case study 1.3

Dispelling the ‘Bean Counter’ Image

While accountancy conjures up the image of someone stuck in an office number crunching, nothing could be further from the truth, says Megan Alexander.

Rather than simply being ‘bean counters’, the general manager of leading recruitment firm Robert Half New Zealand says today’s accountants work in a variety of dynamic roles that are frequently at the very heart of the business.

Ms Alexander is urging teenagers returning to school and university study to put aside any ideas of accountants as people who just sit in front of computers manipulating spreadsheets. She wants them to consider accounting and finance as a career that offers excitement, variety and a world of opportunity.

‘They work with every organisation, from large multinationals to small accounting practices, from government departments to charities, sports clubs and schools,’ says Ms Alexander.

‘Finance and accounting is a crucial part of every organisation, no matter what its core focus, which offers possibly the widest choice of working environments.

‘There are still some of those “dry” roles around, but they’re becoming few and far between. In the past accountants may have sat in the back office and not got involved, but in today’s world that just can’t happen.

‘It’s all about adding value and that means they’ve got to be at the forefront, helping to drive the business; accountants can be very influential these days.’

There are many different avenues to pursue, from the business analyst route, to management accounting through to the chartered accountancy side.

And while finance and accounting professionals obviously do need technical skill, Ms Alexander, herself a chartered accountant, says employers are increasingly looking for employees who are also ‘people people’.

‘Accounting and finance professionals often have to work with everyone in the organisation, from the CEO to the receptionist. They need to be able to explain financial issues in everyday language, to explain the impact of certain decisions on the business, to work in multi-disciplinary teams on crucial projects.

‘Few other professions can match the variety of work available, or the number of career options. It is, quite honestly, a cool career.’

One example of a young accountant who says he has chosen an exciting and interesting career is Ash Matuschka, a 23-year-old senior auditor with Ernst & Young.

Mr Matuschka, whose hobbies outside work include racing inflatable rescue boats and surf-lifesaving (‘that’s my other, unpaid, job’), never considered accounting as a career when he was a child or a young teen.

But at university he chose to do a business degree ‘because I thought I wanted to go into business’.

He decided to major in marketing and accounting and, by his second year, had become increasingly interested in becoming a chartered accountant.

He went straight from Auckland University to Ernst & Young, where he has been for three years, and has just completed his final professional exam to become a chartered accountant.

Now, he says, he has a fascinating job that takes him into a wide variety of organisations – all the way from listed companies to small charities – and involves working with ‘all the different people in all the different roles’ as he gets to understand each business.

Though most people understand his job involves checking financial statements and providing opinions on whether they are correct, Mr Matuschka says to do that auditors really need to understand every aspect of the business.

And that involves talking to people all the time.

‘If you were not a people person in this job, you just wouldn’t be able to do it,’ he says.

‘A chartered accountant is expected to be more than just someone who can look at numbers. There’s an emphasis on problem-solving and communication.’

Ms Alexander says Mr Matuschka’s situation isn’t unusual – these days most new young accountants find a world of opportunities opening up to them.

‘It is a great qualification to travel on – good finance and accounting professionals are always in demand throughout the world.’

Ms Alexander herself worked in London in a number of different roles within one company, from finance manager through to being a project accountant setting up systems.

‘I got a lot of exposure to people around the business, it was good being able to talk to lots of different people, and it was one of those times when I thought, yes, accounting really is a cool career.’

With many professionals wanting to travel with their career, Robert Half has set up a website to help those wanting to work in other countries.

SOURCE: Robert Half New Zealand, ‘Dispelling the Bean Counter Image’, *The Dominion Post*, 22 March 2010, p. G3.

This newspaper article highlights many stereotypes currently held about accountants and the accounting profession. Using this article as a base, try to construct answers to the following questions.

Questions

1 Why did you choose to study accounting?

2 What are your own perceptions of accounting? (Perceptions are defined as a way of regarding, understanding or interpreting something.)

3 Identify the range of preconceptions that others possess about accounting. This could be done through an Internet search using key words, such as ‘accountants’, ‘accounting’, ‘accounting profession’, ‘bean counters’, ‘chartered accountants’, or by talking to your friends, family or teaching support.

4 Critically assess the implications of these preconceptions for accountants, accounting, and users of accounting information.