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How to succeed in your first accounting job

Tips for navigating the transition from student life to career demands.

By Dawn Wotapka

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The transition from studying accounting to practicing it can be an adventure: Instead of pulling all-nighters and wearing sweats, life shifts to sunrise starts and power suits.

There may no longer be homework and tests, but work in the professional realm is monitored and evaluated with even bigger stakes, and "A-level work becomes the norm," said Shabinaaz Mahdi, a Washington-based senior tax accountant at accounting and advisory firm Baker Tilly Virchow Krause.

But those challenges, along with those of studying for the CPA Exam and putting in extra-long days during busy season, come with a payoff, of course. Accounting is a rewarding career with plenty of growth opportunities. Accountants enjoy solid pay, ample advancement opportunities, and the chance to serve the broader good, so newbies have plenty of reason to hang in there.

Here are some tips for young accountants to ease the transition from backpack to briefcase:

Sharpen "soft skills": It's easy to focus only on the academics at school and assume that skills guiding personal and professional interaction will take care of themselves. Employers say many fresh graduates who have grown up in the tech era are less prepared for the human element of a new career. As a result, students who can hold a professional conversation, offer a strong handshake, and make eye contact gain an edge in hiring and promotions. For that reason, make it a priority to polish these skills, said Rina Henning, a recruiting manager with UHY LLP in Farmington Hills, Mich., part of accounting firm network UHY International. "Soft skills play a large part in our company," said Henning, who recruits between 60 and 75 students a year. "Gone are the days of 'I've got a 4.0 and I'm in.'"

For practice, visit campus career services for mock interviews and one-on-one feedback, she suggested. The skills you pick up will prove useful for years to come.

Keep learning: The degree doesn't mean you get to retire the thinking cap. Most firms have a lengthy onboarding program to teach the company's culture and procedures. "That's the stuff that isn't taught at the university level," Henning said.

Be prepared for a transition period as you meet new colleagues, learn new computer systems, and acclimate to a full-time, fully professional world. Take advantage of this early period and "embrace as much as you can and be a sponge the first year," she recommended.

Both Henning and Liz Niemczura, a UHY staff accountant also in Farmington Hills, recommended asking plenty of questions. "You are going to be learning so much in your first few years, and the more questions you ask, the more you will develop not only your technical knowledge base, but also your people skills," said Niemczura, who interned during the 2016 winter tax season and started full time last September.

Successfully navigate busy season: Young accountants face big challenges in their first busy season. "You will work weekends and you will be exhausted. Sometimes you may feel like there aren't enough hours in the day for work, a social life, and sleep," said Allison Towle, who joined accounting firm Mazars USA in New Jersey in 2015.

That's why many firms offer perks aimed at reducing stress, such as catering food or allowing employees to work some hours from home. Niemczura does little things such as taking a full-hour lunch break, getting up every hour or so for a quick walk break, and using a small water bottle that needs frequent refilling to remind her to stretch her legs. But hang in there: After busy season wanes, many accountants treat themselves with a well-earned vacation.

Use time wisely: It's easy to get distracted by snaps from your friends and that viral video trending on Facebook. You don't have to turn off your outside life at work, but you do need to keep the social activity to a minimum, particularly if your job involves hourly billing.

Mahdi said her employer recognizes that social media is a way to network and access market and industry information and news. Still, she suggested minimizing all distractions during work hours. "If you feel yourself being pulled into social media, set aside time to sign on either at lunch or during a scheduled break," she said.

Plan to study: In addition to adjusting to a real-world career that includes busy stretches when vacation isn't allowed, newbies have to set aside time to prepare for the CPA Exam. Remember that "you will have to make short-term sacrifices but for a long-term benefit," Mahdi said.

Niemczura said she mapped out a study calendar on her bedroom wall and worked to meet a daily goal. "Breaking the chapters and sections out into smaller parts for each day made it a lot more manageable for me, which made the whole exam feel less daunting," she recalled. Towle recommended getting licensed sooner,

rather than later. "Make a serious effort to buy your study materials and let your friends and family know that you are fully committed to this," she said. "The longer you wait, the harder it is to get back into the groove of constantly studying."

Practice self-care: With all this change, it is easy to put things like exercising and healthy eating on the back burner. "Make sure you stay active," Towle said. "Bring your own lunch instead of buying fast food. The little things can make a huge difference in the long run."

Dawn Wotapka is a freelance writer based in Atlanta. To comment on this story, contact [Chris Baysden](#), senior manager of newsletters at the AICPA.

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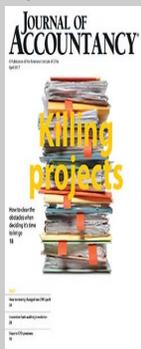
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