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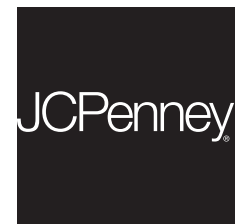
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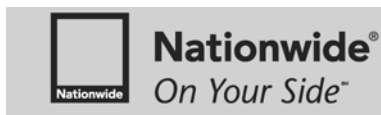
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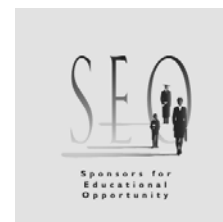


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Accounting

Why Accounting?

What exactly is accounting, and why do we need it? Accounting is a system by which economic information is identified, recorded, summarized and reported to be used by decision makers.

So what does that mean?

Put simply, accounting is the language of business. An accounting system essentially tracks all of the activities of an organization, showing when and where money has been spent and commitments have been made. This aids decision making by allowing managers to evaluate organizational performance, by indicating the financial implications of choosing one strategy over another and by highlighting current weaknesses and opportunities. It allows managers to take a step back, look at the organization, and assess how it is doing and determine where it should be going.

Accounting, however, is not the exclusive domain of Big Business. In all likelihood, you have been managing your own personal accounting system for years – it's called your checking account. Every time you record an entry in your check ledger, you are acting like an accountant. Your check ledger is an accounting log of all of your deposit and withdrawal activities, helping you identify your cash inflows and outflows and letting you know how much money you have left in the bank. It lets you know where your money went and helps you make decisions on how to plan your future purchases and expenses. If this log is not regularly balanced for accuracy, you would have an inaccurate picture of your cash position and might spend more than you have (a common situation, given the popularity of overdraft protection features offered by banks).

You get the picture. Now, imagine these functions performed on more complicated items and on a much larger scale. While you might have 500 checkbook transactions in a year, many organizations might have that many transactions every minute. This is what an accountant does. And, just as you would eventually be lost without a relatively accurate checkbook, organizations would not be able to make useful decisions without an accurate accounting system. Anyone who has pulled out his or her hair trying to balance their checkbook should have an appreciation for both the importance and challenges of accounting.

Why accounting?

So why would anyone choose a career in accounting as opposed to another business profession, like investment banking or management consulting? Isn't accounting boring and tedious?

As we discussed earlier, accounting has always had an image problem, stuck in the public consciousness as a profession populated by math geeks who love crunching numbers but little else. While this stereotype may have been accurate at one point in history, it no longer presents an accurate picture of what the career is like. While the basic mechanics of accounting can certainly become tedious, such functions are increasingly becoming automated, with accountants focusing more on analysis, interpretation and business strategy.

In fact, accounting has been rated one of the most desirable professions available. According to *The 2002 Jobs Rated Almanac*, "accountant" was the fifth best job in terms of low stress, high compensation, lots of autonomy and tremendous hiring demand. Furthermore, the National Association of Colleges and Employers' Winter 2002 Salary Survey ranked the accounting services industry first among the top five employers with job offers for graduating college students.

Accounting Uppers and Downers

Uppers

- **Collegial work environment.** Public accounting firms, particularly the Big Four firms (Deloitte & Touche, Ernst & Young, KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers), tend to hire large classes of newly graduated accountants. Being surrounded by so many people with similar interests and concerns makes acclimation to the firm and the job much more agreeable. It also provides fertile ground for networking opportunities. According to one public accountant, “I started with a class of almost 100 other college graduates, and we bonded quickly through all of the training and client work. While most of these people have since left the firm, I still keep in touch with most of them, which is great since they’ve all fanned out to dozens of interesting companies. I’ve already turned some of them into clients and am working on many others. The networking opportunity is tremendous.”
- **Applicability to many functions.** A strong knowledge of accounting is applicable across all management functions, including purchasing, manufacturing, wholesaling, retailing, marketing and finance. It provides a base from which to build broad knowledge about virtually all business functions and industries. As the collectors and interpreters of financial information, accountants develop comprehensive knowledge about what is occurring and close relationships with key decision makers, and are increasingly being called upon to offer strategic advice. Senior accountants or controllers are often selected as production or marketing executives because they have acquired in-depth general management skills.
- **Exposure to different companies.** Public accounting offers rapid exposure to a number of different clients and activities, accelerating the rate of attaining skills and experience. According to one Big Four audit senior who specializes in entertainment industry clients, “I’ve been with the firm for less than three years, but I’ve become intimately involved in work for large industry players like Sony, Viacom and Disney, as well as for a good number of smaller entertainment and media companies. Being able to learn about the business of entertainment from the industry’s benchmark companies has really sped up my professional development. Few professions would have offered me such a great learning opportunity.”
- **Better hours and less stress than investment banking and management consulting.** The hours and travel required by the accounting profession are much less stressful and more predictable than that found in investment banking and consulting. In public accounting, you generally know you’ll be very busy for a few months out of the year and then settle in to a manageable 40- to 45-hour workweek, whereas I-bankers and consultants are notorious for regularly pulling 60-80 hour weeks (at least) and hopping on planes at a moment’s notice. “As hard as I worked as an accountant, my life has truly been swallowed by my I-banking job,” says one former auditor who, after attaining an MBA, is now an investment banker. “I pretty much work six days a week, with at least part of my Sunday spent on some work item or another. I actually had a life when I was an auditor – not anymore.”
- **Great for women.** The profession has taken great strides to implement flexible work arrangements and other initiatives to provide lifestyle choices for women. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women now account for approximately 60 percent of the accounting profession, with the outlook for women accountants looking bright. According to a CFO survey by Robert Half International, 58 percent of CFOs believe that the number of women accountants in management-level positions (such as vice president or chief financial officer) will increase in the next five years. According to one partner who has worked for several large firms, “At the risk of sounding politically incorrect, my 17 years of experience have shown me that women tend to make better accountants than men. In my observation, men often tend to be focused on the big picture, while women are more acutely aware of intricate detail. Well, accounting demands a detail-oriented approach more than any other skill, so you do the math.”

Downers

- **Lower pay than investment banking and consulting.** The more manageable lifestyle has its tradeoff: lower pay. On average, starting base salaries in accounting are 15 to 20 percent lower than investment banking or consulting, not including the bonus incentives that can significantly increase a banker's or consultant's overall pay package. According to the same former auditor/current investment banker from above, "I do make a lot more money as an I-banker – I mean a LOT – which does make up somewhat for losing my personal life, but it doesn't feel that way all the time. Sometimes it seems that, if you divided my I-banking compensation by the number of hours I spend working, I would be making about minimum wage." Bonus incentives are much smaller in public accounting, if they exist at all. "You'll never become 'stinkin' rich' on an accountant's wage," adds one Big Four tax partner, "but I like to think that, since we are supposed to be conservative and intelligent in matters pertaining to money, we know best how to take care of our money and make it work for us. You will definitely lead a comfortable life."
- **Many bosses with different priorities.** Accountants, particularly public accountants, are usually assigned to multiple projects at any given time and must prioritize and, when needed, learn to say "no." This is particularly true in public accounting, where multiple, simultaneous projects for different clients are commonplace. According to one auditor, juggling projects "has honestly been the hardest part of my job. Forget the clients, they're relatively easy to deal with – it's the partners on those clients that get you. They all want you to focus on their projects first. On more than one occasion, a partner has screamed my head off, really got down and cursed, because of a perceived 'lack of focus' on my part. You just have to try to explain your situation, try to demonstrate that you have everything covered, and move on." However, this premium on time management is also present in investment banking and consulting.
- **Relatively conservative, conformist cultures.** Accountants are generally looking to see if reported numbers conform to one set of regulations or another (Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, the Internal Revenue Code, SEC regulations, etc.). This emphasis on regulations (in fact, one might say that the entire accounting industry exists because of regulations) translates into a generally risk-averse culture and ethos that emphasizes conformity.
- **Pressure to stay "chargeable."** This is one of the subtler, yet highly sensitive parts of being an accountant. Like attorneys, public accountants generally work under billable hour arrangements (they are paid by clients for each hour billed). This means that they must account for every single hour they work and accurately allocate them to each project they work on, whether client-related or otherwise. Being "chargeable" means billing a high percentage of your hours to work performed for paying clients as opposed to non-billable projects. This tracking of billable hours, while often tedious, is absolutely crucial to the profession – it is the basis for how public accounting firms determine revenue, expenses, profitability, efficiency, performance and a host of other metrics. With such vital items at stake, timesheets and chargeability often are the subject of much stress and consternation.

"Yeah, we can work 60 hours in a week," says one audit senior, "but not all of those hours are chargeable to a client. Some days, you can spend time on a proposal for new business, some time on developing a new product or service, and some time on performing general research on a specific issue. All of these activities are important to continued success, but they hurt you because none of them are chargeable to a specific client. In other words, the firm isn't getting paid for this work. While the firm values this non-chargeable work, it doesn't want you doing too much of it – it wants you out there making money for the firm. So when you find yourself doing this stuff, your chargeability goes down and your performance numbers suffer, which can hurt your reviews, your paycheck and ultimately your future at the firm. However, you can't err on the other side either – you bill too many hours to your clients and you run the risk of going over budget and having the client give you the third degree on why the job is taking you so long. It can be pretty stressful."

Public vs. Private Accounting

While there are many ways to classify accountants, the most common division is between public and private accountants. Public accountants mainly deal with financial accounting (the preparation of financial statements for external parties such as investors). Private accountants deal with both financial and management accounting.

Public accountants

Public accountants are paid a fee for services provided to individuals, businesses and governments. Public accounting firms vary greatly in size and the type of services provided. Most public accounting firms provide some combination of auditing, tax and management consulting services. Small firms mainly provide tax or bookkeeping services for smaller companies and organizations that do not have internal accounting departments. Larger firms usually provide these services to firms that have internal accounting departments. Because all public companies are required to have yearly audits, the large public accounting firms are extremely important for fulfilling this requirement.

The four largest accounting firms are known as the “Big Four,” and are among the most well-known organizations throughout the world. (Previously, it was the Big Eight, which became the Big Six and then the Big Five when PriceWaterhouse and Coopers & Lybrand merged to form PricewaterhouseCoopers. Because of the collapse of Arthur Andersen, we’re now down to the Big Four.) The Big Four includes:

- Deloitte & Touche
- Ernst & Young
- KPMG
- PricewaterhouseCoopers

Many students pursuing accounting careers aim to start their careers at one of the Big Four firms. These firms have offices throughout the United States, as well as in many other countries, and recruit at a majority of the top schools throughout the world.

In addition to the Big Four, there are thousands of other accounting firms ranging from small proprietorships to large international partnerships. The difference between these firms and the Big Four is size, often measured in terms of billings. The Big Four have billings in excess of \$1 billion a year. A large majority (97 percent) of companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange are clients of the Big Four.

Regional accounting firms represent clients that do most of their business within the U.S., although they may also have a few international clients. The largest regional firms can be thought of as somewhat smaller versions of the Big Four. And as the category name suggests, these practices tend to be stronger in certain regions. If you’re considering working for a regional public accounting firm, be sure to research the quality of the firm’s practice in your area. Vault publishes the *Vault Guide to the Top Accounting Firms*, which provides detailed insider information on the largest regional firms.

Local accounting firms operate in a small number of cities and tend to focus on small businesses and individuals. These organizations conduct more tax and tax planning engagements, and traditionally handle more of the bookkeeping responsibilities for their clients.

While most people start their careers at a public accounting firm, many gain valuable experience in public accounting and switch to the private sector after two years (or however long it takes them to get certified as a CPA). Accountants with public accounting experience are well positioned to take financial officer roles at corporations, government agencies or non-profits.

Private accountants

Private accountants work for businesses, the government or nonprofit agencies.

Corporations – Most corporations have an internal accounting group that prepares the financial information (both tax and audit) for the public accountants, tracks company performance for internal evaluation and works with management on issues related to acquisitions, international transactions and any other operational issues that arise in the running of the company. Within corporations, there are several roles that an accountant can take on:

- Internal auditors perform financial accounting tasks within an organization. Typically, these employees will perform audits of specific divisions or operational units of a company.
- Management accountants can work in several different areas of a corporation. On the finance side, accountants can work in the financial planning and analysis or treasurer's group, analyzing potential acquisitions and making funding decisions for the company. On the accounting side, there are opportunities within the accounting group to handle tax issues and to work with external auditors to prepare financial statements such as SEC filings. Additionally, on the accounting side, opportunities exist to work within specific divisions to track costs and analyze operational performance.

Government agencies – Government accountants can work at the federal, state or local level. Many government organizations have large accounting departments to analyze the performance and allocation of their funds. The Department of Defense (DOD), the General Accounting Office (GAO), the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) typically hire large numbers of accountants for services and evaluations within the organization. Accountants at the IRS typically review individual and corporate tax returns. The SEC hires experienced accountants to evaluate filings made by public companies. These accountants ensure that firms are complying with SEC regulations.

Nonprofit organizations – Accounting for nonprofits is very similar to for-profit accounting; they both follow Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). In addition to understanding GAAP, nonprofit accountants must also understand the FASB standards written specifically for these organizations as well as the tax regulations also specific to those organizations. (For example, nonprofit organizations are typically exempt from federal taxation.)

The accounting groups in these organizations are typically smaller than those in for-profit companies, so an employee may be responsible for more than one area of accounting (e.g., both financial statements and tax issues).

Public or private?

According to many college professors and career services counselors, most college students interested in accounting should try to start their careers in public accounting. This route carries a number of benefits, including higher salaries, more interesting and diverse work, exposure to many different industries and the ability to fulfill a requirement for certification.

One senior manager at a Big Four firm captures the general opinion of the majority of people we spoke with: "For someone just out of college, public accounting is really the only way to go," he says. "You gain experience and get up the learning curve much more quickly. A public accountant will perform three or four audits of entire companies in a year, whereas a private accountant could be stuck monitoring cash ledgers – one account – for a year. Even in the long term, there are benefits. You have more control over your career progression. In private, you'll often see highly productive and talented individuals mired in their jobs or limited to lateral career moves because they have to wait for the people above them to retire or otherwise leave the company. Public accounting is much more of a meritocracy – you'll advance as fast and as high as you want to."

However, public accounting life is not for everyone. Private accountants generally don't travel nearly as much as public accountants, and their work schedules are much more stable – they rarely have to pack a briefcase and go to a client at a moment's notice. Private accountants also do not have to deal with the chargeability issue (the pressure on public account-

ants to work on billable projects as much of the time as possible). Finally, they are not required to get their CPA and thus do not have to deal with the rigors of fulfilling the grueling certification requirements.

The CPA

Becoming a CPA is no easy task. It demands a higher education commitment than most other career paths. To qualify for certification, you must meet the requirements of the state or jurisdiction where you wish to practice. The state requirements are established by the state board of accountancy and vary from state to state. Because of these variations, first determine where you are planning to practice accounting and then review that state's certification requirements on the web site for the state's CPA society or board of accountancy.

Becoming a certified public accountant entails the successful completion of: (a) 150 credit hours of college-level education, which translates to five years of college and graduate level work; (b) getting passing grades on all four parts of the Uniform Certified Public Accountants Exam (the CPA exam); and (c) the requisite amount of accounting work experience as mandated by each state, often two years or so.

What you can do without becoming a CPA

You most certainly can perform accounting functions without being certified, and there are many successful people in the profession who have taken this route. Non-certified accountants are not required to fulfill the five-year requirement; they aren't even required to have a degree in accounting (although, obviously, it helps). A traditional four-year degree is all that is necessary to be a non-certified accountant. The actual functions of an accountant are not, as the saying goes, rocket science, and complicated mathematics is rarely needed; thus, advanced certification might not seem necessary. Internal auditors, management accountants and tax personnel may all practice their professions without the CPA or any other professional designation.

Furthermore, many accounting professionals (CPAs and otherwise) contend that the CPA exam is nothing more than a rite of passage, an intense exercise in memorization that adds little actual value to your technical development as an accountant. These people generally feel that all of the information you crammed into your brain disappears once the exam is over. Many of them even said that this "brain drain" should happen since much of this information will never be seen in your actual practice; if you ever do need it, you can quickly look it up.

What you can't do

However, not being certified has a few significant drawbacks. Foremost among these is that it can be career limiting – most public accounting firms will not promote an auditor above a certain level (senior associate; these levels are discussed later in this guide) without at least passing the exam.

There are a couple of important reasons for this. First, only a CPA may sign an audit opinion. This signature is crucial, as it signifies that the auditor believes that the financial statements reasonably represent the company's actual financial position, giving the users of these statements more confidence that they can rely on them to make their decisions. Thus, an auditor without a CPA can not perform one of the most important activities of the profession.

Furthermore, a failure to pursue certification is often interpreted by public accounting firms as a lack of commitment to the profession, and few firms are willing to invest resources in someone who might leave the profession altogether (especially when there are so many others out there who are willing to pursue certification).

Another downside of not having a CPA is that you would miss out on the credibility that the certification carries. As with other advanced professional certifications, the CPA tends to give the stamp of "expert" in the eyes of the public and thus more

perceived confidence in the accountant's abilities. Such credibility could mean the difference to a recruiter who's deciding between two otherwise comparable job candidates.

One final, ever-so-important downside of not having a CPA: you'll make less money. According to the staffing agency Robert Half International, the CPA can, on average, increase a candidate's base salary by 10 percent, with specialized fields (such as forensic accounting) commanding even higher salaries.

Now, this is not meant to scare you into pursuing the CPA, nor is it meant to suggest that you are a slacker if you don't pursue the CPA. You can still have a successful career in accounting without it. For example, public tax accountants generally do not sign off on audit opinions, and tax returns generally do not require the signature of a CPA. However, pursuing the CPA opens you up to many more opportunities and can only help a career in accounting. Thus, plans for certification should be seriously considered by anyone looking to break into the accounting field.

This section was excerpted from the *Vault Career Guide to Accounting* and the *Vault Guide to the Top Accounting Firms*. Get the inside scoop on accounting careers with Vault:

- **Vault Guides:** *Vault Career Guide to Accounting*, *Vault Guide to the Top Accounting Firms*
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