case study 1.3 solution

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

This case study aims to address students’ negative preconceptions of accounting by allowing them the opportunity to articulate their thought processes and address the impact of such preconceptions on the accounting profession.

1 Why did you choose to study accounting?

No set answer – this will depend on the student. The aim of this question is to allow a student to articulate themselves in their own language exactly why they chose to study accounting.

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

No set answer – this will depend on the student. The aim of this question is to allow a student the space and time to be able to document what it is they currently perceive accounting to be. This will often be based on current misconceptions, popular media, everyday life experience, and so on. It is a useful exercise to enable a student to articulate how they currently perceive the discipline of accounting and then once they have been exposed to a course on accounting to ask them again so they are able to see a difference in their perceptions.

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.

There is no set answer for this question – without representing an exhaustive list, key findings may include:

• boring

• uninteresting

• mathematical

• objective

• a fear associated with an accountant, such as the auditor – may lead to budget cuts, restructuring, and so on

• cheap and tight with money

• lack of personality

• quantification – excluding all other matters of a social and environmental nature

• corporate collapse, with blame being placed on the accountant and the accounting profession.

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

Students should arrive at the social costs associated with these preconceptions, including:

• negative social stigma of an individual’s professional career – that they have little personality and are only interested in the bottom line

• critical shortage of accountants

• lack of understanding of the accounting profession can lead to a misconception of the role the accountant plays within society to ensure accountability, and so on

• narrow view by users of accounting information to include only information of a financial nature.