Leading the future

General Features



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Emma Reitano meets the 2016 Young Tax Professional of the Year and runner up

Now in its eighth year and attracting more talent than ever, EY's Young Tax Professional of the Year named South Africa representative Karl Frenzel as the 2016 winner. Tetiana Polonska, the United States representative, also made a considerable impression on the judges and came in second.

Now with the highest number of participants since the event began in 2010, the 2016 compeitition saw representatives from 28 countries convene to participate in technical workshops, case studies and interviews before a judging panel, which included EY leaders, academics and tax directors from major multinational companies.

Developing talent

The Young Tax Professional of the Year competition was established by EY to reward and foster the next generation of tax leaders. The event is intended to identify young talents with an interest in tax, help them enhance their professional skills and develop their careers. The competition gives participants the opportunity to share experiences with people from a range of backgrounds and cultures. All of the competitors are selected in their home countries by EY in collaboration with local universities, and finalists hold their respective country titles.

By bringing together students from around the world, the event aims to demonstrate to participants how much the tax profession has changed today and how business is managed in different cultures.

Susan Pitter, event sponsor said: ‘The interaction between the finalists, coaches and jury members will help shape the competitors’ future careers and expand their networks beyond cultures and disciplines.’

Using your background

The other unusual aspect of the event is that it is open to young people with a variety of backgrounds. Karl studied BCom Accounting undergraduate and postgraduate at the University of Pretoria, and has recently started his three year articles with EY in Audit in South Africa, but is keen to forge a career in tax. He says: ‘Audit is very much a compliance framework and is giving me great foundations on how the industry works. In the future I’d like to move into mergers and acquistions – where I get to be involved in a variety of aspects of the tax transaction from the word go – meeting the clients, sourcing the financing, seeing the whole process from start to finish.’

Tetiana studied law for six years in the Ukraine but decided to narrow her specialisation, so moved into international tax and is currently studying at the International Tax Centre in Leiden in the Netherlands. She says: ‘Some people think that taxes are just numbers, just different calculations of the amount of taxes that taxpayers have to pay. However tax is inextricably linked to the business – sometimes advisers have to provide the client with advice on how to restructure business groups, and to do this they need to really understand how that business operates in order to give the right advice. I’m planning to join the EY Luxembourg office in the transfer pricing department – which is exactly where I want to be.

Transfer pricing is very close to business, and in order to structure the business of a company, you need to know the business very well. It incorporates all of the aspects that I find interesting.'

At the top in Amsterdam

Karl describes the year long journey he, and the other competitors took in the competition before fighting it out at the final stage in Amsterdam: 'All prospective competitors submitted a paper and the judges chose twelve to go through three stages of presentations on a case study based on South African tax law. I was chosen to represent South Africa after that.' Tetiana says: 'I received an invitation to enter from my university. It was also a case study, and I prepared and submitted a paper. I then had to go to the central office to continue the process, which was very interesting and enjoyable as I met a lot of great people I was competing against! I then found out that I had been chosen to go to Amsterdam, and I was delighted.'

Great networks

Meeting other young tax professionals is an integral part of the competition for those entering. Karl says: 'While I'm not in contact with every single contestant, I am still in contact with the majority and plan to be for the rest of my career. That means we will have contacts in around 25 countries. The tax world is small, and knowing who to pull together for a project or recommend to a client is a good skill to have.' Tetiana agrees: 'The competition is great for networking and nobody can argue that networking isn't great for your career. Even on a local level, you meet lots of inspiring people.'

Big challenges

Although both Karl and Tetiana agree that the positives in the competition hugely outweigh any negatives, they also emphasise that the competition was hugely challenging. Karl says: 'For me, the toughest aspect was believing that I could take on the other competitors. Some were very intimidating, qualifications-wise, and others had more real-world experience. I was lucky to have a great coach, she sat me down and told me that I wouldn't be there if she didn't think that I was more than capable of taking the others on and winning.'

When asked what advice they'd give future competitors, Karl said that working with each other is just as important a skill as knowing all the information yourself: 'Reading is incredibly important – read everything! But team skills are also important – if there is a quiet person in the group, bring them in, because they may offer a different perspective. You should never think that you know it all. A big mistake would be to take it too seriously and try to be better than the next person, rather than working with them and saying, right, I'm going to use whatever information you give to me, you can use mine too and together we'll work towards the best result.'

The tour

Karl's prize included a 30 day round-the-world trip, incorporating visits to key EY offices in London, New York and Hong Kong. He has found it an invaluable experience. Speaking during the London leg of his tour, he said: 'This is my first time in the UK and I have really enjoyed it. It's incredibly fast-paced and everything just works – if it says there will be a train in two minutes then there will be! Everything is so well looked after, and everyone is so proud of their history.'

Tetiana's prize was a 10-day visit to the EY London office, which she has found very interesting: 'For me, it has underlined the importance of teams working together and communicating with each other. They're all working on complex tasks and transactions but they ensure that the communication is robust and the departments cooperate fully with each other. I think too many businesses lack this communication and cooperation'.

Be the changes you want to see

Both Karl and Tetiana have considered the changes they'd like to see in their own jurisdictions. For Tetiana, it's not a matter of changing legislation: 'If we look at the tax system in the Ukraine, it is a competitive business environment for many, but the political landscape can make it challenging and needs to be addressed.''

For Karl, it's helping entrepreneurs: 'I love start ups, and in South Africa there could be more incentives for people wanting to take a risk and start a new business. These people are often hugely passionate about making a change not only for themselves but for society; they really enjoy what they do and the good that it can bring, and we should be helping them as much as possible. I would love to be more involved with

this in my career in the future.’

If you are a young tax professional, or know one, to find out more about EY’s Young Tax Professional of the Year competition, visit EY's website.