your team are within reach and still able to contribute effectively.
- Use outsourcing companies to increase the success of flexible arrangements, especially during peak periods. Outsourcing busy work can help to maintain consistency by absorbing compliance volume, ensuring your team is able to work flexibly.

Firms that are intentional in their approach are sure to retain the highest-quality staff. The key is to be proactive, think outside of the box, and be deliberate in your approach to create a team that is ambitious, supported and excited about what their career can offer them.

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