

Episode 17: Transcript & Show notes

Title: Letting Clients Have Their Say - How one advice firm changed the way it talks to clients about their investment preferences

Summary: What happens when an advice firm takes a fresh look at how it asks clients about their investment preferences?

In this special Good Money Week episode of Accord Talks, hosts Elly Dowding and Lee Coates OBE speak to Craig Gahagan, a Chartered Financial Adviser at Acuma Wealth, who has recently reviewed and updated their client preference process.

We hear what prompted the rethink, what they discovered along the way, and how changing the conversation is helping clients make more informed choices about their investments — including whether, and how, they want their personal views reflected.

Note: Any guest contributions are transcribed from the recording. Host sections are based on the final script used for recording and may contain wording variations from the audio.

Transcript:

Elly: Hello, I'm Elly Dowding

Lee: and I'm Lee Coates, and together we are in ACCORD and the Accord initiative.

Elly: You're listening to Accord Talks, a podcast about sustainability and compliance and advice processes supporting the financial advice sector. We hope you're all well.

Lee: OK, now before we get into the nitty gritty of today's podcast, I'd like to mention that the report from the FCA established Advisor Sustainability Group has now been published. I spoke at the launch event in early September and it was gratifying to see so many people from the FCA at the event and to hear that they will be responding to the open letter sent to them by the ASG's chair.

For those of you not familiar with the report, it's entitled Sustainability in Practise Guidance for Advisors and Trainers and looks at where advisors may need help and support to build advice on sustainability issues into their advice process. Many of the recommendations in the report neatly and coincidentally reinforce some of the key findings from upcoming report on our own survey of financial advisors. Watch this space.

Elly: Yeah, please do that. So now, if you've listened to some of our previous episodes, you'll know that we spend quite a lot of time talking about the gap between what firms intend to do and what actually happens when an advisor sits down with an investment client. We've talked about consumer duty, we've talked about client expectations and the importance of understanding what clients really mean rather than simply recording an answer to a question.

But today, in this very special edition of the podcast for UKSIF Good Money Week, we chose to do something slightly different.

Lee: Yes, because rather than us talking about what we believe firms could be doing, we're going to hear from an advisor who's actually gone through updating their advice processes.

Our guest is Craig Gahagan from Acuma Financial Planning. Craig and his colleagues have reviewed the way they identify and respond to clients investment preferences and they've used the Accord Initiative's Client Preference Toolkit to help them do that.

Elly: So let's go straight to the interview and hear what happened when Craig and his colleagues decided to look at their advice processes, what they changed, what they found difficult and whether having gone through it all, he thinks it was worth doing.

INTERVIEW:

Elly:

Hi, Craig. It's really exciting to have you here with us. We've been really looking forward to hearing more about your work. Thanks so much for joining us. So please, can you start by telling us a little bit about your firm and the clients that you typically advise?

Craig:

Yeah, of course. Firstly, thank you for inviting me on. I really appreciate it and I look forward to it. To give you some background, we are a small directly authorised firm, small in size but relatively big in ambitions. The firm was purchased last year, twenty twenty five, by Clint and I joined at the start of this year. And we've also taken on further team members this year as we look to expand.

We try to target clients who are either in the accumulation phase of their journey, or preferably those approaching retirement. This is just due to the fact we find the proposition is particularly valuable at this stage as clients are moving from building wealth to making important decisions around retirement, income, pensions, tax and estate planning. I think it's important to highlight our role is not really simply investment managers, it's helping clients make informed decisions and giving them confidence they're on track.

Many people have accumulated significant assets over their lives and need support, understanding how best to structure those assets. We work hard to try and create a clear plan, which means clients can enjoy retirement spending on things they wish or gifting guilt-free with the confidence that they have sufficient assets to meet these goals.

Ultimately, I guess we work with a broad range of clients, including professionals, business owners and those with complex pension arrangements. But the common overarching theme is that they value the ongoing financial planning and have a trusted advisor to help guide key financial decisions throughout retirement.

Lee:

Okay. right, we know you recently reviewed and updated some of your advice procedures. Now before you started this process, how did your firm think about client investment preferences?

Elly:

And can I jump in before you answer that with an extra heart to the question? Did you think that your process was working reasonably well at the time?

Craig:

OK. That's a good question and it probably ties back to some of the reasons why we reviewed the process in the first place. As discussed previously, we're a relatively small firm that's recently changed hands, but importantly we're directly authorized. One of the advantages of being directly authorised, is that it gives us the flexibility to build robust processes that are tailored to the way we want to deliver advice and meet regulatory obligations.

Looking back, I wouldn't say there was a particularly rigorous or consistent process for assessing clients' personal investment preferences. It tended to be more advisor led, with different advisors having those conversations in different ways. Whilst ESG discussions were certainly taking place and sustainable discussions, they weren't the same guardrails, documentation requirements or quality controls that we now have.

Consumer duty, I believe, has had a really positive influence in this area. It's not enough simply to ask a client whether they want sustainable investments. Clients need to be in an informed position to understand what sustainability actually means, the different approaches available, and the potential benefits and trade-offs before they can make a meaningful decision. One of our objectives when reviewing the process was therefore to create a framework that ensures advisors follow the same steps, ask the same core questions and provide clients with a consistent level of education support.

This obviously creates a far more repeatable process and ultimately should lead to better and more consistent client outcomes. So, in answer to whether the previous process was working well, I'd say it wasn't necessarily that it wasn't working badly, but equally it was far from optimal and relied too heavily on individual advisors.

What we've implemented now is a much more structured and robust approach. It gives us confidence that every kind has been treated consistently and their preferences are being properly identified and reflected in the advice they receive.

Lee:

That's great. And was there a particular moment when you thought, actually, we could do this better?

Craig:

Honestly, the moment was probably when I first joined the firm. Because everything was new and Clint had only just recently taken it on. We were looking at everything from the ground up. It wasn't a case of joining because I thought everything was perfect. It was pretty much the opposite. It was an opportunity to review existing processes and ask whether they were genuinely delivering the best possible outcomes.

Being directly authorized gives us more flexibility than operating within larger networks. Between myself and Clint, we were able to take a fresh look at how we engage with clients, how we educate them and how we document and deliver advice. ESG and sustainability preferences were just one area where I felt improvements could be made.

To be fair, there are a number of areas across the advice process where we identified opportunities to make things more robust, more consistent, and more client-focused. Ethical investing happened to be the area that I personally have a strong interest in, so I took ownership of reviewing this part of the process. What became apparent quite quickly was that there wasn't a structured framework in place to ensure every client was having the same educational journey.

Or advisors were capturing preferences in a consistent way. We wanted to move away from something that was largely advisor dependent and towards a process that was repeatable, evidence-based, and aligned with consumer duty principles.

Ultimately, our objective wasn't simply to improve ESG discussions; it was to improve client outcomes, more broadly by creating a more robust advice process that gives clients the information they need to make informed decisions.

And ensure those decisions are reflected consistently in the advice they receive.

Elly:

It's so interesting hearing the background thinking to this. So thank you for sharing that. So what did you discover when you started looking at your existing process more closely? So was there anything missing, I guess, that surprised you?

Craig:

Honestly, I wouldn't say there was a single thing that surprised me. It was more a case of confirming some of the things I'd already suspected when I joined the business. I've been in the industry for a fair few number of years now. And whilst I strongly believe in the positive impact good financial planning can have on people's lives, I also think the profession is still evolving.

We're moving away from what was historically quite sales-led industry towards a true professional services model. And there are still areas across the market where client outcomes can be improved. When I joined Acuma, I wasn't expecting to find a fully developed, mature set of processes. In fact, part of the attraction was the opportunity to build something far better. The business had recently changed hands and the owner and I share very similar views on client outcomes, professionalism, and long-term development.

As we started to review the existing processes, it became pretty clear that there were opportunities to make them more structured and consistent. That wasn't just in relation to ESG and sustainability, it was across the advice process as a whole. ESG was just simply one area that I chose to focus on because it's something I'm personally interested in and felt strongly about improving.

What was missing wasn't necessarily good intent. Advisors were already having conversations with clients, but there wasn't always a consistent framework to ensure those conversations were being carried out in the same way, documented properly, and then translated into the advice process consistently. That's where we saw the opportunity to make a positive difference.

The advantage of joining a firm at this stage of the journey was that we weren't trying to make minor tweaks to an established process; we had the opportunity to step back, look at things objectively and build a framework that reflected how we believe advice should be delivered today, with a strong focus on education, informed decision-making, consumer duty, and ultimately achieving better client outcomes.

Elly :

Brilliant. So we know that you've looked at the preference toolkit on the Accord Initiative website to support updating your process decisions. What did the toolkit make you look at in your business that perhaps you hadn't looked at in the same way before?

Craig:

One of the biggest things the toolkit made us think about was client education before the advice meeting itself. I'm a big believer that clients make better decisions when they're properly informed, but historically we weren't sending anything out in advance for clients to consider before the meeting. The toolkit challenged us to think about whether clients were really in the best position to answer questions about sustainable investing if the first time they heard about it was during an advice meeting.

As a result, we've changed the process. Clients now receive information on conventional and sustainable investing before we meet them. That gives them an opportunity to educate themselves, think about what matters to them, and arrive at the meeting with questions of their own. What I've found is the quality of the conversation has improved significantly.

Rather than spending most of the meeting explaining what sustainable investing is we're able to have a much more meaningful, informed discussion about the client's views, priorities and preferences. In turn, that allows me to build a much better understanding of what's genuinely important to them.

The toolkit also encouraged us to think beyond a simple yes or no approach to sustainable investing. Clients' preferences can often be more nuanced than that.

For example, some clients may want to avoid specific sectors, while others may want to actively support certain themes or industries such as clean energy.

Lee:

Great. And using the toolkit, did it change the questions you asked clients, or was the bigger change actually how you process their answers?

Craig:

For me, the biggest change wasn't necessarily the questions we were asking, it was the quality of the answers we were receiving. I've always had conversations with clients about ethical and sustainable investing, so the core questions themselves didn't change dramatically. What changed was the level of understanding clients had before we were having those discussions.

Previously, I might have been introducing the concept for the first time in the meeting. Asking for their views immediately afterwards. Now clients come to the meeting with a much better understanding of the options available and often with their own thoughts. As a result, the responses I receive are far more considered and more detailed. That enables me essentially to get a much deeper understanding of what is actually important. So whilst there were some refinements to the process and how we document preferences, I would say the biggest value has come from improving the quality of the conversation. Better informed clients tend to give better informed answers, and that ultimately leads to a more personalised recommendation and stronger advice process overall.

Elly:

So we really want to get into the detail of it. So the next is a good one. Was there anything in the toolkit process where you initially thought, do we really need to do that? But then subsequently saw the value in doing so.

Craig:

No, not really. the only area I would highlight is around some of the more detailed client-specific preference questions. In practice, I don't encounter a huge number of clients who arrive

with very specific sustainability requirements or who want highly targeted exclusions or allocations. Most of the clients I work with tend to sit at a broader level. They're genuinely considering whether they prefer a conventional, ethical or sustainability-focused approach, that's where the majority of the conversations take place.

Because of that, I don't find myself using the more detailed preference sections every day. However, I've come to appreciate that when you need them, they're very useful. And whether that's avoiding particular sectors or wanting exposure to certain themes, the toolkit and the framework it provides gives you a really structured way to explore it.

So whilst it's probably not a tool that I use in its entirety with every client, I still absolutely see the value in it. Ultimately, I think that's the strength of it. It caters for the majority of clients who have relatively broad preferences whilst also providing the flexibility to deal with those clients whose views are more specific or nuanced.

Lee:

What was the hardest part to get right and what turned out to be easier than you'd expected?

Craig:

I think the hardest part wasn't actually creating the process or the client-facing documentation. We felt quite comfortable with that element. Once we had identified what good looked like, building the framework and creating the educational materials was actually relatively straightforward. The more challenging part we found was making sure the process could be consistently delivered and replicated.

It's one thing to design a process, it's another to ensure that every advisor follows it in the same way and that the clients receive a consistent experience regardless of who they're dealing with. That's where the focus shifted towards internal processes, training, implementation. We wanted to avoid creating a process that looked great but actually wasn't being applied consistently in practice. For me, that's where the real value lies.

The objective isn't simply to have good documentation or well designed workflow. It's to make sure the conversations we're having are consistently high-level, and the outcomes are actually being delivered.

In that respect, I'd say creating the materials was probably easier than expected. And the harder part was embedding the processes within the business, training advisors to use them effectively and ensure that what was actually designed is replicated consistently.

Ultimately, I see that's the difference between having a process and having a process that genuinely changes client outcomes. The challenge is always in the implementation, not necessarily in the design.

Lee:

Yeah, absolutely. And now, obviously, you know, we worked with you a little bit during the process. So you've got our permission to be completely candid here. What did we challenge you on?

Craig:

I think the main area of challenge was around some of the client educational material we had produced. We had our own ideas and how we wanted to explain sustainable investing and guide clients through the process, but the feedback we received really helped us refine that material and improve it from a client perspective.

Looking back, those changes definitely improved the end result. I'm happier with what we ended with. I described this experience more as collaborative than challenging. There were certainly occasions where our thinking was questioned or suggestions were made, but it was always like we were working towards the same objective of creating the best possible documentation, best outcomes, rather than simply trying to find faults in the process. Ultimately, the challenge made the final process stronger. It helped us communicate more effectively and gave us confidence in the decisions we were making and ensured the finished process was something both us as a company and yourselves were comfortable with.

Elly:

That's really great to hear. Did having somebody from outside the firm review the process, expose anything that might otherwise have been easy to rationalize internally?

Craig:

No, I don't think it was the case of an external party coming in exposing something that we were rationalising internally. For me, the biggest value was actually how collaborative the relationship was throughout. I think the thing that struck me most when I first started working with you both was how passionate you are about this and how deeply you care about it. And that kind of shines through in everything you do. So we were fortunate to be working with you and benefiting from your knowledge and experience. And you have real depth of knowledge in this area. So as we were building the process, there were naturally points where we were weighing up different approaches or weren't entirely sure which direction to take. Rather than simply presenting a finished product and process, having it critiqued afterwards, we were able to have ongoing conversations, ask questions, test ideas, and essentially receive feedback as we went along rather than just kind of when we presented a finished article.

For me, that was hugely valuable because it gave us confidence that what we were building was practical, robust, and aligned with best practices. It became much more of a collaborative exercise than a review or challenge exercise.

By the time we reached the final process, it wasn't a case of us producing something and then waiting to see if it passed scrutiny. We'd worked through the key decisions together already and discuss pros and cons and refined it along the way. So if I reflect on the value of having an external organisation involved, it's less about challenging our assumptions and more about having access to knowledgeable people who were willing to work alongside us, answer questions, provide guidance, and importantly help us when needed. This made the whole process much more effective and ultimately helped us arrive at better outcomes.

Elly:

That's really, really positive to hear. Yeah, it's delightful, in fact, to hear the word collaboration used, because that's really, yeah, it's really how we feel about it. So I'm going to bring a regulatory perspective back in, I suppose, and look at the consumer duty a little bit more. So you already mentioned consumer duty, so from that perspective, having reviewed your processes, do you now see asking about client preferences differently from when you started?

Craig:

Not really, if I'm being honest. I've always been supportive of consumer duty and the principles behind it. So I was already trying to have those conversations with clients before we went through this exercise. I've always believed that understanding a client's preferences and values and objectives is a fundamental part of delivering good financial planning. What has changed isn't necessarily how I view those conversations, the quality and consistency of them.

The process we've built means clients are better informed before the meeting. The discussions are therefore more meaningful. And we're essentially able to gain a far deeper understanding of what is genuinely important to them. So as a result, I think client outcomes are better, clients are making more informed decisions, and we're capturing their preferences more effectively. And we have a much more robust framework for evidencing how those preferences have been considered within our advice process.

So I wouldn't say my mindset has changed dramatically. If anything, the project has reinforced beliefs I already held around client education and the decision-making process. The difference is that we now have a much stronger process to support those principles.

Ultimately that gives me greater confidence in the advice we're delivering. I feel more comfortable that clients are making more informed decisions, we're properly understanding their preferences, and that we're able to demonstrate good outcomes. From a professional perspective, that's certainly something that helps me sleep easier at night.

Lee:

Great. Actually you finished that with sleep easier at night and I want to ask you now and imagine a scenario where if the FCA walked through your door tomorrow and asked you to show them how your firm gives every investment client an opportunity to express their investment preferences, how much more confident would you feel showing them the process now?

Craig:

Hugely more confident. Yeah, it's immeasurably so. We've discussed already the business was relatively new to both myself and the new owner when I first came in. The existing processes and documentation weren't where we wanted them to be. The bar was fairly low in terms of having a structure and repeatable process for identifying and evidencing the client investment preferences.

One of the things that attracted me to the business was the opportunity to help build those processes properly. We've both been very motivated to keep improving the business and client outcomes. So there was never a sense that we'd reached a finished article. Even today, I'd still say it's a journey rather than a completed product. We're always looking for ways to refine and improve what we do. However, there is a huge difference between where we were then when I first joined and where we are today.

If the FCA walked through the doors tomorrow, I wouldn't have any concerns about being able to demonstrate how we identify, discuss and document investment preferences. We have a clear process, consistent client communication, documentation, and a framework that ensures every client is given opportunity to understand and express their preferences. For me, the biggest difference is that we're no longer relying on good intentions or individual approaches, we have a process that's structured, repeatable, and capable of being evidenced.

So whilst I'd never say we're finished and there's always room for further improvement, the change from when I first joined the firm to where we are now is genuinely significant. The confidence I'd have in demonstrating our approach to FCA is vastly higher than it would have been from outset. And this is one of the reasons we sought your help to ensure that our process was robust from an FCA expectation perspective. And with your expert guidance and support, I believe what we have done is very positive and we're really appreciative of the support we received.

Elly:

Brilliant. So, and it's been a pleasure actually, I have to say. So I know that we've touched on a few of these things already for the next thing I want to ask, but it's got a slightly different angle. From a much wider perspective and acknowledging that many clients may not choose to invest sustainably or ethically, for example, when discussing those preferences with clients do you now feel that your clients are making their choices from a more informed position, covering all the different preferences?

Craig :

Yes, absolutely. To be honest, that's probably the biggest benefit we've seen from the whole process. Whether a client ultimately chooses a conventional investment approach, an ethical or a sustainability focused approach isn't really the point. The key thing here is that they're making the decision from an informed position that's aligned to their personal values.

In financial services, almost every decision involves trade-offs, there are advantages and disadvantages to different approaches, and as our role as an advisor is to help clients understand so they can make informed decisions that align with their views and objectives and values. A simple example is cash. Many clients view cash as a safe asset because its value doesn't fluctuate. It's excellent for short term spending needs, however, we all know over the longer term purchasing power of cash is often eroded by inflation. By contrast, investing in equity often involves market volatility, potential short-term losses, but historically it's provided real growth over the longer periods. I think ethical and sustainable investing are similar. There are benefits and there are potential trade-offs, and there is no right or wrong answer.

What's important is that clients understand those considerations and they can decide what matters most to them. That's why the educational element has been so valuable. In the past, sustainable investing might have been raised during a meeting, an explanation given, and the conversation moved on.

Now clients have the opportunity to read information beforehand, think about the subject, discuss it with family if they wish, come up with questions and come back to the meeting with our own views. The result is the decisions become much more conscious and deliberate rather than being an afterthought at the end of a meeting. It's something that the client has genuinely considered and engaged with. From my perspective, that really does lead to better outcomes regardless of which route they ultimately choose.

If a client decides sustainability is important to them, that's fine. If they decide it isn't a priority, that's equally fine. The important thing is that they've made an informed decision and we can build a portfolio around those preferences. Ultimately, clients don't know what they don't know, and our responsibility is to educate them, explain the pros and cons of the available options and help them make informed decisions. I think the changes we've made have significantly improved our ability to do that.

Lee:

Great. So spinning it round slightly to look at it from the client's perspective, I mean, have clients responded differently since you changed the way you introduced these conversations? And have you learned anything about clients you may not have discovered otherwise?

Craig:

Yeah, I believe they have. The biggest difference I've noticed is clients are asking far more questions. And for me, that's a really positive sign. Some of the best meetings I have are the ones where the client is doing the bulk of the talking, asking questions, exploring different scenarios and challenging their own thinking. That's genuinely when you learn the most about what's important to them.

Previously discussions around sustainability or ethical investing could sometimes be relatively brief because the clients hadn't had much opportunity to think about the topic beforehand. If someone doesn't fully understand the subject, they can be reluctant to ask questions or may simply move the conversation on because they don't feel confident discussing it. By providing information in advance, clients come to the meeting with a better understanding of the concept and, importantly, with their own questions.

That makes the conversation much more interactive and allows us to explore their views and priorities in far more detail. I've definitely found that this leads to a deeper understanding of the client. Whilst our conversation may start around sustainable or ethical investing, it often develops into a discussion about their wider views, what drives their decision making, and ultimately what they want their money to achieve. Those are insights that can be incredibly valuable when building a long-term financial plan.

So whilst I wouldn't necessarily say that clients' preferences have changed, I do think we're uncovering those preferences more effectively, the conversations are richer, clients are more engaged and we're gaining a much better understanding of what really matters to them. Ultimately that's the biggest benefit. It's not just about discussing sustainable investing. It's about creating an environment where clients feel informed, comfortable asking questions and able to express what's important to them.

Elly:

So do you find that clients always arrive knowing that their personal views can be reflected in their investments? Or do you sometimes find that you're introducing an option via this education process and information process that they hadn't realized actually existed?

Craig:

It's an interesting question, and I think it very much depends on client demographic. In my experience as an advisor, many younger clients, particularly those in the accumulation phase, already have some awareness or in some cases, a good awareness of ethical, sustainable investing. Often, they've read about it, heard about it through the media, or have certain views that they would like reflected within their portfolio to some extent.

With many older clients, however, it's often a very different picture. Some have never really come across the concept before, whilst others may have heard the terminology but only have a limited understanding of what it actually means in practice. That's one of the reasons I think the educational piece is so important. We can't assume that every client understands the options available to them or realises that their personal views can even potentially be reflected within their investment portfolio.

What I found is that for some clients, we're not simply discussing their preferences, we're introducing an opportunity they didn't know existed. Once they understand the different approaches and what's possible, they can decide whether it's something that's important to them or not.

Importantly, that doesn't mean clients automatically choose a sustainable or ethical approach. Many don't, and that's fine. The objective isn't to steer clients in a particular direction, it's to ensure they're aware of the options and they can make an informed decision based on their own views, values, and priorities.

What I would say is that once a client understands they can align investments more closely with their personal views, it often leads to richer conversations. Sometimes that's about sustainability, sometimes it's about particular industries or themes, and sometimes it simply reinforces that investment returns remain their primary consideration.

Ultimately, I think the biggest benefit is ensuring that every client has the opportunity to make a conscious and informed choice. Whether they decide those preferences are important to them or not, at least they're making that decision from a position of understanding rather than because they were never aware the option existed in the first place.

Lee:

That's fantastic, thanks. Now, after updating the process, and you've explained how you've gone through that and the importance of it, you naturally, of course, applied for the client preference ready badge. What did you think the badge was going to demonstrate to your clients?

Craig:

I hope it demonstrates trust and a genuine commitment to understanding clients more deeply. I'm really passionate about trying to move the industry towards a true professional service. I don't see our role as simply recommending investments or placing clients into products. It's to understand what is important to people, help them make informed decisions and build plans that are tailored to their individual needs and objectives.

For me, the badge reinforces that mindset. It shows we're willing to take the time to have more meaningful, deeper conversations with clients, understand their preferences and values, and ensure those are properly reflected in the process. Whilst the badge is linked to sustainability preferences, I actually think it says something much broader about the way we approach advice. It's about listening to clients, educating them and making sure that we're in a position to make informed decisions rather than simply presenting a recommendation.

I hope clients see it as an indication that we take these conversations seriously and we have the process in place to support them properly. Whether a client ultimately chooses a conventional investment approach or a more sustainable one isn't the key point. The important thing is they've had an opportunity to understand it.

Elly:

So I think you've partly answered this already, but I'm very interested in the thought process behind this. Do you see the badge mainly as something for clients to recognise, or is there also value internally in being able to say this is the standard that we've committed ourselves to?

Craig:

Absolutely both. I think there's a lot of value externally and internally. From the client perspective, it demonstrates we're committed to understanding people properly. But internally, I think there's an equally important benefit. It gives us a standard to work towards and hold ourselves accountable against. We operate in a profession where the advice we give can have a genuinely life-changing impact.

We can be the difference between someone retiring several years earlier than expected, achieving financial independence, having the confidence to spend more in retirement.

Equally, poor advice or poor processes can have significant and lasting detrimental consequences for clients. Because of that, I think it's important that firms continually challenge themselves to improve.

We should never be complacent and assume that the way we've always done things is necessarily the best way. Having an external standard and framework helps reinforce that mindset. For me, the badge isn't just a recognition of work we've already done, it's a commitment to maintaining those standards going forward. It reminds us that understanding client preferences, educating clients, and delivering good outcomes isn't a one-off exercise. It's something that should be embedded into the culture of the firm.

As a relatively young and growing business, we're always looking to improve what we do. I certainly don't see this as a finished article. However, I do see the badge as evidence that we've put through effort into building the robust processes and that we're willing to hold ourselves accountable to a recognised standard. Ultimately, anything that encourages higher standards, more meaningful conversations and better outcomes is a positive thing. That's valuable for clients, but it's also valuable for us internally because it helps create a culture of continuous improvement and keeps the focus where it should be, which is delivering the best possible outcomes for the people we look after.

Lee:

That's great, thank you. Now, imagine another advisor is listening to you here on this podcast and they think their existing process is probably good enough. What's the one thing you'd suggest they go back and look at?

Craig :

I think I'd encourage them to challenge two things in particular. The first would be whether they're providing clients with enough information before the meeting.

Looking back, that has probably been the single best improvement we've made. Having now experienced both approaching introducing sustainability and investment preferences for the first time during a meeting versus educating clients beforehand, I genuinely don't think it's possible to have the same quality conversations unless a client has had the time to consider the subject in advance.

When clients receive the information before the meeting, they arrive with questions, opinions, and areas they want to explore. The conversation becomes far more interactive and meaningful; rather than the advisor doing most of the talking, the client is actually engaged in the discussion. In my experience, that's when you learn the most about what's really important to them.

The second thing I challenge is whether the process is genuinely repeatable across the business. It's one thing for an advisor to have good conversations with clients, it's another to have a process that's documented, consistent, and supported by internal guardrails so that every client receives the same opportunity to express their preferences and make informed decisions.

More broadly, I don't think any advice process is ever truly finished, and I certainly don't think anyone should be saying this is good enough; we don't need to look at it again. The advice profession is consistently evolving, client expectations are changing, regulation continues to develop, and there are always opportunities to improve.

We certainly won't be putting this process on ourself and forgetting about it. We'll continue re we'll continue reviewing it, refining it, and looking for ways to improve client outcomes further. So if I had one message for another advisor, it wouldn't be to settle for good enough. It'd be willing to challenge your own process, look for ways to improve it, and keep pushing standards higher.

Elly:

And what would you say to the advisor thinking, I'd like to improve in this area, but I really don't need another compliance project.

Craig:

No advisor needs another compliance project. But I'd say if you're looking at it in purely another compliance project, you're missing the real value. I completely understand why people might have their own action. Everyone's busy and there always seems to be another regulatory initiative or process review demanding time and attention away from clients.

However, my experience was that this wasn't just about compliance. It was more about improving the quality of client conversations and ultimately more about improving client outcomes, which far outweighs just a simple compliance project.

If we tried to do this entirely on our own, it would have been far more time consuming and significantly harder. Having access to the toolkit, the framework and importantly the support throughout the process made a huge difference.

What I found particularly valuable wasn't just the documentations itself, but having knowledgeable people available to discuss ideas with, answer questions, and help us work through decisions when we were weighing up options. It felt far more collaborative than simply being handed a checklist and left to get on with.

Yes, there's still a time commitment involved. Any worthwhile improvement project is going to require some investment, but it's nowhere near as onerous as many advisors might assume, particularly with the support available.

More importantly, the outcome justified the effort. We now have better client conversations. We're able to evidence how we are identifying and recording client preferences.

So if an if an advisor is thinking, I'd like to improve, but I really don't need another compliance project. My response would be don't think of it as a compliance project. Think of it as a client outcomes project. The compliance benefit comes as a byproduct of building better processes.

Lee:

Brilliant. Okay. So the big question. Knowing what you know now, would you do it again?

Craig:

Yes, absolutely. Looking back, I don't think there'd be any hesitation in saying I'd do it again. The reason is the benefits have gone far beyond simply improving the sustainability process and obtaining a badge.

What we've ultimately achieved is a far better framework for understanding clients, educating them and helping make more informed decisions. It's genuinely been an enjoyable process. I've enjoyed working with you both and we're really grateful for the support that you've provided. So happily do it again.

Elly:

And we've loved working with you too, so that's amazing. Absolutely amazing.

Lee:

Thank you so much for your time, Craig.

Craig:

Likewise, good to chat to you both as always.

Lee:

Thank you so much for your time, Craig.

Elly:

Yeah, thank you.

Lee:

Well, Elly, I know we're hardly impartial observers in this one, but there was an awful lot in there that I think advisors can take away. And oddly enough, the bit that stayed with me most wasn't actually about the toolkit or the badge at all. It was Craig saying that the biggest change wasn't necessarily the questions he was asking, it was the quality of the answers he was getting.

Elly:

Yeah, I think that that's really, really important. We can sometimes become so very focused on the wording of a question. Have we asked about this? Is it in the fact find? Have we recorded the answer? But asking a question isn't necessarily the same as establishing a client's informed preference. So Craig's experience is that by giving clients information beforehand, they've actually had time to think. So when he asked the question, he's then getting a much more considered response.

Lee:

OK, that's it I think for this episode. A huge thank you to Craig for being so open about his firm's experience and for sharing not only what they've changed, but what they've learned along the way.

You'll find more information about the Client Preference Toolkit and the Client Preference Ready badge in the show notes.

And as always, if there are subjects you'd like us to explore in a future episode, please do get in touch and subscribe wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Elly:

Thanks so much, everyone for listening to Accord Talks. Thanks as always to our Accord Initiative partners as well for making it possible for us to produce the podcast.

We've loved it and we hope you have too.

Lee:

Yeah, thanks for listening.

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