

From College Student to Trusted Advisor

Tools needed to get you from here to there...

Speaking a common language

Understanding an industry and an organization's position in it is critical knowledge for accounting professionals. Adding this broad perspective to your technical accounting knowledge will allow you to advise organizational leadership on critical decisions, and will enable you to become a valuable resource. Whether by focusing internally on a single organization or focusing on a range of client organizations through public practice, keen business acumen and knowledge of organizations are keys to effectively competing as an accounting professional.

Public accountants deliver professional services involving financial information by marketing their expertise. They compete with each other on the basis of their proficiency and relationships with client organizations. Clients expect the professionals they hire to understand their organization, and ensure their financial reporting accurately satisfies the regulatory requirements for their organizational structure. Further, they often look to their external accountant for advice on new developments, organizational changes, and new business ventures. Do you want a competitive advantage in the public accounting arena? Become a general business expert as well as a technical accounting specialist.

In industry, the accounting function of an organization is also relied upon to ensure the financial statements are fairly presented. But as an employee of an organization, accountants often have a broader range of business responsibilities as well. Accountants must be able to explain financial information in a way that enables their organization's leadership to make wise business decisions. They are relied upon to analyze financial information to develop, as well as evaluate, different business strategies. Do you want the opportunity to advise on financial matters within an organization? Add a deep understanding of the organization, its industry, its goals and its values to your core accounting knowledge.

While accounting rules may vary by industry or country, understanding complex business issues and the related accounting, coupled with comprehensive business acumen and organizational awareness, positions an accounting professional to be a necessary resource.

Using technology

Technology plays an integral part in organizations today. Organizations use technology to facilitate their activities and gain an understanding of results. Gone are the days of accounting functioning as an after the fact reporting of activities. Today's accounting systems are

embedded in enterprise-wide roles, a reporting the organization's activities and events in a real-time manner.

Think about a purchase at a retail store – when you buy a pair of shoes, accounting transactions from the cash register transaction flow up to the financial statements directly. Information is produced so that management can understand where and when you purchased the shoes, correlate the purchase of shoes with other items that you purchased, associate advertising campaigns that may have influenced your purchase and so forth. When management wants to understand detail about sales of particular products, they are able to analyze successive levels of more detailed transactions – from the financial statement all the way down to your purchase in a few clicks.

It would be impossible for organizations to fully understand their results of operations or make fact based decisions without robust, technology-based information systems. Using these systems enables Accounting to follow the results of operations, then summarize and report on activities in a manner that is useable by management, owners and other stakeholders of organizations.

Having a broad understanding of how technology is used in organizations to facilitate their operations is important. While you do not need to understand how to create an accounting system by writing line by line computer code, it is important to be comfortable with the concepts and design of information systems in order to accurately and dependably gather information. Ability to use analytic tools such as spreadsheets (for example, Microsoft Excel) and tools that assist with the preparation of communications (such as Microsoft's Word and PowerPoint) are critical. While certain aspects of the accounting profession require familiarity with specific accounting systems, databases and more powerful analytical tools, a general understanding of system design and proficiency with analytical and communication applications is the right place to start. This strong foundation will allow you to more easily navigate the ever-changing world of technology, and learn how to use it to your advantage as an accounting professional.

Communicating effectively

Accounting is more than just debits and credits. Mark Twain said that the importance of using the right word is the difference between *lightning* and *lightning bug*. Executing accounting, as a service, requires communication – whether it's a formal communication designed to clearly convey an idea or a less formal, verbal communication with a colleague or member of management. Effective communication skills which inform, advise and recommend actions are integral to success as an accountant.

Think about your first job – in order for you to understand what was expected of you, someone had to provide that information to you. Listening is as much a part of communication as talking – hearing, identifying the key information and understanding the meaning of the message is important – you had to process the information provided in order to effectively perform your job. Effectively communicating with individuals and groups in a positive, instructional manner, even when the subject matter may be technical or complicated, is what sets successful accountants out as professionals.

You will be expected to communicate with others beginning with your first day on the job. You may find yourself helping a client with their taxes, inquiring of an accounts payable clerk as the external auditor, or emailing your supervisor about the status of the project you just started. No matter what industry you find yourself in, and no matter what medium communication takes, you will have to communicate clearly and effectively with those around you. Communication skills are an important part of a lifelong career as an accountant; improving these skills is a wise investment in more ways than one.

Learning continuously

The accounting profession demands continued learning and development as a professional – the only constant in life is change, and adapting to it. While a new accountant acquires much technical knowledge through college studies, business, finance and accounting techniques are subject to change as businesses engage in new kinds of transactions and new regulations are implemented. Accountants may stay current and keep their skills sharp by attending workshops, seminars, conferences or webcasts. Others may choose to engage in self-study courses or take graduate accounting classes.

Maintaining an accounting certification, such as the Certified Public Accountant (CPA), requires continued learning. Continuing professional education (CPE) requirements vary, but generally involve at least 40 hours of study each year.

Continued learning is more than just maintaining your technical skills, but is often focused on the development of soft skills as well. Soft skills include any skills that are not technical in nature and are needed for long-term survival in the workplace. Soft skills include the abilities to conduct information-seeking interviews, communicate in written form, describe accounting and financial issues to non-accountants, write and present proposals to new clients, listen and interpret the needs of clients, and address human resource matters.

A successful accountant approaches the profession with an attitude of lifelong learning.

Demonstrating your skills

Your career is built on a strong foundation of skills that were acquired in your college undergraduate education with a bachelor's degree in accounting or related studies. Additionally, most states now require 150 college credit hours to take the CPA Examination. As a result, those that seek to become certified generally obtain an additional year's college education, often including a master's degree

Your technical skills are important, but they are table stakes. You demonstrate these skills via your grades, college degree and successful completion of relevant professional certifications, as well as through your specific experience. But employers want more than just technically savvy accountants. A recent survey of accounting employers found that intellectual and interpersonal skills were considered the most important skills for those starting out in the profession of accounting. Technical skills are not considered unimportant, but *how* you apply the technical skills to specific situations is what employers are looking for. Specifically, accounting employers are focused on the following skills used in applying your knowledge to organizations and technical matters (in descending order of importance):

- Capability for inquiry, logical thinking, deductive reasoning and critical analysis
- Verbal communication
- Ability to identify and solve unstructured problems
- Time management
- Conceptual thinking
- Knowledge of content, concepts, structure and meaning of financial reporting
- Interaction with Clients, superiors and/or subordinates
- Decision making
- Written communication

Focusing your education and experiences around these areas will provide you with an appropriate base for success in the profession of accounting.