Breaking the Boring Accountant Stereotype

The stereotype of an accountant working a dull job and crunching numbers all day is being thrown to the wayside. Business and technology growth combined with more stringent auditing and reporting requirements have given accountants many new and exciting opportunities.

“Many people think accountants have boring jobs in which they work alone with tedious numbers,” says Louise A. Miller, an Accounting instructor for South University – Online. “On the contrary, accounting work today involves substantial social interaction, and accountants often must be creative in solving the varied problems they encounter.”

Jeannie Patton, vice president of Students, Academics and Membership for the American Institute of CPAs (AICPA), says the accountant’s role is not just to provide data, but also to analyze and interpret information and help plan to sustain and grow the business.

“Accountants are at the decision-making table and provide key input into business strategy,” she says.

Law of Numbers

Changing financial laws and regulations in the past 10 years have created demand for people with accounting backgrounds. The biggest action was the establishment of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which put strict auditing and reporting requirements on public companies. The law was established in response to major corporate accounting scandals, including those involving companies Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom.

“The Sarbanes-Oxley Act created a focus on the importance of business decision-making and has definitely impacted accounting procedures,” Patton states.

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Accountants can be found anywhere – they work in all types of industries because every organization needs them. According to AICPA, typical industries include public accounting, government, non-profit, and private industry. Specialized career options include financial reporting, international, information technology, forensics and fraud, and personal financial planning.

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According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accountants are expected to experience much faster than average employment growth through 2018. Accountants and auditors who have a professional certification, especially certified public accountants (CPAs), should have the best prospects.

As the business world becomes more complex, the role of the accountant has grown in stature and importance. Internet and technological tools have positioned accountants as problem solvers who use advanced information systems and programs. Many technological tools have taken over basic accounting, so more emphasis is placed on accountants making sure input into those numbers is accurate and reliable.

The Language of Numbers

Business and technological changes also require accountants who possess strong communications and people skills – yeah they are good with numbers but also have to be good at communicating, making ethical decisions, and thinking creatively.

“Many accountants work on teams with others, so they must be able to communicate accounting and financial information clearly and concisely,” Miller says. “Individuals who are proficient in accounting software and information systems or have expertise in specialized areas such as international business, international financial reporting standards, or current legislation may have an advantage in getting some accounting jobs.”
Many students have already gotten the message that accounting is now where the action is. According to AICPA data, from 2004-2007, new graduates for bachelor’s and master’s degrees saw a 45% increase. AICPA attributes the increase to growing awareness and opportunities for job placements.

Those going on to receive their CPA certification may be taking the right step – CPAs prove they have the on-the-job experience and education to be valuable to any organization.

“There is no question that ‘CPA’ behind your name gets you increased opportunities for interviews,” Patton states.

Even if they do not go onto accounting careers, those with an accounting education often have analytical and problem-solving skills that are useful in a variety of positions.

“Accounting is the baseline skill set, but the opportunities to leverage that baseline skill set is one of the reasons accounting continues to thrive,” Patton says.