SBA & KEY INDUSTRY ISSUES

Craig Gardiner CEO of SBA Small Business Accounting was asked to share his thoughts on key issues he sees in the industry today.

Do you believe the current economic situation is a barrier to growth in the accounting sector?

I do not believe this is correct. We have seen a large number of significant issues, weather events and geopolitical problems both locally and abroad that have had a ripple effect on the NZ economy. These issues have had a significant impact on various business types and industries and the businesses and networks that service and support those industries.

During all of these issues I have seen that tax, accountancy and advisory services will always be in demand. Accountants who are visible, accessible and offer a wide range of services are in a great position to benefit from this demand.

Our network of accountants have experienced a number of economic and global challenges since SBA started back in the late 1990's. These have included recessions, the GFC, fluctuating interest rates, change of governments and of course the pandemic, with more recently world wars impacting household staples, travel immigration and emigration and of course inflation.

Despite these challenges year in, year out, our networks revenue and client numbers have consistently grown, proving that our model is largely recession and pandemic-proof.

We have testimonials from many franchisees who have joined SBA or expanded by reinvesting in the group during these difficult times and they are thriving, having grown substantial practices in their time with us.

I believe there is still huge scope for growth within our franchise network for individuals who want to build a business that fits with their personal, financial and professional development plans and ambitions. Many of those who have joined us are developing strong profitability and working towards a good work/life balance.

Can you talk about the evolution of accountancy services going forward?

Traditional compliance services continue to be the core business for our accountants. Accountants are even more involved with our clients businesses and truly wearing and earning the title of trusted advisors.

Our services and adoption of technology has evolved and will continue to develop to meet demand and to reflect changes in service requirements, delivery and the value proposition with which we have built this successful brand and network.

Core accounting services are increasingly being supported and supplemented by complementary and advisory services. We have been working with our franchisees over the years to develop these services to help them meet their clients' ever-changing needs. Our accountants can now support their clients in areas such as bookkeeping and payroll, software implementation, business planning, cash flow forecasting, amongst others.

In the last few years there has been significant change and disruption in the accountancy sector. Recruitment challenges, software, AI and digitalisation, regulatory changes and tax legislation are all talked about with increasing frequency.

Each of these topics are a chance for our accountants to support their clients in different ways.

Change can help them to embrace efficiencies, capitalise on emerging opportunities and plan for the future, all of which will help to create stronger client relationships, which are key to a practice's success. It is said that AI will take the jobs of accountants, what we are seeing is that the accountants using AI, will take the clients off the accountants who are not.

Are the services of an accountant currently in high demand?

The amount of change, both regulatory and legislative in the last five years and for the next five years at least, coupled with a reduction in the amount of people studying accounting and getting into the profession both corporate and public practice, along with an ageing demographic from accountants already in practice tells me that access to expertise is going to become scarce for the 500,000 individuals and SME entities whose tax returns are filed in New Zealand each year. At SBA we currently file around 36,000 of those tax returns each year. There is plenty of work available.

Demand for accountancy services is growing, particularly since the pandemic, when so many reached out to their accountants for advice on how to survive and subsequently thrive. Those that made it through those times are now expanding to take up the space left by other product and service providers who didn't. The volume of new businesses is also having a net increase year after year.

The ways in which new enquiries and existing clients wish to engage and interact with our services has changed over the last three years and our business model and marketing has adapted to this change. We have seen each year in the number of new client leads we have delivered to our network, how where and when they are engaging with our marketing via online, digital and our website, supported by strong referral activity and of course walk-ins to our premises throughout New Zealand. Here in New Zealand we are a nation of entrepreneurs, with more people looking to set up their own business or find ways to build new income streams, demand for accountants and our services continue to rise.

Have you taken on many new franchisees in 2026?

Interest in becoming an SBA Accountant is always steady and at times we get lots of interest for locations where we already have an established SBA business. Now that we have over 80 offices nationwide, if I'm being honest I am more selective. I am not growing our network for growth's sake. I want our business to grow off the back of sound experience and expertise. The first thing I ask a new franchisee enquiry is why do you want to join SBA, what do you plan to bring to our network?

They need to also be well capitalised to invest in their new SBA business as they work to establish it. They need to be focused on business development and committing the time and effort required to build this business and provide the service at the standard that we require. You are becoming part of something sought after, we are looking for Ritchie McCaw, we are not looking for someone to just wear the number 8 jersey.

Accountancy practices are a valuable asset and practices for sale are in high demand, with more buyers than sellers.

The economic situation coupled with a focus on business development and succession planning has helped our existing franchisees to spend time on business planning, debtor and cash flow management, pricing etc.

These processes help to improve the value of their business, to change their lifestyle, take control of their finances and build a scalable asset for their future.

SBA Small Business Accounting has a proven model which has been working for almost 30 years. A dedicated head office team supports our franchisees through every stage of their development.

We ensure they can benefit from the scale of the network, our central expertise and the shared learnings of over 200 accounting professionals across the country.

Will AI replace accountants?

AI can't replace accountants. The value transfer between accountant and client requires human judgement and expertise which cannot be replaced/replicated by machines.

It is the accountant with many years of hands-on experience who will interpret the client's business and financial data, support strategic decisions and help clients to understand the context behind the numbers.

We believe that building an accounting practice on technology alone lacks a critical element – relationships.

Clients still want a human element and they need to trust their accountants.

We work for our clients to help them get the best outcome. We are not simply inputting numbers into a box and press send/submit. Software is a tool, like a hammer. A hammer doesn't build a house.

I see huge potential in the roll out and uptake of AI and technology in our industry. It will allow accountants to work far more efficiently and support their clients in more ways, further developing and improving the relationship between customer and advisor.

With AI, aspects of accounting tasks will be replaced or superseded, but this will free up accountants to expand their role, becoming strategic advisors to clients, providing more of the value and insights that the clients benefit from, not the processes of data from statements to systems.

I see huge opportunities here, with advisory and consulting services strengthening the client/accountant relationship and diversifying our business and revenue streams now and more so into the future.

Is this a good time to invest in an SBA franchise?

Yes. Our franchisees' continued success proves that the demand is there to enable you to build a substantial practice, a scalable asset for the future.

The changes I have referred to around tax legislation, economic pressures and technology are all accelerating this demand.

At SBA we say, as a franchisee you are in business for yourself but not by yourself.

There is no question a client could have that we don't have the answer for within our network.

We know that clients value our services and want to meet their accountant face to face. The SBA business model and shop front access is the ideal setting for building those relationships.

To contact SBA or Craig about opportunities within the network, please contact us on enquiries@sba.co.nz or craig.gardiner@sba.co.nz or call 0800 999 SBA.

Don't take our word for it...

"SBA has all of the systems and marketing in place to help us be successful. With SBA I'm my own boss and happier than ever before."

David Yang
SBA Mt Eden & SBA New Lynn

"SBA brings you business and, if you take the opportunities wholeheartedly and get out there, then your clients will come."

Vasily Khrapov
SBA Burnside & SBA Papanui

"SBA allows you to develop your business as you see fit, while having access to an incredible amount of support should you need it."

Steve Goddard
SBA Hibiscus Coast

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