

the Anchin HR Report



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Recruiting Your First Employer

With accounting majors in demand more than ever these days, recruiting efforts by both national and regional firms are intensifying. Chances are you will find yourself courted by more than one firm, with promises of diverse opportunities, merit-based promotions and an attractive work/life balance. How can you separate the substance from the hype to determine your best choice? Following are 10 questions to ask yourself and your recruiters as you go through the process.

Who is recruiting you?

Most firms have recruiting teams that include representatives from human resources as well as both junior and senior staff. If you see a partner on campus at a career fair, it's a sign that a firm is serious about recruiting. Some firms will also attract your attention early in your college career by assigning you a buddy when you are only a sophomore or junior. This buddy has already been through the whole recruiting and hiring process. Take advantage of the

chance to learn more about the field and the firm from him or her.

What is the firm looking for?

Good grades in required courses are important, but they are usually not the only priority for recruiters. Firms should also have a clear sense of the character traits required to serve their clients well. Ethics, leadership, creativity, responsiveness and tact are probably on the list. You may get a sense of what kind of people the firm hires by asking which schools it typically targets and why. The interview questions should go beyond the typical "Where do you see yourself in five years?" When you hear an interesting question, think about the quality or qualities the firm might be looking for and consider what that says about its culture.

Where else can you turn to understand what this firm is all about?

Lay the various recruiting brochures across a table and try to determine the difference in the messages they send. Can you see your-

self in the photographs? Then look at each website. Does the graphic design suggest that this firm is traditional and conservative, or cutting edge and high tech? Is the tone simply self-congratulatory or does it reach out and welcome prospective clients and employees? No message from the firm itself can beat what you hear through the grapevine. Discuss the firms you are considering with your network of friends and relatives to see if you can find someone to give you an insider's perspective.

What kind of orientation and training will you get?

A firm that's serious about its commitment to people will keep recruiting you after you accept an offer, leaving nothing about your welcome and orientation to chance. Your interviewers should be able to tell you what you will do during your first weeks on the job, whom you are likely to meet (the more people and partners, the better), and how quickly you will be in the field. Your train-

over

ing should cover the firm's proprietary systems and software while also giving you the opportunity to review the basic word processing, spreadsheet, database and email programs they use.

How many jobs will you work on in your first year?

The type of firm that's right for you will depend on whether you have already chosen a focus and want to dive right in, or whether you want to survey the possibilities before deciding. In general, the smaller the firm the more diverse the opportunities, but it is better to ask the question directly than to take anything for granted. At Anchin, Block & Anchin LLP, people commonly work on multiple clients in their first year, with some tax and consulting work to complement the audit tasks.

How will your assignments be scheduled?

A firm that is respectful of its employees will put someone in charge of managing a formal scheduling process so that senior people are not pulling entry-level staff in many directions. Working on multiple jobs at the same time may be possible, depending on the deadlines, but someone should be making sure you do not have conflicting priorities.

How soon before you get assigned to a job that's related to your interests?

The answer you want is "as soon as possible." One of our new entry-level hires from Loyola College in Maryland had an offer from a Big Four firm, but chose Anchin, Block & Anchin because he wanted the chance to work for clients similar to his family's construction business. His second assignment was with a construction client.

How will your work be evaluated?

Regular and constructive feedback is crucial to understand how well you are doing and in what areas you need to improve. If you are working for the same people on the same job for your entire first year, you may not learn what you are doing wrong until it is too late to correct it. Our firm requires completed performance reviews within 30 days of a job's close. The person being reviewed has the chance to discuss the review form with the reviewer and add comments before signing it.

How will you find a mentor?

Mentoring is a great idea that can be very difficult to execute. If a program is too structured, it risks pairing people who may not be compatible; if it's too flexible, it risks low participation. At Anchin, Block & Anchin, we are instituting a program in which every new hire is assigned a different mentor every three months for the first nine months. By

that time, the new employee should have enough experience to choose the person with whom he or she wants to establish a longer-term relationship. Our mentors are trained to deliver sound career guidance without compromising the interests of the firm.

How does the firm promote the work/life balance?

Accounting firms talk a lot about work/life balance, but the nature of the work inevitably involves long hours to meet rigid deadlines. Even if the firm you are considering says it offers flexible hours, chances are you won't encounter that possibility for several years. Look instead for policies that value your time: overtime compensation, a weekend off during busy season, and summer Friday hours are small graces that add up to a big benefit. Consider the company's working environment: Are the offices bright enough to make a long day there tolerable? What kind of social or volunteer activities does the firm support to promote camaraderie and fun?

The firms you talk to will be testing you, but you are entitled to establish some standards of your own. Make sure the firm you choose passes your test.

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