

How do you get into practice?

DOES PRACTICE REALLY MAKE PERFECT? FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO WORK FOR AN ACCOUNTANCY FIRM, IT CAN BE A REWARDING AND VARIED CAREER. HERE'S A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO MAKING IT WORK

It's no surprise that some students on AAT forums have asked about the best way to start working for a practice – after all, it's a desirable job. As Sanjay Sah, founder/director of London-based Makesworth Accountants puts it: "Working in a practice is rewarding for any aspiring accountant. You'll be exposed to a wide range of businesses and professionals, plus get the chance to know about the business inside-and-out. You can use this experience to work in other fields."

Whether you've got your heart set on working for a multinational behemoth such as KPMG or PwC, want to learn the ropes working for a local firm, or wish to join the 4,000 AAT-licensed accountants currently running their own businesses, here's everything you need to know about securing the practice job of your dreams...

1 Remember – you might want to work in industry instead
A job at a practice is more likely to be a general role, working for a range of clients in different sectors, with tasks including accounting, auditing, assurance, tax, consulting, advisory, actuarial, corporate finance, or legal services. While this diversity is a great way for fledgling accountants to learn the trade (one day you could be filing a tax return, the next helping a company with its payroll), it isn't for everybody.

You may prefer honing your skills by working in industry – loosely defined as working in-house at a company – instead. Tasks include cash flow, cost control or budgeting, while it gives financial staff an opportunity to work in a sector they feel passionate about, such as film, fashion or charity.

Balancing different clients can make working at a practice a stressful role, adds Sanjay: "We need to meet the urgencies of many clients, so somebody who wants to work at a practice should be able to cope in a fast-paced working environment and meet deadlines. Patience is essential too."

2 Figure out whether you want to work at a small or large practice

The advantages of working for a small practice, according to Sanjay, are that "you can gain all-round experience, as you'll be exposed to various kinds of work, from data handlings to making accounts to client relationships."

Large practices, such as the "Big Four", may be better for those who want to specialise in a particular field. "Working for a large practice will give you experience of dealing with well-known companies, but you may be associated with one kind of task," says Sanjay.

Samuel Harrison MAAT AATQB runs Watford-based SH Accounting Solutions. He says working for a smaller practice can provide more opportunities to enhance your communication skills. "At bigger firms, you'll be dealing more with numbers and less with the service. But clients at smaller practices prefer meeting their accountants face-to-face, which doesn't tend to happen at large firms," says Samuel.

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3 Consider apprenticeships and trainee schemes

“The best way to get into practice is via an apprenticeship or working as a trainee accountant,” says Sanjay. “This will open a doorway of opportunities.”

Manchester-based practice Beever and Struthers recruits school-leavers for its annual apprenticeship scheme. “It’s great,” says partner Andrew McLaren. “You don’t run up student debt, plus you’re getting a decent salary for an 18-year-old.”

Many larger practices also offer apprenticeships, such as KPMG’s 360° scheme, which sees young staffers work with clients in diverse sectors spanning everything from aerospace to healthcare.

4 Develop your digital skills

Of course, you don’t have to be a trainee or an apprentice to secure a practice job. Should a role be advertised, there are some skills you can harness to ensure you stay ahead of the pack. “The market is highly evolving and competitive, so those wanting to work at a practice should be fully aware of current digital trends,” says Sanjay.

5 Polish your communication and personal skills too

The days of number crunching

in a corner office are gone, Sanjay adds. “Interpersonal skills are very important when working in a practice, as you’ll be proactively dealing with clients and helping them resolve problems they face in their business.”

You should also try to make your personality shine during any job interview. Alongside other tests, candidates for new roles at Beever and Struthers are often made to sit in an hour-long interview with an HR professional. “If you can’t speak to them for an hour, it means you may struggle communicating with clients,” says Andrew. “So much of the recruitment is based around social skills and the ability to mingle.”

6 How to ace the job interview

“When going for an interview, make sure you’ve researched the company first,” says Samuel. “If you can’t be bothered to do that, how can you be expected to know about the small businesses that you’ll be working with? Also, brush up on the basics of law and legislation. There’s a lot of new compliance out there – many practices may give you a quiz.”

Sanjay adds that the main quality he looks for is determination and a willingness to learn and grow. “Just having a good qualification is not enough in today’s world,” he says. ²⁰

No work experience? No worries!

Want to get into a practice but your work experience amounts to nothing? Here, City CV’s Victoria McLean gives her tips on beefing up your profile...

SHOWCASE YOUR PASSION FOR ACCOUNTING

If your CV or LinkedIn profile is barren on the work experience front, then highlight your financial literacy by putting any accounting experience on your CV. If you’ve been treasurer of a university club, set up your own eBay business or helped a charity with its budgeting, it’s worth putting it on there.

IGNORE THE RULES OF CV STRUCTURES

Don’t feel your CV has to adhere to a generic Education/Professional Experience/Skills structure.

Try having a section entitled “Finance Acumen” or “Entrepreneurship” if possible.

NETWORK ON LINKEDIN

Once you’ve decided the practice you’d like to work at, try engaging with its staff on LinkedIn. If you flatter their posts by liking them, or sharing content, the more likely they are to engage with you. Don’t ask them for a job though. If you gently ask for advice, you’ll be surprised how many people will happily help you out.

