



IN THE BUSINESS OF ETHICS

FOR THESE ACCOUNTANTS, AN ETHICAL APPROACH IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THEIR WORK

WORDS ANNIE MAKOFF-CLARK

It's a rare business that can get away without having some sort of environmental or ethical policy in place these days. That includes accountants.

Jonathan Orchard, partner at Sayer Vincent, says he's noticed a definite trend for accountancy firms to move into ethical territories. Yet unlike the new adopters, Sayer Vincent's ethical philosophy has been there right from the beginning. "In some ways, we were ahead of our time – environment awareness and ethics wasn't really in public consciousness then. Now though, we're much more aware as a society."

Sayer Vincent's remit is around using professional skills and experience for wider social benefit. Orchard says the firm actively turns down work from big corporations or high net worth individuals if they feel they act unethically. Excessive tax planning is also a hard "no".

"We believe everyone should pay their share of the tax burden, so we wouldn't encourage tax avoidance," he says. "That kind of work is ethically questionable, and we'd worry what it might do for the standard of the profession."

Direct donations

Alison Godfrey, director at Godfrey Wilson, agrees. "Where tax is due, it should be paid," she insists. "We wouldn't ever get involved in clever tax schemes."

Like Sayer Vincent, Godfrey Wilson have an active ethical approach to business. Sayer Vincent donates at least 5% of its annual turnover back into the charity sector through direct donations, toolkits and additional guidance to encourage a sustainable approach to accountancy. Godfrey Wilson ensures that every single product or service they use or recommend as a company is ethical.

Paper and glass gets recycled, IT products come from a refurbishment charity. Cleaning products are Ecover. Tea, coffee and sugar are all fair trade. Company stationery is purchased through a local eco-specialist company. Even their electricity provider is a renewable energy supplier. Staff are also encouraged to walk, cycle or take public transport where possible – many volunteer "at the frontline" for organisations like the Samaritans. They also donate a certain percentage of their annual turnover to charity.

"If you're a profit-making company and you can afford to do your bit, you should," says Godfrey. "We stand by that. Our energy supplier may not be the cheapest on the market, and there are other ways we could do things cheaper, but that's not the point. As a firm, we're unified on ethical principles. It genuinely runs through everybody's values."

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According to Diane Metcalfe, MD at Vegan Accountants, this approach – working with ethical and sustainable providers – is essential if businesses want to become more ethical. “You can’t claim to be ethical but not work with ethical people,” she points out. “We also have a responsibility as professionals not just to be ethical ourselves but to ask clients to be, too.”

It’s why Metcalfe decided to set up her specialist business – she’d become disillusioned with the accountancy sector. Many of her clients in previous roles weren’t paying much tax and spent the money they saved on themselves. One client even admitted he didn’t want to pay tax at all because he wanted to buy a Ferrari.

For a niche accountancy business like Metcalfe’s, it makes sense to insist that her clients are ethical and vegan themselves. For larger or more general practices, there are other ways to become more ethical.

All about values

“It’s about finding the right people,” says Orchard. “We are very particular about who we take on. We try to take on ten audit trainees a year, but if we don’t feel they share our values – even if they do have the experience and qualifications – we would accept less. Ultimately, you can teach technical skills, but you can’t teach values.”

By hiring well, Sayer Vincent has maintained its ethical values throughout its 25-year history. Orchard returned to the firm after working elsewhere for several years – even though the staff had changed, the values hadn’t. They were hiring people with the same motivations and principles. “It’s the people who make it,” he adds.

As Godfrey explains, it’s not just about looking for anyone who can do the job – they have to share the firm’s values. “We recruit directly rather than using agencies so we can be more selective. We also include personal statements as part of our hiring process so we can assess attitude and motivation,” she says.

Godfrey Wilson also carry out regular ethical and environmental audits to ensure the business remains ethical. It’s something she recommends to other firms, too. You could pay for an independent consultant to do your audit or find online tools and gain ethical accreditation that

TAKING THE ETHICAL APPROACH

FIND YOUR NICHE

“People warned me I wouldn’t get enough clients calling myself a ‘vegan accountant’ but because it’s niche, it’s attracted all sorts of like-minded people.”

Diane Metcalfe, managing director at Vegan Accountants.

USE A BENCHMARK

“There are lots of online tools that enable you to carry out ethical environmental audits on your own business. Rate yourself on how you perform in key environmental, ethical areas then use that as an action plan.”

Alison Godfrey, partner at Godfrey Wilson.

FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE

“You’ve got to get the right people in. Yes, they need to have the right skills and qualifications, but they also need to fit your values. You can always teach technical skills, but you can’t teach values.”

Jonathan Orchard, partner at Sayer Vincent.

way. Some online reviews even include checklists that break down the business into different areas, such as resource usage, transport and energy. This can form the basis of an action plan.

Metcalfe, though, believes that for businesses to become ethical, they need to find their niche. It’s why she decided to have “vegan” in her business name: not just to stand out, but to attract the “right” clients. Friends and professionals advised against her choice of business name – they felt it would alienate her - but she went ahead anyway.

“The opposite happened,” she recalls. “Veganism has exploded over the past few years, and it’s the fastest growing industry there is. So it’s important to be niche. It’s about being honest with your values and not being scared to be different. But many practices don’t care who they work with.”

Metcalfe’s approach may seem extreme to some, but it’s successful because it’s niche. As Orchard points out, more businesses realise they should operate ethically – appealing to environmentally-friendly companies, promoting fair tax schemes or donating to charity.

“Ultimately, having an ethical approach is good for any business, and everyone should be moving in that direction,” he says. “Society would look very different if more businesses were operating ethically. It shouldn’t be the sole preserve of charities; it ought to be in everybody’s business objectives. That’s the route to long-term success.” =