

ACCOUNTING

BEYOND THE NUMBERS



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PODCAST EPISODE #3: STARTING AN ACCOUNTING CAREER INTERVIEW WITH SEAN SMITH, CPA TRANSCRIPT

Kae Wagner – I'm with Sean Smith today and he's with Ross Buehler Falk, otherwise known as RBF, a CPA firm and also a business advisory firm. Glad to have you on the line today, Sean. Good to talk to you.

Sean Smith – Thank you for having me.

Kae Wagner – You bet. So give us a little background. Tell us about your education. And what we're really looking at today to hear from you is, as someone who is relatively new in accounting, when you look back, in terms of when you looked at accounting as a career, what were your thoughts then and when did you first know that you liked numbers; that you actually wanted to do this?

Sean Smith – Well I first knew that I liked numbers when they started showing up on my paychecks. Actually my undergrad education was in Criminal Justice. I graduated from York College of Pennsylvania in 2006, but I did take one intro accounting course and actually enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I would. Appealing thing about accounting and bookkeeping is that the numbers, when you do everything right, they balance and it's like solving a puzzle. And I remembered that years down the road when I was already in the workforce and looking for a career change. I decided on accounting because, again, I enjoyed what I had already learned of it and I knew that once you have a CPA license you're instantly marketable anywhere in the nation in any industry, whether it's public or private. And that's kind of what made up my mind for me.

So I decided to study, again I was already in the workforce, so I studied with an online master's program, got my master's in accounting and then from there went and passed all the sections of the CPA exam because that just makes you a lot more marketable when you're going for interviews.

Kae Wagner – So that sounds like a good start to your journey actually. A little bit of a switch from criminal justice, but a good path to take. And so you got your master's and then you passed and did all your CPA work. When you started looking at the industry, at the accounting industry, what did you encounter in that process?

Sean Smith – There are a lot of conflicting reports out there about what you should expect from your first few years in a public accounting firm. A lot of the information that you get online is really geared towards your big four firms, your international firms, and you're told to expect 80-plus hour weeks during busy season and to have little to no time for yourself and your family and that's just sort of how you pay your dues in the first couple of years. It's like a revolving door at the lower levels. Most people who start their careers there will leave after the first couple of years. I was never interested in a big four position because, well there are two reasons: first of all, I already had a wife and a home to take care of. And second of all, I knew that I wanted to live in Lancaster, in Lancaster City and get a job at a smaller local regional firm in Lancaster County. So I kind of had an idea where I wanted to go and what I wanted to be doing. But beyond that, honestly, I just looked on the PICPA's web site and applied to every single CPA firm in the county.

Kae Wagner – Well that's good. In talking to your peers, you know the information that you got about the 80-hour weeks and that kind of stuff, does that really prove out? Is that what happens in the big four?

Sean Smith – In the big four, yes, it's close to the truth. In a small local regional firm there's considerably more flexibility.

Kae Wagner – All right. Great. So you're applying to all these accounting firms and you get connected with RBF somehow. Right? And what did you, in your initial experience with them, in the interview process as you started to look at them as a potential employer, what did you see that you liked?

Sean Smith – I liked the atmosphere that was generated by the people that I met during the interview process. You know, everybody from Lisa, our office manager, to Patrick and Larry our audit and tax partners at the time, respectively, who actually interviewed me. Everybody was just very, very personable, down to earth and willing to have a conversational interview rather than an interrogation, which I think makes a lot of folks nervous, especially very recent graduates. And I felt like this is a place where my input and my experiences will be valued. And so far that has definitely been the case. They also appreciated my sense of humor, which that helps a lot too because you're going to be working with these people day in and day out and if you can't make each other laugh, you're going to have a difficult time.

Kae Wagner – Exactly. Especially during tax time, right? So you came into RBF and those initial impressions that you had proved out. In the years that you've been there, how have things changed in the firm, in the industry, in terms of your overall experience?

Sean Smith – Not a lot has changed day to day. There's been some normal turnover of personnel, some promotions, and some folks have moved on. But our turnover ratio is actually slightly lower than the industry average from what I've seen, which is great because there's a consistent crew that I work with every day. One major change has been in the technology sector. We did migrate to a cloud-based computing program which enables me, anywhere I have a computer with Internet connection, I can access the same desktop that I would be accessing from my desk at the office. So if you are at the client,

if you're working from home, if you're on vacation and you need to respond to something quickly, then you have the ability to do that. That's probably been the number one change. And the second change would be the flexible work schedule. When I arrived here, the work schedule was already pretty flexible. But with this new ability to work from home more efficiently, it's become even more so, which I think is a great retention tool for staff who have concerns about their life/work balance. That enables us to spend a good bit more time with our families.

Kae Wagner – Right. I understand that's a really highly valued part of your work day there, or part of the culture there. Sean, what are your aspirations for your career as you look into the future? What do you hope to be doing down the road?

Sean Smith – Well at RBF I can definitely see myself in a partner role, certainly within the next decade. Not that I'm locked into that career trajectory, but that's one of them: what I'm on target for now, at least in my mind. But it's a place where, if you are willing to put in the work, if you're skilled, and if you take an interest in the development of the firm as a whole, those opportunities will be there for you.

Kae Wagner – That sounds great.

Sean Smith – Currently I'm in audit in a Test Department. But as time goes on, I will be doing a little bit more work with the consulting and the tax arms of our firm. Some folks will start out in one specific area as I did, and then branch out to a certain extent to other aspects of public accounting, whereas others will start out as more generalists and then develop a focus in either audit, consulting or taxes.

Kae Wagner – What advice would you give to someone who's just coming out of school, just going into the job market looking at accounting, whether they're still in school or coming out of school and wanting to get into accounting? What kind of advice would you give to them?

Sean Smith – Well, first and foremost, get comfortable with the idea of leaving the house and talking to strangers. The importance of networking really can't be overstated because especially in a small city like Lancaster, it really is who you know that can help you to get a job or get a job more quickly. I was very, very fortunate to find a job as quickly as I did, being an outsider from Jersey. But it's certainly feasible, in this environment, that if you've spoken to enough people in the community, you might know who's about to interview you before the interview begins. That's really the goal. Getting out there and networking, whether informally or formally through groups like Lancaster Young Professionals, or the Lancaster Chamber, gives you the opportunity to learn what jobs are out there that you might be interested in. And it also allows you to discuss with folks ahead of time what they might be looking for and what might be a good fit.

Second of all, your resume and your cover letter: Talk to your career adviser or your professors. Or, if you're already out of school, a trusted friend who's already been in the business community for a while. Have them look over your resume. Make sure it's in good shape. Make sure it's up to date and formatted appropriately for whatever position you're going for.

I would also recommend you include a cover letter whether one is requested or not, because that gives you the opportunity to show that you have written communication skills, which is key. Social media

kind of ties into that. Your LinkedIn profile: first of all, if you don't have one, get one and keep it up to date as sort of a virtual resume that you can pull up at any time. Facebook, make sure it's clean. That's all I'll say about that.

Finally, when you actually do get to an interview, remember as I alluded to before in my experience here, an interview should be just a conversation between two professionals and you have as much to offer your potential employer as they have to offer you. So remember that and try to ask them as many questions as they're asking you. You're just two professionals trying to determine if you're a good fit for one another.

Kae Wagner – That's great advice, Sean, and I think people will really appreciate that. So in closing I think that the accounting world is better off to have you in it. I know that RBF, all the folks at RBF, love working with you. And thank you so much for your time, for your insight and for being on the line with us today.

Sean Smith – Thank you, my pleasure.