GROW YOUR OWN IN PUBLIC

INCREASING NUMBERS OF PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS ARE REAPING THE BENEFITS OF TRAINING ACAs. SARAH PERRIN

Individuals have been able to train for the ACA qualification within the public sector for some years. The National Audit Office, for example, has offered ACA training since 1991 and now takes on around 75 trainees a year. 'Graduates still look at the ACA as a premium qualification,' says Andrew Baigent, director general financial audit at the NAO. Trainee ACAs develop a 'broad range of skills', he says, noting that the financial management capability they acquire is particularly valuable to the NAO and other public sector organisations.

Both qualified and trainee ACAs working in the public sector benefit from access to the ICAEW's networks and faculties, Baigent adds. 'In government, people often sit in lonely positions. They don't necessarily have the support mechanisms around them that people elsewhere may enjoy. So having the support of the ICAEW is helpful.'

The NAO is not alone in its provision of ACA training, nor even now unusual. HM Revenue & Customs also has experience of training aspiring ACAs, as does the Treasury, the NHS, the Wales Audit Office, various county councils and other government departments.

Michael Buckley, ICAEW head of business, commerce and public sector in the learning and professional development team, believes Dame Mary Keegan, former head of government accounting, played an important role in increasing the availability of ACA training in the public sector. 'She sought to have people in the position of finance director in government departments to be qualified accountants,' he says. 'They tend to be members of the ICAEW and they have up-skilled the finance function throughout the public sector.'

As the ACA qualification continues to evolve, the needs of public sector employers will be borne in mind. 'All stakeholders will be included in our consultation for 2012,' Buckley says. 'It's about determining exactly what our clients require.'

ALI AHMAD, DWP
EXTENDING TRAINING OPTIONS

The Department for Work and Pensions welcomed its second intake of ACA trainees to its financial management development scheme in September 2009. Until 2008, the department only supported CIPFA and CIMA accountancy training, despite the fact that 12% of the DWP's 400 accountants are ICAEW members – as are 23% of its most senior finance managers. The decision to offer the ACA training as well followed a review of all the CCAB qualifications against the DWP's business requirements, including the support provided by the institutes to the organisation and its trainees.

In 2008, six out of 18 trainees chose the ACA, and in 2009, four did so. What influenced their choice? 'The ACA has prestige in the marketplace,' explains Alison Lally, head of professional development for the finance and commercial community across the DWP. 'It has a strong reputation for technical knowledge and a strong brand.'

She believes that offering ACA training makes the DWP more attractive to potential recruits. 'Some people want to train with a specific accountancy institute, and will look at employers who offer that,' she says.

Ali Ahmad joined the DWP in September 2008. Already ACCA qualified and with considerable finance experience, Ahmad was keen to gain the ACA as well. 'The ACA training offered a balanced combination of academic and work experience, focusing on developing well-rounded professionals,' he says.

He believes his ACA training will benefit himself, the DWP and the public. 'The ACA qualification stresses the need to maintain high standards of ethical and professional conduct,' he says. 'It is also providing me with hands-on experience in handling business processes and practices, revenue/expenditure budget analyses and reviews, as well as performance management. I am gaining the required analytical skills and commercial awareness to ensure that I make quality decisions in a variety of roles.'

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NICK SHARMAN, HIGHWAYS AGENCY
INNOVATIVE LINKS WITH PWC

With an annual spend of £3.5bn and the task of maintaining England's £80bn strategic road network, the Highways Agency places great importance on the 160 members of its finance team. 'A few years ago the decision was taken to build our capability across finance,' says Nick Sharman, group financial controller. 'We now run an accountancy graduate trainee scheme. We started with three ACA trainees in September 2008, and recruited four to start in September 2009.'

An ICAEW member himself, Sharman believes the ACA qualification suits his organisation. 'The agency has a strong focus on commercial expertise and value for money,' he says. 'All our business involves contracting with the private sector. So understanding the marketplace and having commercial and project management skills is vital. The ACA provides those qualities and skills.'

The accountancy graduate training scheme is proving attractive. Graduate trainee Will Barnes says: 'Having spent time on work placement at the NHS while at university, I was quite keen to remain in the public sector as opposed to working in practice. The Highways Agency graduate scheme appealed as it offered the ACA qualification, various training opportunities and high levels of support and guidance.'

To enhance its graduates' training experience, the Highways Agency is building innovative links with PricewaterhouseCoopers in Birmingham. 'Our trainees go on PwC students' courses,' Sharman says. 'They sit the same modules at the same time. That's good for our trainees because they have a large peer group to share experiences with.' Agency trainees may also be able to gain some experience of working life in PwC, and vice versa.

PwC partner Richard Bacon sees benefits for his firm: 'Our graduate trainees will be able to understand what it's like working in the public sector. That will benefit us in terms of understanding how we can help our public sector clients.'

FERN STONER, NATIONAL THEATRE
ACA TRAINING FOR A BROAD FOCUS

The National Theatre on London's South Bank, which has turnover of around £55m – including £18.7m from the Arts Council in 2008/09 – employed its first ACA trainee in April 2008. She filled a new role, with a range of responsibilities covering financial and management accountancy. 'We have other part-qualifieds studying for CIMA and the ACCA,' says Fern Stoner, head of finance in the 17-strong team. 'However, she was keen to study for the ACA and it was the right qualification for the type of work we were asking her to perform. The ACA is quite a broad qualification and the role had quite a broad focus, so they seemed to marry well.'

Having an ACA trainee in the team has benefited the organisation, Stoner believes. 'She was able to get involved in projects that I might not have been able to do otherwise,' she explains. 'For example, she revised our accounting policy for capitalisation, developed some of our capital reporting and performed ticket price modelling for us. She really owned these projects and that's been great to see. That comes with the confidence you gain from your studies and wider professional development.'

Now part-qualified, the ACA trainee recently moved on to a new role in another organisation. So would Stoner consider employing another ACA trainee in future? 'Yes, if I thought we had the right role that would allow the right level of development,' she says. 'It depends whether the organisation can offer the appropriate work experience and challenges.'

The experience has been 'positive', Stoner adds. 'The institute has been great. I finished my ACA qualification 10 years ago and the syllabus has changed since then. But there is helpful online material and I always felt comfortable picking up the phone to the ICAEW if I had a specific query.'

If you are an employer in the public or private sector, the ICAEW offers a package of support to help you grow your own talent. Find out more at www.icaew.com/employers or contact Michael Buckley, head of business, commerce and public sector on +44 (0)20 7920 8544, or email michael.buckley@icaew.com