



What bosses want

We asked 20 partners and business leaders the million dollar question: What do bosses want from young accountants? And, what can ACA students (or anyone interested in a career in business or finance) do to stand out or to shine in the workplace? And, you might be surprised by what they said...



1. Alik Whitworth

Former Finance Director
Yahoo (Switzerland)

What do bosses want from young accountants? A very important cocktail of hard and soft qualities is required; solid financial acumen, communication skills, professionalism, reliability, time management skills, multi-tasking abilities, quick grasp of issues and resolutions, positivity and a can-do attitude. But these are just the staples. When I transitioned into the industry I was surprised to discover that what allowed me to progress

and be promoted was less my pure technical and functional skills, but rather my analytical capacity, my ability to work with diverse cultures and personalities, my assertiveness as a subject matter expert and my listening skills I have acquired while auditing different clients. Over the years of hiring trainees, I have also learned to appreciate people who are eager to understand the business, who are detail-orientated but efficient and have a good understanding of the tricky balance of time versus quantity. Two other factors that as a boss I really value from my employees include:

Those who ask questions

New recruits often hesitate to ask questions when a piece of work is assigned for fear of being judged. But there is a magic window that new employees have in their first few months where asking the right questions is paramount to being properly integrated and should be encouraged.

Those who challenge the system

Never use a methodology or solution just because 'that is how it has been done before' without understanding it and questioning it. How can it be done better, faster, different is a question everyone should keep asking. I strongly believe that we should always push to progress.

2. Emily Tate

Chief Financial Officer
Office Shoes (UK)



Being bright and numerate really helps, but attitude is what makes people stand out. I value people with drive and energy; people who ask questions and find better ways of doing things. A supplier once called up the finance department of one of the businesses I worked in to ask whether we had received an invoice. One of my team, who was quite junior at the time, thought that as a result of the conversation she had with the supplier, we weren't getting a good deal on price for the service they were providing. So she negotiated a better one there and then. It wasn't her area of responsibility but her proactive approach saved the business quite a lot of money.

3. Daniel Garcia

Managing Partner
Alder Shine (UK)

We're about to promote a graduate we recruited in 2009 to partner. What impressed me when I first met him was his clarity and focus. I could see the person he would become when he qualified. He was mature, personable, assured and sincere. Plus he supported Arsenal football club – perfect!

4. Rachael Cunningham

Finance Director
DVLA (UK)



What I look for most is creativity. I want people in my team who can think and problem-solve creatively. Other essential qualities include emotional intelligence, because the days when accountants could afford to be 'bean-counters' are long gone. Our business now is just like any other and we need personable, vibrant people to drive it forward. One important piece of advice I'd like to offer is stop if you lose your train of thought. Just stop, apologise, compose yourself. That's so much better than gabbling one.

5. Maggie Stilwell

Partner and Head of Talent
EY (UK)

They need to demonstrate emotional intelligence (or EQ) as well as IQ, to be able to connect with and better serve the businesses we work with.

6. Rocel Madrid Magtibay

Human Resources and Administration Manager
Helmi Talib and Co (Singapore)

We encourage our employees to challenge authority where appropriate. Though only do this if you can pull it off without looking bolshie.

7. Melissa Christopher

Partner, Tax Advisory and Global Expansion
Fitzgerald and Law (UK)

We want to see that you are willing to learn and are a well-rounded person, with interests and a life outside work. Ultimately, accountancy is a people business.

8. Bhavish Naeck

Head of Finance
Strategic Business Unit
Mauritius Commercial Bank
(Mauritius)



Our ideal recruits are assured and want to stretch themselves. They should be their best possible selves and not just try to be something they think we want.

9. Liz Rylatt

Executive Director for Finance
Operations and Members
ICAEW (UK)

As a given, I want competent employees with the skills to master the tasks they are recruited to do. Additionally, I like to see that they respect their colleagues and the values of the organisation. I like my people to have energy, flexibility and good humour too. The world of work is constantly changing with new technology, which gives us time to think laterally about problems or opportunities. I want my employees to be curious. Challenge the way we do things. Breathe life into business. Above all, I want my team to work towards achieving goals that meet key performance indicators of the organisation.

10. Gerard Zaid Rahman

Chief Executive Officer
BDO (UAE)

I look for authenticity, for self-belief and for people who can relate to others easily. Technical skills we can teach, but that ability to connect with clients is not easy to develop in those who don't have it. My advice is to be yourself, because you'll fail miserably if you try to be someone else.

11. Mukhtar M Hasan

Chairman
Al Barij International (Oman)



What do bosses want? Young employees with character and attitude. Positive personalities with a can-do mentality will probably get through the first stages, but beyond that, we want people who have the skills to help our organisation grow. We need clear-thinking people with a hunger for learning who are prepared to work hard and who persevere in the face of tough challenges.

12. Joe Scaife

Partner
Bishop Fleming (UK)



We don't have a prescriptive type – instead we want a mix of personalities: extroverts, introverts, some who are focused technical thinkers and others who are more 'blue sky' thinkers. I like people who are enthusiastic and passionate; you can't be too keen but you can be over confident.

13. Evgenios Evgeniou

Chief Executive Officer and Senior Partner
PwC (Cyprus)

At PwC we look for five specific attributes that make up what we call the 'PwC Professional'. These are sound leadership skills, relationship skills, global acumen, business acumen and technical expertise. Those are our core requirements but beyond those we also want people who have a strong career drive, who are willing to work flexibly in teams and are committed to continuous learning and development. Above all we seek people of integrity and professionalism.

14. Jon Talbot

Partner, Assurance and Business Services
Smith & Williamson (UK)

How ACA students communicate, both verbally and with their body language, is key. And that's what I hone in on. If they can communicate well with me, and their body language is relaxed, then they'll communicate well with our clients too.

15. Amanda Hall

Partner
Quercus Corporate Finance (UK)



Accountants often work in small teams, so we like ACA students who are team players; people who are ambitious but not too self-important to roll their sleeves up and get stuck in. Ultimately, in order to succeed, students need to be self-starters.

16. Mark Sherfield

Partner and Chief Operating Officer
BDO (UK)

Our business is diverse, our clients are diverse and we want staff who are diverse. We don't want to see ACA students trying to mould themselves into what they think is a 'typical' BDO type, because that doesn't exist. We want people who don't check-in their personalities when they come to work.

17. Paul Dillon-Robinson

Director of Internal Audit
House of Commons (UK)

The first meeting is important so, when it comes to interviews and starting out, don't underestimate the small things: a firm, but vice-like handshake, eye contact and a smile. Other than that, I look for people who are interested (ie, they've gone beyond the first page of our website and have researched our organisation properly); interesting (they can talk about their previous employment, highlighting what they've learnt); and of interest (they have a life outside work). To those starting out, I would say I don't mind if you make a mistake and you learn from it. But I do mind if you make the same mistake again.

18. Austin Rudman

Partner and
Head of Financial Services
KPMG (UAE and Oman)



What do I want from my employees? People who can work well in a dynamic and culturally diverse team. People who are good communicators, flexible, adaptable to changing circumstances and have a real passion for continuous learning. Most of all, people who can engage and collaborate well with their teams and with customers, who enjoy their work and have a great sense of humour.

19. John McAree

Chief Finance Excellence Officer
Gamma Civic (Mauritius)

I look for demonstrable independence and an ability to think on your feet. We need quick-minded people who have ideas and are confident to voice them. Young employees can help our business change for the better, so we want them to be proactive and to question processes they don't understand.

20. Melanie Richards

Vice Chairman
KPMG (UK)



The stereotypical view of businesses wanting to employ students who silently soak up information couldn't be further from the truth. Being able to listen is important, but organisations need fresh perspectives, which often come from new staff. You don't have to shout or be arrogant – just have the confidence to bring your whole self to work and find the balance between learning and contributing.

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Chartered Accountants' Hall Moorgate Place London EC2R 6EA UK

T +44 (0)1908 248 250

E careers@icaew.com

icaew.com/careers

 [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com) – find ICAEW

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