

REFUGEEWORKS GUIDE

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEE ACCOUNTANTS

By Linda Rabben

INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of refugees, asylees, Cuban/Haitian entrants and victims of human trafficking resettle in the United States every year. In FY 2008 alone, 60,279 refugees were resettled by 10 national voluntary agencies. All make lives for themselves in cities, towns and suburbs across the country, and all strive for the same things: freedom and opportunity. Many of these newcomers bring a few reminders of home, their families if they are lucky, and their past experience. This experience is vast and varied. Now more than ever, most resettlement agencies are greeting individuals at the airport who are accountants, lawyers, teachers, professional interpreters, engineers, and so on.

In a recent survey conducted by RefugeeWorks, at least 74 percent of resettlement agencies around the country had one or more healthcare professionals in their caseload. About 25 clients per agency are seeking recertification in their previous occupation. These people represent an enormous amount of human capital. However, the issue for many of these new Americans is that they do not know how to navigate the employment and advancement systems in place in their particular profession. How does a teacher from Nepal obtain a job in education? How does an auditor from Iraq get into the accounting field?

To answer these questions and many more, RefugeeWorks has created a series of in-depth guides that can be used to help newcomers regain their professional career. The first of the series focused on engineers, the second on teachers, the third on physicians and nurses, the fourth on pharmacists and the fifth on dentists. This guide is about the accounting profession: its structure and future, the skills, credentials and training needed to enter this line of work—and most important, how to find employment as an accountant.

If you are someone who is working in the field of refugee resettlement, we urge you to use this

research to help your clients navigate what can sometimes be a perplexing road to regaining entry into a particular profession. If you are a new American seeking to use your skills in your chosen occupation, we hope this guide will make your journey a littler easier.

Jonathan Lucas
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1. A REFUGEE ACCOUNTANT IN THE UNITED STATES

Vanja Djuric and her parents arrived in the United States from war-torn Bosnia when she was 13 years old. She found it “hard to fit in at first. I focused on my math classes, because numbers are numbers in any language. I couldn’t speak English, but I could finish a math test in five minutes and earn the highest grade in the class.” At age 17 she started a business on E-bay. With her profits she paid her way through college, earning a bachelor’s degree in accounting and a master’s degree in finance from the University of Texas. In December 2008 she launched Direct Tax and Financial Services in Dallas, and in mid-2009 she completed all requirements to be a Certified Public Accountant. “If I were still in Bosnia, I would probably be unemployed or working for minimum wage,” she reported. “Here, I was able to put my talents to use and truly fulfill the American dream.”¹

2. THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

According to the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, “Accountants and auditors work with financial data. They produce accounting records and statements and also verify that those records and statements are correct. Accountants and auditors help organizations such as businesses and government entities make better business decisions by providing an accurate picture of their financial situations.”²

Accountants “typically work in an office environment and work a 40-hour work week. Self-employed accountants may work additional hours. Public accountants, who tend to provide more tax advice, often find that their workload increases during tax season in the late winter and early spring.” They “can work for large or small accounting firms, businesses, schools and universities, nonprofit organizations, or government entities, or can be self-employed. Large organizations will often have entire accounting departments made up of many accountants performing a variety of tasks in a variety of areas of the business, such as in payroll or accounts payable.”

In the United States “the four main fields of accounting and auditing are public accounting, management accounting, government accounting and internal auditing.”

Public accountants work for corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations or individuals on tax matters, employee benefits, accounting system design and asset controls. Many are Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) who may have their own business or work for an accounting firm.

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Accountants and auditors help organizations make better business decisions.

Management accountants, who are also called cost, managerial, industrial, corporate or private accountants, work for companies. They analyze financial information, do budgeting, evaluate performance, and manage costs and assets, among other duties.

Government accounts and auditors maintain and examine public records and audit private businesses and individuals subject to government regulation and taxation. They may work for the International

Revenue Service or in various agencies at the municipal, state or federal level.

Internal auditors examine company records and review operations, including computer systems for efficiency, effectiveness and compliance with policies and regulations.³

Related occupations include bookkeeping, accounting and auditing clerks; budget analysts; cost estimators; financial analysts; loan officers; personal financial advisers; tax examiners, collectors and revenue agents; management analysts; computer administrators, engineers and programmers.

3. WORKFORCE COMPOSITION

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2008 accountants and auditors held about 1.3 million jobs in the United States. About a quarter worked for accounting, tax-preparation, bookkeeping and payroll services firms, and 8 percent were self-employed. Most work in urban areas. Some teach full-time or part-time at colleges and universities. Accountants’ annual wages ranged from around \$36,000 to more than \$100,000 in 2008. Those with recent bachelor’s degrees received starting offers averaging around \$49,000, while master’s degree holders could start their careers earning around \$50,000.

A 2009 survey by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) found that minorities comprised 25.5 percent of enrollees in undergraduate programs in accounting. More than 50 percent of students in these programs were women. Some 66,000 people graduated from bachelor’s and master’s degree accounting programs in 2009.⁴

“Most beginning accountants and auditors may work under supervision or closely with an experienced accountant or auditor before gaining

more independence and responsibility,” the BLS reported.

4. THE FUTURE OF THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

According to the BLS, accounting and auditing will have “much faster than average employment growth”—22 percent—in the coming years. Almost 280,000 accounting jobs are expected to be created by 2018. The retirement of older accountants will create many job openings. CPAs will have the best prospects for employment, and those with a master’s degree in accounting or in business administration with a concentration in accounting may have an advantage. “The continued globalization of business also will lead to more demand for accounting expertise and services related to international trade and accounting rules and international mergers and acquisitions,” the BLS predicts.

5. SKILLS, TRAINING, CREDENTIALS

Accountants should have an aptitude for mathematics, good communication skills, ability to work with people, business systems, and computers, familiarity with accounting software and high ethical standards.

Most accountants and auditors obtain a BA in accounting, and about 30 percent go on to obtain a master’s degree in accounting or business administration. Universities and colleges also offer certificate programs in specialties such as internal auditing. Professional associations provide continuing education courses. Junior accounting jobs often lead to accountant positions.

It is important for accountants to acquire specialized computer skills and “keep up to date with the state-of-the-art developments in the field,” in the words of a Filipino accountant who teaches the subject at a private U.S. university. He advises

immigrants to learn not only job requirements “but a completely new culture as well. A new way of thinking or paradigm . . . is essential to embrace in order to succeed. . . . Training in communication skills, teamwork and leadership are important attributes to acquire.”⁵

An accountant does not have to be a CPA to work in the field. However, any accountant who files reports with the Securities and Exchange Commission must be a CPA and be licensed by the state board of accountancy. To become a CPA the accountant must pass a national examination and meet state requirements. Only accountants who have passed the CPA examination may call themselves CPAs.

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According to the BLS, “As of 2009, 46 states and the District of Columbia required CPA candidates to complete 150 semester hours of college coursework—an additional 30 hours beyond the usual four-year bachelor’s degree.” Some universities offer a five-year combined bachelor’s and master’s degree that meets the 150-hour requirement. The BLS warns accountants to “carefully research accounting curricula and the requirements of any states in which they hope to become licensed.”

The AICPA prepares the four-part Uniform CPA Examination, which can be taken online. Since 2004 the examination has been taken online more than a million times. Fewer than half of those who take it each year pass all four parts on the first try. Most states require test-takers to pass all four sections within 18 months of passing the first section. In addition, many states require CPA license applicants to have previous accounting experience, but requirements vary by state or jurisdiction.

6. HOW TO FIND AN ACCOUNTING POSITION

- **Networking.** Potential employers may be inaccessible or constrained by strict qualification criteria. As a result networking is essential for successful job hunting in the accounting profession. Job seekers must “sell” their qualifications, experience and talents, not only to human resource personnel but also to intermediaries and mentors who can advise and inform them about job opportunities. Initiative, persistence and skillful self-presentation are important qualities for job seekers in all professions.
- **Self-Presentation.** American cultural norms for self-presentation may be very different from those in the refugee’s home country. Mock interviews and exercises in meeting and greeting should be helpful to the refugee job seeker. Mentors can also give good counsel and feedback.

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- **Résumés/CVs.** Résumés should be tailored to demonstrate specific accomplishments in the field as well as certificates and degrees. The job seeker should be prepared to present a résumé at job fairs and networking events and to consult it during telephone screening interviews.
- **Training.** No matter what experience an accountant may already have, professional education is a good long-term investment and provides an opportunity to update knowledge and improve vocational language skills.
- **Postsecondary Employment.** An administrative or support position at a university or community college may include free courses, since many

offer tuition benefits to employees. University employment also provides opportunities to interact with potential colleagues, mentors and employers.

Career laddering is a feasible way for refugee accountants to progress toward professional recertification. A position as a bookkeeper, accounting clerk or bank teller can provide the opportunity to work in a professional environment, interact with potential employers, colleagues and mentors and learn American professional culture.

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Although some refugee accountants may be willing to work in entry-level positions, it is important for job developers to help them advance beyond these jobs, so that their valuable skills and specialized training will not be wasted.

Initiatives in other countries to help refugee accountants could serve as models for refugees and service providers in the United States. For example, in Ontario, Canada, the Halton Multicultural Council sponsors business communication training, accounting software classes, and sector-specific consulting and work experience to internationally trained accountants and bookkeepers. The program is funded by the Ontario government and the national agency, Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In Afghanistan the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, an international professional organization, conducted a training course for accounting technicians especially for refugees who had returned home after many years in refugee camps in Pakistan. In Britain TimeBank, a national charity, sponsors Time Together, a mentoring program for refugee accountants and other professionals “who just need a little bit of support and encouragement to realize their ambitions,” according to the project manager.

7. NOTES

- 1 Djuric, Vanja. "Bosnian War Refugee Fulfills American Dream by Earning CPA License," www.free-press-release.com, July 1, 2009; accessed April 2010.
- 2 Quoted material in this section comes from "Becoming an Accountant and Auditor in Pennsylvania," used by permission of Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, www.welcomingcenter.org.
- 3 Descriptions of accountants in this section and statistics in other sections are from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11*, "Accountants and Auditors."
- 4 Reigle, Dennis R. 2009. "Trends in the Supply of Accounting Graduates and the Demand for Public Accounting Recruits." New York: American Institute of Certified Public Accountants.
- 5 Valle, Manuel B. 2007. "Critical Reflections of Filipino Immigrant Accountants on Their Work Experiences in the San Francisco Bay Area: A Participatory Research," *Journal of Filipino Studies*, <http://class.csueastbay.edu/filipinostudies/journal/html/cfsj-csueb-2007.html>.

8. LINKS

American Institute of Certified Public Accountants.
www.aicpa.org
International Federation of Accountants. www.ifac.org
National Association of State Boards of Accountancy.
www.nasba.org

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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