Qualifying years: the future of the tax profession

General Features



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How can you develop your own career in tax and help those who are starting out in your practice. Alex Maton shares his thoughts on the importance of training and mentoring, and we talk to several ATT members who have benefited from the ATT Qualification.

It might be an easy thing to overlook when we are busy pursuing our careers in tax, but even the busiest of us should pause to remember the beginning of our journey – when we first entered the profession without the knowledge and experience that we now take for granted.

Remembering where we began reminds us of the things that first excited us about our chosen career. We can use this knowledge to inspire the next generation of professionals. This article discusses important aspects of early careers, and how we can work with students, employers and each other to bring on a positive future for

the profession.

Where we start, and why it matters

For most people, careers begin at school. Exam results direct us and opinions are formed from what our parents, teachers and contemporaries tell us.

However, according to the Institute of Government and Public Policy, 70% of secondary students ‘do not know or are unsure about what they want to do for a career when they leave school’ (see tinyurl.com/53xzrazh).

Many of us have seen this for ourselves. I represented my firm at a careers fair to find that most students were unaware of the professional opportunities available to them. Universities enjoyed a bumper uptake, while apprenticeship stands stood empty.

I entered tax as a graduate, lucky that my degree included taxation modules. Nevertheless, I always find it disappointing to hear talented colleagues’ stories of career advisers and teachers warning them away from apprenticeships that turned out to be a perfect fit for them.

This is a shame when young people can gain so much from professional work, whether as a school leaver or as a progression from university. Whichever course students decide is best for them, they need to be aware of the possibilities to make an informed choice.

Diversity encourages progress, and we can only have diversity if we recruit at different levels of experience. To achieve this, we need to educate schools in the opportunities available, whether through outreach events, advertising or work placements. The ATT, CIOT and other professional bodies are already doing excellent work to promote professional training among young people, but there is always more to be done.

Where and how we train

A large part of our experience as young professionals is informed by the place we choose to train. A good fit leads to a lifelong career, while a bad fit encourages us to

look elsewhere. In order to ensure the best fit in as many cases as possible, firms need to make prospective employees aware of the many different options available to them.

Working from home means we do not have to head for big cities, and work-life balance prompts many to avoid big firms too. There are now many possibilities in industry, the public sector, law and finance, as well as the traditional private client firms.

The choice of employer is therefore about more than scale and reputation. We need to have this in mind when advertising the tax profession to young people, and when choosing who to hire.

Smaller firms need not try to compete on salary when they can win on flexibility, and specialists might convince a candidate who is not attracted by general practice. By playing to our strengths and differences, we can encourage a broader and better uptake of new talent.

Teaching and learning

Once we have decided to pursue a career in tax and where to do it, the next stage is professional training.

This is the trainee’s chance to find out whether they have made the right decision, so they should be given as much encouragement as possible. This means having the opportunity and time to learn.

Studying may not count towards chargeable hours but pays in loyalty and enthusiasm. It is also important to be up to date with new rules, not just experienced with old ones, which means that a trainee’s contribution to a meeting or piece of work can be as valuable as a partner’s.

For employers, this may mean reviewing study leave entitlements, or it may mean giving breathing space for senior staff to train others without affecting efficiency targets. Training should be kept at the top of any firm’s priorities, not least because it benefits us as much as the people we mentor. As Seneca the Younger said around 2,000 years ago, ‘By teaching, we learn.’

What next for members…

Learning does not stop at qualification, as any member will have discovered. To keep them interested, junior professionals need to have exposure to as many practice areas as possible. Even those who find their niche early on benefit from variety, because few problems are simple enough to be solved by one tax discipline alone. Experience in different areas reduces the risk of omission and means that we can provide a more comprehensive service to our clients.

This means managers being supportive when a trainee wants to explore a new discipline and more understanding when a qualified member wishes to diversify their workload. As with training before qualification, it is in the employer's interest to have staff who are knowledgeable and motivated, and time given to this end is often repaid many times over.

…and what next for the profession?

Below are key takeaways that I believe could make a positive change for the future of the profession. These are drawn from my experience as a junior member, my involvement in early careers training and my collaboration with those I worked with and helped to train.

This is by no means an exhaustive list and I would be glad to hear suggestions and experiences from other members and students.

- Educate schools and universities about the benefits that tax careers can offer, especially professional apprenticeships.
- Advertise the variety in the tax profession; throw out old stereotypes.
- Encourage new talent by giving attention to training and mentoring.
- Mandatory professional supervision could go a long way to publicise the value of careers under the ATT, CIOT and counterparts. At the time of writing, this is under review as part of the government consultation on 'Raising standards in the tax advice market – strengthening the regulatory framework and improving registration' (see tinyurl.com/mpwesxc9).

The tax landscape is not becoming any simpler, making professional tax advisers more important than ever. The positive difference they can make is the best encouragement we can give to anyone considering a future in tax.

Case study: Starting out as an apprentice

‘I joined Larking Gowen straight from sixth form. I had applied for university but decided that I would also apply for some apprenticeships, as I thought they might lead to a good career. I had applied to Larking Gowen to work in their accounting department, but they offered me a position in tax and I’ve really enjoyed it!

When I joined, I was set up with a ‘buddy’, who I could talk to about the training and the work. That’s really helpful because when you are on an apprenticeship straight from school, you are suddenly surrounded by people of all different ages and levels of experience – which is very different to what you’re used to. But you soon find out that you can talk to everyone and learn about everyone’s lives.

It would be useful for employers to let new starters know what area of tax they’ll be working in, and give them some information and basic pointers about the tax rules. Then even though everything is new at the start, they’ll have notes to refer back to and can build upon that. I initially started out in personal tax where I was taught our internal processes and how to prepare a tax return. I have since progressed to CGT, trusts and Inheritance tax for trusts. At the start, I found there was quite a lot of information to take in. You’ll have lots of questions and it’s important to have assistance. But, of course, your work is reviewed by someone with more experience who will give you feedback, and you’ll learn from that process.

When I started to study with ATT, my first written paper was the personal tax paper. That helped a lot because as I studied I was learning more about the rules. I remember thinking, “Oh, so that’s why we do that at work!”’

Chloe Griner, Tax Assistant at Larking Gowen

Case study: Changing career paths

‘After attending an open day at my local college by the Association of Accounting Technicians, I started working in accountancy at a local airport for private jets and people learning to fly – a strange place for a 19 year old to find themselves. But quite a lot of people who worked for Big Four companies used to go flying for the afternoon – and by sheer fluke I heard that there was a job opening in Deloitte’s tax team!

I was already AAT qualified and I’d studied a little bit of tax as part of that which I’d enjoyed, and when I was at Deloitte Istarted studying the ATT. I completed the qualification when I was at another firm. I had an exemption for two of the exams because I was AAT qualified, so I was able to finish the qualification quite quickly – and passed first time with a distinction.

‘That was about ten years ago, and it did help me to build my career. The opportunities have to be there, of course, but it did open up doors. And the quality of my work was improved because I had a better grasp of the technical issues. It was a really good grounding to my tax career.

People won’t know everything on day one so it’s important to be patient. It’s not just about learning the tax rules but everything else that goes along with it, including how a business works! But it’s important to be open and willing to work with your new starters. I had one manager who had done the role for a long time – but just because you’ve always done things in a certain way doesn’t always mean it’s the right way. Be open to what your new recruit can offer and it might help you to see something with a fresh pair of eyes.’

Connor Whelan, Tax Manager at Mercedes-Benz

Case study: Building a lifelong career

‘I started out working in accountancy but soon realised that tax was much more interesting! Although you can be working with the same clients every year, what you might be doing for them can be very different. So I changed track to do my ATT and I’ve now been working in tax for nearly 20 years.
I’ve always worked full time, so used my holiday for studying for a number of years, but I found it very useful to do the ATT alongside my job. It can be so helpful when what you’re studying correlates with what you’re doing in practice in the tax department. For me, the two worked really well together. There were things that I’d heard people talking about in the office but hadn’t had any practical experience with, such as inheritance tax, so the ATT does really help your professional development.

About 10 years ago, I had lunch with Vanessa Fuller – we’d worked together in the tax department in an accountancy practice, and were still friends. She asked me if we should do this for ourselves, and together we started Premier Tax Solutions!

When you’re taking on new starters, it’s important to think about their skills and personality type, and how they will fit into the business. Some people are very engaged and keep coming to you asking what they can do next. Do you need someone who likes to get things done quickly and be in charge, or someone who is a caring team player? Are they going to be detail oriented and want their work to be as perfect as possible? You can help people to develop their technical skills, but getting the right people in the right roles is good for everyone!’

Emily Precious, Director at Premier Tax Solutions

ATT is a milestone, not a stepping stone

Georgiana Head, ATT member and ATT Council Member, reflects on why gaining ATT membership is a milestone in your tax career.

ATT is a great qualification for a tax professional who wants to show that they understand UK tax and are capable of dealing with complicated compliance work. When I completed the exams in 1997, it helped me to understand the practical tax

work that I had been doing over the previous couple of years. ATT is the gold standard for tax compliance work. To qualify, you need to pass your exams and have two years of practical tax experience – then students can apply for ATT membership. Members are entitled to use the designatory letters ‘ATT’ after their name and the descriptive title ‘Taxation Technician’. It is not enough to just complete your exams – you need to become a member to gain all the benefits of being an ATT.

As part of your membership of ATT, you are given a wide variety of members’ benefits including the annual annotated copy of the Finance Act, Tolley’s Annual Tax Guide, a Tax Rate Card, Whillans’s Tax Tables, a weekly newsletter, access to the ATT mentoring programme – and, of course, Tax Adviser! It would actually cost you more than the cost of your membership to buy all these publications directly.

Your membership also helps to access all sorts of support from the Association, such as AML supervision and an ‘Employer Focus’ newsletter if you set up your own practice. We even support for hardship through the Tax Advisor’s Benevolent Fund. After 10 years, you can also apply to become a Fellow of ATT.

If you decide to go and complete CTA your joint membership cost is heavily discounted.

It’s amazing what membership of ATT can do. For me, it has led to volunteering on steering groups, and gaining confidence in my knowledge of governance of a charity. As a direct result of my volunteering and the skills I have picked up chairing meetings, I have gone on to become a school governor, a chair of governors, a parish meeting chair and a trustee of other charities. My membership of ATT with its ongoing CPD has also helped me to have confidence when dealing with my own business’s tax – whether that be VAT, payroll issues or corporate tax.

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