

Careers in small and medium sized accountancy practices (SMPs)

The opportunity for small and medium sized practices to grow in today's business environment is unprecedented. Digital transformation, in particular, is truly enabling smaller accountancy firms to reimagine the services they offer, but successful change is critically dependent on attracting, developing and retaining the right people.



WHY IS THIS REPORT DIFFERENT?

1. It focuses on practical aspects of careers specifically in SMPs – underlining both challenges and opportunities relevant for this field.
2. It is entirely based on real-life case studies and the testimonials of leading SMP experts.
3. It has global reach and covers case studies from 20 countries around the world.
4. It formulates a set of strong messages about how SMPs can attract talent and position themselves in the broader accountancy field.
5. It suggests top tips for both SMP employers and employees.

'Accountancy' transformed?

Ensuring the pipeline of talent to small and medium-sized accountancy practices (SMPs) is vital for the future success of the SMP sector, which could drive the progress and transformation of the accountancy industry as a whole. Adoption of digital accounting tools, changing client expectations and business models are deeply transforming all aspects of SMPs. This impacts on the skills and attitudes required to respond successfully to the changes and shape careers paths within SMPs. It also requires reviewing approaches to talent management. Lessons learnt from the leading practitioners, who shared their insights with ACCA and Chartered Accountants ANZ in developing this report, are key to understanding those changes.

Skills and attitudes fit for SMPs

SMP leaders are reconfirming the importance of attitudes and skills set out in ACCA's seven professional quotients (ACCA 2016a) and Chartered Accountants ANZ Capability model (Chartered Accountants ANZ 2020). The importance of adaptability and readiness to engage in continuous learning, openness to sharing and readiness to take responsibility during early career stages were recurrently underlined as key for a successful career in SMPs. Shared values are becoming increasingly important for both employers and employees working for small practices.

Building the recruitment brand

The recruitment brand is as important for SMPs as the client brand: key arguments for attracting talent to SMPs need to be clearly communicated. This is important for SMPs that do not have dedicated recruitment resources, where interviewing and screening candidates is a major drain on time. SMPs have a compelling story to attract talent, and practice leaders are actively using social media both to convey their message to potential candidates and to engage them in a dialogue. We suggest 10 clearly formulated key areas for talent attraction that can be used by practice leaders building their recruitment brand.

Attraction strategies

The recruitment techniques used by SMPs are evolving. Some SMPs use psychometric testing or profiling, particularly when looking at the balance of skills they want to bring into their teams; others ask their candidates to submit videos about themselves instead of writing covering letters and CVs. Those innovative practices have proved their value during the COVID-19 pandemic, when face-to-face interviews were impossible.

Talent development and retention

Staff retention can be a critical issue for smaller practices. Progression is often said to be key to retention, with the opportunity to learn and develop new skills. It is important to look at development and retention together. The majority of SMPs do not restrict their employees to in-house development programmes, but instead support their initiatives for self-curated training and provide financing for external training opportunities. The use of mentoring, inter-generational cooperation, working in pod systems, networking, and involvement of employees in community work are just some of the approaches used by SMPs to develop staff. Building a continuous learning culture that can engage and support the workforce to adapt and transform in line with business needs is of vital importance for SMPs.

The importance of purpose

It is more important than ever for SMPs to demonstrate their wider contribution to society, and employees increasingly look for careers that are purposeful and for jobs that have 'meaning'. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this has become even more important. SMPs provide opportunities for employees to shape the success of businesses and have the satisfying experience of seeing the result of their efforts, in a similar way to those engaged in artisanal work, that often is a missing component in the corporate sector. Purpose, and not just pursuit of profit, is fundamental for all organisations and SMPs are no exception. Transparency is a prominent issue and it works both ways: both SMP employers and employees need to be open about their own plans and ambitions.

Careers reimaged

Career progression in SMPs is as much about personal and professional development and growth as it is about job titles and pay scales. Larger SMPs have more opportunities to offer a variety of career paths, potentially offering the ability to switch between departments and specialisms. But employees in smaller practices have a natural progression too as the complexity and sophistication of their work grows. Career pathways are less anchored to traditional vertical models and pyramid-shaped organisations. This requires SMP leaders to reconsider how they support careers and design 'jobs' for their employees.

Lessons learnt from COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the majority of SMPs, particularly those with a strong digital core, are ready to adapt rapidly to the changing world and could drive the transformation of the sector as a whole, thanks to their agility. Their pre-existing remote working culture and adaptability have facilitated the transition of SMPs to the 100% virtual environment that has been essential for most during the lockdown. A number of SMPs have decided to keep working 100% remotely. This will require a review of their approach to talent management, including remote on-boarding and mentoring.

FIGURE 1: 10 ways of rethinking the employee proposition

