



Skills accountants need—and supporting students in attaining them

To achieve personal success, accountants—particularly CPAs—must possess a wide array of skills and attributes that go above and beyond technical know-how and an interest in working with numbers. As accountants climb the corporate ladder, more and more of these qualities and competencies become central to the daily tasks they're responsible for. That's why it's so important for students to be aware of these less-obvious accounting career requirements.

Accountants and CPAs should be:

- **Highly ethical**—It's incredibly important that accountants' behavior and conduct is guided by socially accepted morals, standards and values since they are trusted with managing others' money.
- **Adaptable**—Requirements can vary from job to job—or even day to day within a single position—so accountants should be flexible and able to adjust to different conditions, situations, clients and tasks.
- **Professional**—As part of a highly trained and respected profession, accountants are expected to possess the aptitude and display the skills and competencies that align with their role.
- **Organized**—Having a structure that guides and determines how tasks and activities are coordinated or completed is key to managing accounts, especially so others can follow and understand the work.

- **Analytical**—Dealing with numbers and understanding their greater context demands the use of or relation to systematic, methodical, diagnostic or otherwise logistical reasoning.
- **Detail oriented**—Particularly when dealing with numbers, giving the appropriate amount of attention to individual parts and intricate minutiae is key in avoiding critical errors.
- **Strategic**—Identifying and carefully planning calculated long-term or overall aims along with a detailed proposal is key to reaching financial goals, whether it be for a business or an individual.
- **Curious/Inquisitive**—Accountants with a natural desire to know and learn have a better understanding of clients' unique business needs and how to best meet them.
- **Tech savvy**—Practical knowledge of multiple programs and software is crucial for accountants to make sound judgements about the use and implementation of technology.
- **Self-motivated**—Many accountants have autonomy in their jobs, which makes it important for them to be able to operate with minimal supervision.

Skills accountants and CPAs rely on:

- **Communication**—Successfully and adeptly conveying information or sharing ideas with others is tantamount as accountants work internally with other departments as well as with clients.
- **Creative problem solving**—This skill aids in finding unexpected, unique or out-of-the-box solutions to address challenging or complex client needs and uncover more financial opportunities.
- **Relationship building**—Because accountants work either directly or indirectly with coworkers and clients, the ability to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships is critical to long-term success.
- **Leadership**—Whether within one's own team, department or organization, accountants are responsible for providing guidance and direction to various groups of people.
- **Critical thinking**—Accountants must have the ability to form judgement based on objective evaluation and analysis, particularly in developing financial plans and making course-correcting suggestions.
- **Project management**—Being able to juggle multiple facets of a single job or a number of projects requires a system of organizational flow and the ability to keep up with deadlines to achieve goals.
- **Good judgement**—Wisely, objectively and authoritatively being able to form an opinion and make decisions based on the details and circumstances presented is an important part of accounting practice.
- **Big-picture thinking**—This ability is key when it comes to generating big ideas, initiating significant changes, leading large projects and finding out-of-the box solutions to internal and client problems.
- **Collaboration**—Accountants should work well with others (including fellow accountants, other departments or organizations) to create, complete or produce reports, strategies, recommendations, etc.

- **Decision making**—Once information is collected and analyzed, being able to definitively provide a decision based on all known factors is vital to carrying out many accounting functions and advisory roles.

Ideas for developing these skills and attributes:

- **Always keep them in mind**—Students are more likely to reach their goals if they're clearly defined and referenced. Share these lists with your students, then work with them to identify the skills and attributes they'd like to develop. Once they have a solid idea of how these competencies look in practice, they'll be more likely to recognize and seize opportunities that present themselves in the real world.
- **Try role-playing activities**—Role-playing can be a powerful tool for developing new skills. Prepare realistic roles and scenarios ahead of time or have students throw out improv-style suggestions during class. Students will then have to use their knowledge, creativity and judgement to respond to potential real-life scenarios on the spot.
- **Assign books outside of class**—There are a number of books that cover just about every one of these skills and competencies. Assess each student's strengths and growth opportunities, then guide them toward the subject areas they'll benefit from the most.
- **Encourage work experience**—Summer jobs and internships are wonderful ways to strengthen necessary attributes and skills such as collaboration, adaptability, communication skills, organization and so much more. Remind students that opportunity is everywhere—even a job as a movie theater attendant or drug store associate will help them develop critical skills that will aid them throughout their lives.
- **Find mentors or role models for your class**—Role models and mentors aren't always attained through a one-on-one proposition. Reach out to your state CPA society to find local accountants or CPAs with varying experiences who are willing to talk to your class about their responsibilities and all of the skills they use on a day-to-day basis.
- **Take projects a step deeper**—Self-analysis will help students recognize and internalize their own strengths and opportunities while peer assessments can provide a valuable glimpse into their potential blind spots. When assigning activities and group assignments, include these post-project analyses as part of the ask.
- **Use Start Here, Go Places. activities** —Throughout the spring 2019 semester, we'll be introducing monthly activities designed around specific skill and attribute pairings that future accountants need to succeed. Our first one, [Shady business: What would you do?](#) focuses on ethics and big-picture thinking.

While we hope your most talented students plan to use these competencies to become the next generation of accountants, acquiring these skills and attributes should serve them well in any professional field. Understanding this will help your students see the advantages of sharpening these skills and qualities—no matter what they aspire to be.

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