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Features

Career interview – Accountant



Tim Pilkington works for a large firm of accountants and is a keen basketball player. He obtained a joint honours BSc in Mathematics, Physical Education and Sports Science at Loughborough University. He has also worked as a mathematics teacher.

What A–Levels did you do?

I did Double Maths, Physics and Chemistry.

At that stage did you already know what you wanted to do at University?

Not really. I originally applied to Loughborough to do Engineering straight after A–Levels. I deferred that and took a year out. Then I did Engineering for a year, but early on could see it was just an Applied Maths course and not very exciting. I no longer wanted to be an engineer. Being a sports fan, I decided to do a joint honours degree in Maths and Sports Science. It was a great degree combination, 35 hours a week at books went down to 20 which was a bargain!

Did you find Mathematics helpful in your PE and Sports Science studies?

Definitely. It's all Applied Mechanics in Sports Science and I found all the Applied Mechanics elements of PE very straightforward. It's basically Applied Maths and Physics in relation to a sports context.

If you were talking to someone doing A–Levels now, what advice would you give them?

It's very important to do something you enjoy at University and that keeps your options open. Something like Maths does, you can do a lot of things with it.

Did you enjoy being a student?

Career interview – Accountant

Yes, University was fun. I think the financial side is harder than when I went through, but I'd still recommend it to anybody, it's a fantastic experience. You meet a lot of people and experience an awful lot of life. I played University sport all the time, mainly basketball.



What did you do after University?

I did a one year PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education). When I was graduating I applied for jobs in banking and accountancy, they all involved doing exams and as I'd just done lots I wasn't interested. I quite fancied teaching and did a PGCE. I taught for 2 years before taking up accountancy.

What did you teach?

Maths, which I really enjoyed. The joy of it is you can teach something new every lesson; students leave able to do something they couldn't do when they arrived. If some of them couldn't, you had something to work on and that felt super. Another thing I liked was helping people who have a phobia about mathematics. I taught it like a wall, so all you had to do was find out which brick was missing for them. As soon as you did, you could build up quickly and not only their mathematics built up but their confidence too. Thinking individually about students involves a lot of time, which can be draining. From the points of view of teaching and feedback I think it is one of the most rewarding subjects.

Why did you decide to leave teaching?

I didn't see a defined career structure. The Careers Service at Loughborough took me through computer programs which come up with your ideal careers. I looked at accountancy again, it had the structure and by then I didn't mind doing more exams.

How long does it take to qualify as an accountant?

You have a three year training contract. It takes about 2 years to pass the exams, of which 12 months is spent away on courses, not working, but being paid by the company. Then you build up work experience, which I'm doing now as I've completed the exams.

What sort of things do you do actually in your job?

I did Audit for a year and a half but got bored and am now in Tax. There are 3 major sides to my work. As a service industry, the first task is to make sure my clients, mostly PLCs, are happy with the service we give them, the quality of the product and our understanding of their business issues, etc. Then I do compliance work for them which is submitting their annual tax computation to the Inland Revenue. We go through their accounts, their statutory accounts, and work out what their tax payment should be. The rest is consultancy. It's better to have the sort of relationship with your client where you know what is going on in the business because every transaction they do has a tax impact. We make sure they do it in the most tax efficient way, often there are huge savings to be made.

Does that mean that you are away from your office, actually with your clients?

Career interview – Accountant

In Tax you tend to be more office based. I'm out about 1 day a week maximum. We run briefings and seminars on topical Tax issues where we meet a lot of our clients. We also visit them from time to time. If I was still Audit based I'd be out all the time.

In your current job, is there one specific area which is of interest to you?

The bits I enjoy most are the technical things. There are so many rules in Tax, no-one can never know them all. Whatever happens is almost always new. Say if it's a consultancy project, you start from scratch and find out what is the best answer for the client.

Has Maths played a role in what you do now?

Yes, hugely useful in the way it taught me to think. In terms of the Maths I use daily, computers do it for you. Being able to do a basic estimate of a reasonableness test is really all the mathematical skills involved.

What kind of career structure is there in your job? You mentioned earlier on that you quite liked the idea of something with a career structure.

You can set goals. You get regular ratings from everybody you work for, which impact on your annual salary and promotion. You expect promotion annually for the first five years, then the big watershed is whether you make manager or not. People are kept on at the end of their training contract when they qualify because there are more jobs than there are accountants, it's a buoyant market.

So thinking about the way you looked at a career when you were at University, would you say that it has lived up to your expectations?

I didn't have any career expectations. I was enjoying University and being a student. There is plenty of time later to do serious things, as I am doing now.



Tell us about your sporting interests.

Career interview – Accountant

Sport has always been a big motivating factor. I play National League Division 3 Basketball and get to travel all over the country. I was in the Loughborough University First Basketball Team for 5 years. I've also just started to play for my village cricket team, first time since school!



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