



# HIGHWAYS AGENCY PARTNERSHIP APPROACH



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**Nick Sharman,**  
group financial controller

- 140-strong finance team looking after £3bn annual spend
- ACA training offered since 2008
- The ACA fits well for organisations positioned on the border between the public and private sectors
- ACA provides marketplace understanding and commercial and project management skills
- ACA training, and reputation of the qualification attracts high-calibre students to join Highways Agency
- Six-month placements to incentivise trainees and provide wide experience across business units
- Links with PwC students enables both sides to share experiences, gain understanding and exposure to each others' organisations

## EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

### ACA TRAINING

With an annual spend of around £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. **Nick Sharman**, group financial controller confirms that offering ACA training is now an important element in the development of team members.

### THE ACA SUITS OUR BUSINESS

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. 'Understanding the marketplace and having commercial and project management skills is vital. The ACA provides those qualities and skills. In an organisation such as ours, positioned on the border between the public and private sectors, the ACA fits very well.'

### TRAINING EXPERIENCE

Once on board, the ACA graduate trainees are encouraged to experience a variety of finance roles. 'We move people round the Highways Agency on six month placements,' Sharman says. 'We have developed a structure to incentivise our trainees, so that as they pass their exams they are rewarded through promotions around the business. We can offer quite wide experience, because of the many different areas within the Agency, not only within financial accounting and reporting, but also in asset management, systems-based areas and big private finance initiative transactions.'

### INNOVATIVE APPROACH

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 explains. '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, who learn through a mix of classroom and home-based study, may also be able to gain some experience of working life in PwC, and vice versa. 'We can see the advantages of our trainees spending time in PwC, perhaps working with an audit team,' Sharman says. 'This could help them to gain wider commercial experience, which they can then bring back and apply within our organisation.'

## MUTUAL BENEFITS

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. It is useful for our trainees to be able to talk to public sector peers about their experiences.'

'As part of the programme, we are looking into the possibility of Highways Agency ACA students spending some time with us, possibly participating in business games, to help them understand how we work and the range of activities that qualified ACAs get involved in. Another idea is to second people the other way, with some of our qualified people perhaps leading small teams on projects in the Highways Agency. Such activities help us to maintain a good working relationship with an important public sector organisation.'

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### THE ACA APPEALS

Graduate trainee **Will Barnes** joined the Highways Agency's accountancy graduate trainee scheme in September 2008, having gained a 1st in Accounting and Finance at the University of Wolverhampton. Why was he attracted to the Highways Agency? 'Having spent time on work placement at the NHS while at university, I was keen to remain in the public sector as opposed to working in practice,' he explains. 'The Highways Agency graduate scheme appealed as it offered the ACA qualification, various training opportunities and high levels of support and guidance.'

Barnes believes the ACA qualification will support his career development. 'As I progress through the training scheme and the studying I will gain increased responsibility,' he says. 'Such a prestigious and highly regarded qualification is likely to open many doors going forward.'