



THE RIGHT FIT

...the right job, the right employer

By J.K. Radomski

Photo: Ruslan Sarkisian

PHOTO: Top (left to right): Grant Thornton Accountant Kevin Chiu (Wilfrid Laurier), IBM Financial Analyst Purav Desai (York's Schulich School of Business), and Ernst & Young Staff Accountant Chris Gage (University of Toronto's MMPA Program).
Bottom (left to right): Deloitte Senior Tax Accountant Oana Savin (Waterloo), architectsAlliance Assistant Controller Heather Gallagher (Seneca), and KPMG Staff Accountant Baoqin Guo (Queen's).

Your first job out of school is an important milestone. You're not just looking for a place to work, but choosing an employer that's going to be the right fit for you.

This is especially important during your first year as an accountant, as you build a solid foundation for yourself, and you want to be comfortable right from the start. And if you're doing well in your courses, and have already impressed a few recruiters, you should definitely not settle for the first job offer that comes your way.

"Accounting is a growing field because businesses are recognizing that you need somebody with these competencies," says Purav Desai, who walked out of his last exam in May from York University's Schulich School of Business, and into a job with IBM as a financial analyst. "I think there are a lot of opportunities students can choose from."

The first thing you should consider when choosing an employer is whether they will bring you closer to obtaining the accounting designation you're pursuing.

The specific work experiences required are quite different between designations. So, where you choose to work, will definitely depend on the type of accountant you hope to become. See this issue's "Professor's Corner" column for more details.

While salary and benefits are often cited as top considerations when looking for a job, they should not be the only reasons for accepting a position.

"You're going to be working long hours. So, naturally, you'll want to be compensated for your efforts. But I think what's more important is knowing what kind of job you will be doing, and whether you will be learning and getting adequate work experience," says Kevin Chiu, who graduated last December from Wilfred Laurier University, and who now works with Grant Thornton as an accountant.

You should also take the time to learn about all facets of your prospective employer's business.

In the case of a company, this means knowing what products they produce and what services they pro-

vide, and deciding whether or not you believe in those offerings.

Similarly, when it comes to accounting firms, you'll want to find out what clients and industry sectors they serve. Chances are, you'll be spending a number of hours auditing these clients, and your focus and productivity will be much better if you find these businesses interesting.

And while you're developing your employer profiles, you may also want to look into their respective positions in the marketplace. You'll want to make sure the organization you plan to work for is healthy, competitive, moving forward, and has a solid reputation within its industry.

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— Oana Savin

Senior Tax Accountant
Deloitte

"If a place has a good reputation you're pretty sure you're going to meet some great people there. And you want to be working with people that are intelligent and motivated. A strong reputation speaks to all of that," says Chris Gage, a staff accountant with Ernst & Young.

Once you find out how a potential employer is perceived on the outside, you'll want to take a very close look to see how things operate on the inside.

The first step here is to find out everything you can about the job you're interested in. You'll want to know what your tasks and responsibilities will be.

Then, you'll want to find out every-

thing you can about the work environment you'll be placed in, or what is commonly known as an organization's corporate culture.

"A company's corporate culture is both the feeling that you get from it, and the way the company projects itself. This can be through its employees, its advertising and promotional campaigns, or the way it recruits new employees," says Grant Thornton's Chiu.

An organization's corporate culture also includes such things as: whether employees dress in formal business attire, or if business casual is acceptable; whether the environment is energetic and fast-paced, or a little laid back; and whether employees have individual but small offices, or work in spacious cubicles.

Given you'll be spending a good portion of your day at work, you'll also want to know something about your future co-workers, and the types of people your prospective employer likes to hire. You'll want to make sure that you'll like your future colleagues, respect them, and learn from them while working together.

"What attracted me to KPMG was that the people were incredibly friendly," says Baoqin Guo, a staff accountant with KPMG, and a 2003 Queen's University graduate. She adds that finding an employer that offers a balance between work and your leisure time is another consideration. "Everyone I talk to is also involved in things outside of work. They're encouraged to pursue personal activities such as volunteer work, and to take time off when things are slow."

Knowing whether an organization places an emphasis on upgrading your skills is also important, considering you will be working towards your accounting designation during your first year there. So you'll also want to look for an employer that has specific programs in place that will help you reach your goal.

The better accounting firms offer Uniform Evaluation (UFE) training programs to help new accountants obtain a CA designation. They also offer support programs that include

practice exams, and the experience of a “study buddy” to mentor you.

“I chose to work at Deloitte because they offered a lot of UFE support that some smaller firms simply can’t afford,” says Oana Savin, who works as a senior tax accountant with Deloitte. “Not only through their internal study programs, but also financially by paying for external UFE training and for the UFE itself, by putting us on payroll during the study period, and even offering a bonus for passing the UFE on the first try.”

“I had two weeks off to study for the Core Knowledge Exam, a whole month off for the School of Accountancy, and then another two months off for the UFE,” says Guo, who had the highest UFE score in Canada last year. “KPMG really emphasized giving us enough time off, to make sure we had time to study all the necessary materials.”

Meanwhile, some companies are eager to turn their new accounting recruits into CMAs or CGAs, and will offer paid study and exam days, or cover the cost of examination fees.

“You have to find an employer that’s relevant to your skills, and who will encourage you to continue to grow professionally,” says Heather Gallagher, an aspiring CGA who now works as an assistant controller with architectsAlliance, after starting as an accounting assistant with the Toronto company only two years ago. “The better companies are eager to help you develop, and might even pay your designation dues and course fees.”

You will also want to consider whether your prospective employer is a right fit when it comes to more training down the line.

“An employer has to encourage you to use the skills that you’re developing, such as the ones you learn in the CGA program,” says Gallagher, who graduated from Seneca College in 2002.

Gathering all this information about a potential employer can be done through research.

The first step is to get your hands on any published information you can find about the firms and companies that have piqued your curiosity. This includes keeping track of any news about them in recent magazine and newspaper articles,

visiting their corporate websites and clicking and reading all the links, and requesting their brochures.

Once you’ve armed yourself with this basic information, you should network with classmates who may already work with this organization, or see if they know anyone who does. Talking to actual employees can reveal a lot about a company, and how it operates on the inside.

The information you gather while researching a prospective employer will also help you formulate some intelligent questions when meeting recruiters.

Not only will asking these questions help you get the answers you need to determine if an employer is your right fit, but they will also allow you to score some serious points with recruiters. Having some well thought out questions shows you are giving their organization and your career some serious thought, and signals your professionalism.

While internships, summer jobs, and co-op programs are limited, and can be especially challenging to obtain, these coveted positions offer you another way to get to know your potential employer a little better.

“Most of the people who do co-ops with the big four firms will continue with them, on a full-time basis. So, it’s an opportunity to get your foot in the door, and see what they’re all about,” says Ernst & Young’s Gage, who graduated last May from the Master of Management and Professional Accounting program at the University of Toronto’s Joseph L. Rotman School of Business.

Joining a school accounting club, or a commerce society, is another way to gather employer information.

“Clubs provide you with the benefit of meeting and understanding what recruiters are looking for, and give you a chance to ask them questions,” says Desai, a CMA in training, who was president of the York University Finance and Investment Club last year.

Having excellent grades does not automatically entitle you to your dream job. It also takes the right professional attitude, a polished résumé, a proven track record of hard work and dedication, and knowing what you want out of a job.

“The key is knowing what you’re looking for, and knowing what areas of expertise you want to develop,” says Deloitte’s Savin, who graduated in 2004 with a Master of Accounting degree from the University of Waterloo. “Expanding my tax knowledge was important to me at the beginning of my career, since this is the area that needs the most development. That’s why I wanted to find a firm that could offer me a lot of opportunities, through exposure to different files and clients, so I could continue to build on my technical knowledge.” **CIA**

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