

Counting on a future in accounting? You're in good company.

Women were 55% of new accounting grads hired last year by CPA firms.

(Source: AICPA)

Women get ahead faster at smaller firms.

(Source: AICPA)

35% of bachelor's accounting grads go to CPA firms. 20% head to industry.

(Source: AICPA)

What your interviewer is thinking

Don't you wish you could read your interviewer's mind?

We interviewed some interviewers about what they're thinking while you're talking. Here's what's going on inside their heads.

Will our clients like her?

True, you have just spent several semesters immersed in the technicalities of accounting, and yes, your interviewer cares about your GPA. But she's also looking for signs that you will be great with clients. Do you listen carefully to the interviewer's questions? Did you turn off your phone so you're completely ignoring it during the interview? (Vibrate doesn't count. It's still a distraction.) Are you friendly and confident? Firms know that you can always learn more technical skills, but they can't give you a personality transplant if you aren't already a people person.

Can she communicate?

Clients don't speak accounting. A big part of working with them is clear communication. Come prepared with a couple of examples of how you have explained something complicated in plain English.

The examples don't have to be about accounting. You could explain, for instance, how you led a sorority board through a tricky collaboration with other campus groups and how you communicated the reasons for the collaboration to the board and sorority members. Public speaking experience is even better. But don't replay the whole speech. Talk about how you tailored the message to the audience.

Is she polished?

Your mom is right: You never get a second chance to make a great first impression. How you present yourself to the interviewer is how you'll present yourself on behalf of the firm. Before you head into the interview, take a twirl in front of the mirror. Make sure your teeth are free of lipstick, your skirt is straight, your hair is under control and your breath is fresh.

Will she send a hand-written thank you note?

An old-fashioned thank-you note shows that you are in tune with traditional business courtesies. Email is ok, but definitely second-rate. No thank you note is not ok.

How to find out what firms won't tell you

Interviewers come equipped with stock answers to stock questions. Here are non-standard questions that will get you the answers you really want. And in the process, you'll stand out from your competition.

What to ask: How do you know your women's initiative actually makes a difference? Where can I find the latest statistics that show how women fare at your firm?

What you're looking for: Most firms claim to have women's initiatives. But what firms claim on their websites often doesn't have anything to do with reality.

The dirty little secret is that many of those initiatives don't have much budget, don't have support from top partners, and don't actually result in women getting promoted to the top.

You're looking for evidence that the initiative actually delivers what the firm says it does. It's a good sign if the firm can show you how it measures the effectiveness of its women's programs. That tells you that the firm is serious about getting results -- and that if you're at that firm, you won't get overlooked, especially if you participate in its development programs for women.

Factors to look for: How many women are managers? Senior managers? Partners? Some leading firms produce annual reports that show how many women are at key levels. Before the interview, try to find such a report at the firm's website. If it isn't there, ask about it in the interview.

Keep an eye on this site for the upcoming 2010 Accounting MOVE Project report. It will include new statistics about the percentages of women in the profession. You can use those statistics as a point of comparison when you're looking at a particular firm.

What to ask: I'm looking for firm where I can grow as a business person. Of course, I expect to keep developing my technical skills, but can you tell me how your firm would help me gain the business development skills?

What you're looking for: Accounting firms depend on partners to bring in new clients. The clients you're responsible for recruiting and retaining are called your “book of business.” You will need to start building your book of business when you are a manager, and your ability to find and sign up new clients is critical to getting promoted to partner.

Of course, you will get to know clients from the beginning as you work on client projects. But many firms assume you will absorb business development skills by osmosis. Maybe, maybe not. Progressive firms know that it can be tricky for women to translate good client relationship skills to productive selling skills, so they provide training and mentoring geared to help women make that transition.

Business development skills are also essential to starting your own firm or becoming an independent consultant or solo practitioner. When you're on your own, you have to sell to eat.

What to ask: How would I get to know different specialties, and would I be expected to concentrate on just one client industry?

What you're looking for: Concentrating in a client practice area is a lot like choosing a college major. You can't be an expert in everything, so you'll be expected to choose a technical specialty, such as tax or audit, and also a client industry specialty, such as nonprofits, health care or manufacturing.

Very large firms expect you to quickly “declare a major.” You will be expected to become an expert in a relatively narrow category of client industry and accounting proficiency.

Medium sized firms offer more latitude. You might be able to specialize in, say, small business, which covers a variety of industries.

Local firms often offer the greatest chance for being a generalist. Their clients tend to be medium sized and smaller businesses, so you will get to know a variety of industries and types of organizations.

Firms in the 2010 Accounting MOVE Project told us that women gravitate to technical specialties that don't demand a lot of travel. That enables them to balance work with local clients with home responsibilities.

They also told us that client industries that especially attract women are health care, nonprofits, media and the arts, and financial services. If you concentrate in one of those, you will likely be dealing with more women clients, because those industries tend to have more women in leadership. You might find it easier to network with these clients and to cultivate relationships with them.

Women are relatively scarce in manufacturing, technology and heavy industry client categories. On those teams, you will stand out as one of the few women and you will probably have to work harder to fit in with the male-dominated team. You'll definitely stand out, and it will be up to you to make the most of the attention you get, to bring in new clients and keep the ones the firm already has.

What to ask: How do people at your firm get promoted while they are on flexwork or alternative work schedules?

What you're looking for: Pretty much every accounting firm will tell you that it offers flexwork. That sounds great, but bear in mind that a majority of *all* American employers offer some kind of flexwork, according to the Society of Human Resource Management.

What you want to know is how the firm's flexwork arrangement affects your ability to get promoted. Can you make partner, if you are a senior manager on a four-day workweek? (Of course, it will take a couple of extra years, but the point is, can you do it at all?)

If you want to try out a different role in the firm -- for example, take a few months break from auditing to develop a new training program -- does that make you more promotable, or less?

The interviewer might give you an example of a woman on flexwork who was recently promoted to partner. Your followup question: was she the first? How often does this happen?

What to ask: Tell me how your firm uses its alumni network.

What you're looking for: Firms use alumni networks to stay in touch with former employees. If you leave the firm to work for one of its clients, they will hope that you will become a cheerleader for the firm at your new employer. If you cycle out of the workforce to stay home with your baby, you could communicate your interest in project work through the alumni network. Or if you leave and want to return, the alumni network would be your entre to reconnect and find out about available positions.

How a firm uses its alumni network will tell you how open it really is to alternative career paths. Women often take time out altogether to stay home with young children, in hopes that they can easily return. If the firm is truly open-minded about alternative career paths, the interviewer will be able to give you specific examples about how it continues to work with former employees through its alumni network.

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