

# Old School Skills

IT skills are fast becoming essential in accountancy though soft skills get trainees in the door, writes **Robert O'Brien**

**A**ccountancy is not traditionally a fast-moving sector, but the advance of digital has forced it into something of a gallop. Cloud technology has encouraged accountants and firms to embrace software hosted on remote servers, which has implications for data management and protection.

Blockchain technology and its open-access, distributed ledger system is also changing traditional roles for accountants and auditors, while digital automation is taking over some of the functions previously handled by accountants in their day-to-day jobs.

The knock-on effects of technological change are evident throughout the accountancy sector. Employers are expecting new skillsets from trainees, accountancy training institutions are redesigning their courses, and trainees themselves are under more pressure to hit the ground running once they graduate.

However, employers still place the emphasis on traditional skillsets among their graduate intake, in keeping with the core requirements for accountancy competency. Several qualification routes are available to prospective accountants, from bodies such as Accounting Technicians Ireland, Chartered Accountants Ireland, Certified Public Accountants Ireland and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.

The training bodies continually refresh their course modules to reflect changing skills requirements, while keeping the focus on the core skills.

**Aine Farrelly**, consulting partner and COO of RSM Ireland, notes that the professional courses focus on the technical accounting, tax and business knowledge required to be an accountant.

"There is no doubt that a greater focus on technology will be required as part of this learning in future years,"



**Karen Buckley, RBK**

says Farrelly. "We wouldn't often see a specific preference for the type of qualification, unless the person hiring has an affinity to a specific accounting body, either personally or through other members of the team.

"The portfolio of experience that a candidate brings to the role is as important as the qualification that they hold," Farrelly adds. "The ability to interact with and relate to clients and work colleagues will always be the differentiating factor between a good accountant and a valued and trusted business partner/advisor."

**A**t Cooney Carey, audit partner **Will Townsend** notes that the accountancy profession is changing, in that data processing and compliance is reducing as a percentage of fees, and is increasingly more of an information technology skill issue. "The growth is in the consultancy area," says Townsend. "The people who will do

best in this area require skills to evaluate, make decisions and communicate.

"Cooney Carey employ staff to suit the service we offer. While most are chartered accountants or graduates from the Institute of Taxation, we also have staff qualified in other associations, such as CPA Ireland."

Crowe Ireland also has members of CAI, ACCA, CIMA and CPA working in the firm. "As we are a chartered firm, most students tend to sit chartered exams, but not everyone does," explains **Natasha Whitney**, corporate services manager.

"The stereotypical belief that accountants are not personable is totally false," she adds. "A good accountant must have a strong personality, be able to talk to many different types of people and be able to explain often complex issues in an easy-to-understand way. A key strength for an accountant is the lasting relationship they build with their clients."

## ‘The new genre of trainee accountant is progressive, ambitious and entrepreneurial’

“Colleges provide a lot of technical expertise that can be built on during the training contract. However, students could benefit from more soft skills, such as interview and presentation skills. Colleges that offer internship placements as part of their course help students gain real-life experience of the working environment, which is very beneficial.”

Employers tend to look for ACA or ACCA qualified individuals when recruiting for finance positions, according to **Deirdre McGinley**, director at McInerney Saunders. “The individual’s personality and qualities are extremely important too, as the nature of finance positions means one must be able to work as part of a team, and work with other staff, customers and suppliers.

“The professional accountancy

qualification courses give the graduates the theory to use in the modern workplace, but it is through their relevant training experience that they gain practical experience and the know-how to apply the theory to practical situations. There should be more emphasis placed on the soft skills in college courses to assist in the transition from college to work life.”

McGinley also emphasises the growing importance of digital skills. “Technology is changing the future of accounting. Graduates need to embrace technology and ensure they keep up to date with technological advances.”

**Karen Buckley**, HR director in RBK, believes that trainee accountants must be able to relate well to people at every level. “In our experience, the most successful graduates are prepared to learn, have an appetite to work hard, can

interact with people and are receptive to feedback,” says Buckley. “The new genre of trainee accountant is progressive, ambitious and entrepreneurial. They have a strong aptitude for business and have ambition and confidence.”

**Joe O’Brien**, partner and head of talent in Walsh O’Brien Harnett, observes that the art of being able to communicate with peers and clients will always be important. “This is something that is being lost a little bit with graduates,” O’Brien adds.

“Most of our clients would hire chartered accountants but it generally comes down to who is the right fit, irrespective of what qualification they have. In hiring, it really is all about first impressions and how candidates present themselves.

“For any young person deciding which accountancy qualification to pursue, I would recommend that they choose the one that works for them in terms of exam timing, work/life balance and what they want to do long term – stay in practice or go into industry.”

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