

## Seven Reasons To Consider Working At a Small CPA Firm

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Let me start by admitting that if you're an accountant in training, you should definitely consider working for a large firm. Two or three (or more) years working for a large international or national firm give your resume an extra burnish. You will probably receive a higher salary and more training. Plus, your stint at a large firm can be another personal pedigree equivalent to a degree from a well-known top-tier university.

In spite of the big advantages that the big firms offer, however, let me suggest that you should also consider working at a small local firm. And I count at least seven, super-compelling reasons.

### Reason #1: Close to Home Work Location

Many small firms locate in suburban areas. Which means that rather than commuting into some central business district during rush hour, you may only be traveling a few miles in light traffic to get a small firm office.

If you like the hustle and bustle of the city, sure, you may want an urban practice location. And maybe you've considered the hours you'll spend trapped in traffic or riding the bus and the time isn't significant. For many of us, however, the time and money cost of a long commute represents a big liability.

### Reason #2: Less Overtime

The Texas Society of Certified Public Accountants annually publishes a survey that tallies a bunch of interesting statistics on accounting firms. One of the things that survey shows is people work more overtime at the larger firms. (By the way, be sure to look at this survey if you can get a copy from a professor or at the library. The survey provides tons of useful information.)

But back to the subject of overtime. Don't fool yourself. Working sixty hours a week through tax or audit season burns you out. Do you really want to sign up for that grind?

Tangential aside: At small firms, you may work a bit of overtime during tax season, but you'll also often find that during the off-season, the workload lightens considerably. Often, people may not even work a full, forty-hour week.

### Reason #3: Minimal Business Travel or No Business Travel

Small firms almost always serve local business clients which means you probably won't have much or any business travel. And you certainly shouldn't find yourself assigned to some other out-of-state location for weeks or months.

No kidding: I left Arthur Andersen twenty-five years ago when the office managing partner told me that I was being reassigned from Seattle to Chicago for a two-year-long firm project. It sure didn't seem like that was a good choice for my marriage?

Nothing quite saps the fun of work if after spending the week working long hours, you spend the weekend in airport security lines, on overcrowded flights, and doing your laundry.

### Reason #4: More Family Friendly Environment

OK, reason #4 is sort of a combination of reasons #1, #2 and #3, but think about the sort of firm where the partners have said, "Hey, we want to work close to home? don't want to work a bunch of overtime? and sure as heck don't want to travel a bunch?"

Are you really surprised that such a small firm environment is more family friendly? If in all the obvious, big ways the firm has constructed a family friendly work environment you can be pretty certain that the firm will also be family friendly in a bunch of small ways, too.

A small firm will more easily allow you to pick up a sick kid from school or schedule time off to coach little league. I guarantee it.

#### Reason #5: More Client Contact

Large firms operate with a leveraged structure, which typically means that staff accountants and senior accountants work for managers, managers work for partners, and then partners hobnob and schmooze and sell to clients.

The good part of leverage? Leverage makes it possible to serve large clients and work on large projects. And that's cool.

The bad part of leverage? The structure also means that most of the professionals in firm have little or no client contact. In fact, in many large firms, accountants may have to wait years before they actually sit down with a client. And that's tragic. Client contact makes the work more fun. And client contact provides context for the work.

In comparison, in a small firm, an accountant may have client contact as soon as he or she acquires professional competency. If you're mature and technically competent, in fact, a small firm setting may mean that you have client contact a few days or weeks after starting work. Seriously.

#### Reason #6: Services Provided to Decision-makers

Another subtle yet significant difference between a small firm and a large firm concerns who the CPA works with. In a small firm serving small clients, the CPA very likely works directly for and with the owner. In a large firm serving large clients, the CPA very likely works with mid-level managers.

That's also too bad. The entrepreneurial owner of, say, a \$2M, \$5M or \$20M business will almost surely be a very intriguing person.

Not to pick on accountants, but let's face it. That entrepreneur will probably be way more entertaining than, well, the manager of the accounts payable department or the divisional controller of some huge distribution company.

Close contact with the decision maker will also mean that you're often working on strategic and important tactical problems and opportunities. That's not going to be true if you're working with, as I say, an accounting manager several layers deep in the organizational chart. Sorry.

#### Reason #7: Realistic Chance of Partnership

And one final reason to consider a small firm: A small firm should provide a more realistic opportunity for sharing in the firm's ownership. In fact, if you've got good technical skills and good people skills, you are a shoo-in. Absolutely.

Let's face it: Large firms, by design, rely on pyramidal staffing. The firm can't promote every qualified candidate to the next level of the organization. Each partner keeps three or five or ten other people busy and billable.

In comparison, a small firm using a flat organizational structure could, theoretically, promote everyone to partner. A partner only needs to keep him or herself busy.

What's more, inevitably, a small accounting firm's owners will want to sell out at retirement. And that means that the firm's staff should automatically have an opportunity to buy into or acquire the practice.

#### **Short note about the author**

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