

Alex (interviewer)

I'm here with some of the apprentices who are going to discuss their apprentice programme, how they feel with regard to being an apprentice in the current situation and discuss their experiences more generally. Do you want to start by introducing yourselves?

Alice

Yep so hi, I'm Alice - a second year apprentice at Audit Wales.

Max

My name is Max. I'm a first-year apprentice at Audit Wales

Emma

I'm Emma, a third-year apprentice at Audit Wales

Alex (interviewer)

Thank you all for coming on. Do you want to start by saying why you chose to become an apprentice?

Alice

Yep, So I did A levels in school and I wasn't really interested in going to uni. I'd done maths at A-level and enjoyed that throughout, so I started looking into apprenticeships based around finance and came across this one. I like the idea of doing the professional qualification while working. And, yeah, this I was interested in doing an apprenticeship because you obviously are doing a job and that's going to give you loads of transferable skills for later on in your career. That's why I chose an apprenticeship.

Alex (interviewer)

On that, were there any particular skills that any of you were particularly sort of hoping to pick up as you transition from education, from your apprenticeship, into longer term work?

Alice

Well, I did have a part time job, so I did have some transferable skills, communication skills, but I guess it was just trying to develop those further by starting a proper job really.

Max

For me? I'd definitely kind of say the same reasons that as Alice, so practically I I didn't really want to get into debt by going to University, but I wanted to be able to learn and develop as well as gaining my qualifications and I also feel that I am getting a different opportunity to learn by learning on the job with an experienced team as well as people in similar roles like mine while also learning from college, which I think is really valuable and not something that would 100% be happening if I was in University.

Alex (interviewer)

That's an interesting look at it. I hadn't looked at it before as a sort of learning alternative to University. Emma, is that something you can relate to?

Emma

I suppose I'm a bit different in this sense. I did actually go to University and I got a degree in education. I kind of realized that isn't the path I wanted to go down and I spent some time in a different organization and looked at different departments and finance was always one that stuck out for me. And I decided to go along the apprenticeship route because I found that AAT was kind of like the base knowledge and coming from a degree

that wasn't accountancy//audit based, I wanted to start from the beginning I suppose, and build myself up.

Alex (interviewer)

And how have you found studying for the programme?

Emma

I've found it really good. We get one day a week which we go to college on and then our exams are factored around that as well, which I think is really good because, it's one day out of the office every week. And I think also, it's easier for us to implement our learning alongside work because we've got that constant learning every week. It's not just kind of blocked out as such.

Alice

Yeah, as I'm a 2nd Year Apprentice, I'm doing AAT Level 3 but you start on Level 2 and I feel like could you start from level 2 and then work your way up to level 4. It's a lot easier to build on your knowledge and kind of get the basic knowledge you need then to go on and go further in the qualification.

Max

Yeah, 'cause I'm doing Level 2 at the moment, so I'm right at the start and I feel just getting that base knowledge and also doing work throughout the week and going to college once a week, it really is good and integrated very well, to learn more I think.

Alex (interviewer)

So, potentially for the benefit of those listening who might be worried, are you saying that it's sort of like a gradual learning approach rather than, you know, as opposed to being enrolled and then chucked in at the deep end?

Emma

Yeah, completely, I think this is more of a gradual approach. Like Alice said, I think because you start a level 2, you guys really good knowledge of your double entries and you get really good knowledge of financial statements. So yeah, every year your just building upon the skills and upon the knowledge.

Alex (interviewer)

Yeah, I can certainly relate to that as someone who's been here two years on a work placement. It is a process of gradual learning. Failure and making mistakes is almost welcomed. You know you're not punished for it, it's all viewed as part of the learning process, so I definitely know what you mean there. With regard to the current situation with coronavirus, how have you found doing your role or starting your role during the pandemic and. and how just how have you adapted to that and the challenges set by that?

Max

So, in my situation I've never experienced full-time office space work before, so working remotely I don't think as being much of a problem as this is kind of the norm for me at the moment. I do kind of feel, however, there are slight drawbacks when problems occur when working remotely, but I definitely feel when things like that have happened. I think I've been definitely well supported, and I feel any types of issues that can come up aren't really going to be a problem.

Alice

Yeah, and then when I started my apprenticeship I was initially based in our own finance team in Audit Wales, so I didn't actually have much audit experience before we went into lockdown. So that was quite daunting at first, not having actually been on some of the

clients sites and meeting the clients, or even the audit teams really well. But obviously, 'cause we've got Teams, it was really well set up in that respect. It was a very easy transition process because we have regular catchups with our teams to check in and we have loads of opportunities to ask any questions and just work through anything that we need to do. This worked really well.

Emma

Yeah, I'd agree with that as well myself. And yeah, I've been on audit since I started here. When we had to start working remotely, I think we responded really quickly. And yeah, I think teams is really great for being able to speak to people. And I think as well, its' a little bit more efficient, with our time.

Alex (interviewer)

As you sort of transition to, well, as everyone so transitions to a post-lockdown, post-coronavirus world, how do you think your working patterns and working lives are going to change. Are you missing the interaction you get from an office space and being on site or are you hoping that your work becomes a lot more sort of technologically enabled, and you can do things more remotely, more from your own home and more to your own schedules?

Emma

At the moment for me, I'm on West cluster. We've actually started going back to the offices now, so I've been going back two days a week with like 6 people in the office and I have found that really beneficial even though I think working from home is really good. I think being the office, you can't, it's a social aspect, isn't it? Of actually seen people in real life, which is really good, but it is quite nice having a balance of two days in the office and then three days working from home.

Alice

I definitely think it's about balance 'cause I'm on the South Wales cluster and I've started going back in for one day a week. And yeah, definitely the social aspect is really nice. Obviously we can't work with our audit teams at the moment, because in the office it's limited to 22 people, but when we can go back to possibly more working with our audit teams...you can't put a price on being in the same room with people and just being able to call out a question. But then you've got the working from home where you can obviously work more flexibly.

So yeah, I think it's all about balance going forward.

Max

Yeah. I went in the office the other day a well for the first time ever in about 6 months plus from starting the role and then just meeting people I think and getting that interaction. You know it's definitely not the same online, being able to really meet people and you know for the first time really get to know them and ask for help if you need it very quickly. I think it's definitely very beneficial but also I really do enjoy the flexibility of working from home. You know, kind of being able to pick hours in a way that suits other people as well.

Alex (interviewer)

Yeah, it definitely has positives and negatives, both options. I personally really enjoy the sort of personable nature of coming into the office and I find I'm more productive coming into the office but it's very much a question of sort of the person and the individual.

On that, aside from the meeting people, the interacting what are you most hoping carries over from what's changed in response to coronavirus and what you're hoping completely changes in your working lives?

Alice

I suppose before lockdown it was quite office-based and you didn't really work from home, especially if you were an apprentice or graduate. But obviously, going forward, it is useful just to have, even if it's one or two days a week working from home, just for that flexibility.

So yeah, I think that's what would be good going forward. And obviously with Teams we'll be able to do that, 'cause obviously some people may be in the office while you work from home, so yes, it's all about balance again, with that.

Max

Yeah, I definitely agree with the flexibility with working from home and office-based work because I do feel working from home in my opinion, when I know what I'm doing, I can do things... You know, I've only been in once at the moment, but I feel I can probably get stuff more efficiently when I'm not needing support and stuff, but I guess it is all open to how you kind of work and the type of person you are.

Emma

Yeah, I agree with what everyone's saying. Definitely the flexibility. I think having that communication with your leader is really good. If we can keep this it would be really good to choose when to work from home and went to go into the office.

Alex (interviewer)

Looking more broadly then, at your apprenticeship programmes, what have you learned from your experiences?

Max

I feel I've definitely learned a lot in the several months, I've currently been here at the moment. Whether that's in audit work, Excel, or even sometimes teams, 'cause obviously we're using that a lot. But I've also definitely learned that Wales Audit has put exceptional support in for me during my apprenticeship, and I do really appreciate that it is a well-supported kind of program.

Alice

Yeah, I definitely agree with that 'cause we're all allocated a line manager and especially since we can from home we've been having really regular catchups just checking in to see if you're OK, so the support's been really amazing. And you obviously learned so much on the job

with regards audit and accounting. And even just how to do admin jobs like keep track of emails and timesheets and communication skills, talking to clients. I've learned so much since starting, compared to when I came out of school.

Emma

Yeah, it's the same for me as well. Like Alice said, I think you learn so much in this role. And yeah, it's just so many things. Like for us, I think it's the accountancy side with AAT, it's the audit side with our day-to-day job and the communication with the clients, communication with the teams. Yeah, you just learn so much on this.

Alex (interviewer)

Yeah, I can definitely relate. I've learned such a cross section of skills I never really thought I would learn working at Audit Wales, so I'm really grateful for that. Just to sort of finish off what advice would you give to new applicants, either about the role itself or about the application process?

Alice

With regards to the job, I'd say just keep asking questions 'cause that's how you learn. You learn by sometimes making mistakes and getting things wrong and then being taught how to do it correctly. And I suppose with the application process, it's just making sure your CV's well filled in.

Max

I definitely agree with you. Don't be afraid to kind of try any sort of work that you come across because you know if you do try and get it wrong. The best learning is when you do get it wrong and that you learn from your mistakes basically.

Emma

Yeah, I think it's just being able to appreciate that you won't know everything straight away and I think that is vital. Then just make sure you're asking questions. And yeah, just take it day by day I suppose.

Alex (Interviewer)

Apprentices on the Audit Wales Apprentice program also get a chance to do a secondment whether that's in another area of the organization itself or outside of the organization. I'm here with Emma Thomas who's completed as a secondment. Do you want to start by explaining what you did on your secondment?

Emma

So, I did a 6-month secondment between November 2019 and April 2020 with the public service ombudsman for Wales. My secondment there was with me in a finance type role so working really close to the finance team, so almost the opposite of the auditor then.

Alex (Interviewer)

For those who are unaware, do you want to explain precisely what that body does and what your role was there?

Emma

Yes, the public service ombudsman deals with complaints from the public, mainly to do with the NHS and my role there was within the finance team then. I did a variety of

different work. I liaised with internal audit. I did some budget monitoring, preparation of the accounts.

Alex (Interviewer)

How did you find your experience?

Emma

It was amazing. I probably couldn't have asked for a better secondment place to go into. I think as well because the public service ombudsman is quite a small team, it meant that I could really get involved with all type of areas then. So yeah, I was doing things day-to-day like invoices and also because my secondment went over to April 2020 It meant that I saw year end and I saw the preparation of accounts as well. So yeah, it was a really good secondment and a really good place to go.

Alex (Interviewer)

Did you find the process of applying for it and getting this secondment easy? And, did you sort of know what you wanted to do as a secondment beforehand, or was it a process of thinking for a few options and deciding?

Emma

When the public service ombudsman was put to me as a place for a secondment, I think I was the first one to go there, so I was really interested in it and I've always been quite interested in the ombudsman's work as well so I was really excited to start my secondment.

Alex (Interviewer)

And what have you learned from your secondment that you've applied in your role as an apprentice at Audit Wales?

Emma

I think it's seeing that perspective of the other side, so as an auditor we normally deal with finance teams in local authorities and NHS boards and I think being able to see the other side of that being able to see the systems and the day-to-day jobs they have to do, really made me appreciate it more and it was really good for me as well to use my AAT alongside it. I could really apply that. And actually, when I did my secondment, I was doing my budgeting exam. So really, that meant that I could incorporate my audit work with my secondment at the same time as well, which was really beneficial for me.