

Alex Swift

Croseo, Welcome this is the Exchange podcast. I'm here with Harriet Rees and Simon Papworth. How are you both?

Simon Papworth

Very good thank you.

Harriet Rees

Yeah, very good.

Alex Swift

This is a podcast to support the current graduate recruitment campaign. So, do you want to start by explaining why you chose Audit Wales?

Harriet Rees

So I chose Audit Wales...I knew someone who was working at Audit Wales who introduced me to them and said I should apply. So, I did. But at that time, I'd already had quite a few interviews and offers for other grad schemes, so I was sort of already decided that I was going somewhere else and then when I got offered to do the assessment centre for Audit Wales, I thought, well I haven't really got anything to lose, so I should sort of go and see what it's like. And all day I just felt that everyone I met was really rooting for us and everybody who walked past would stop and say hello and introduce themselves. And I haven't been to any other assessment centres like that, and I think I felt that the values sat differently, and I sort of left the assessment centre feeling like I wanted to be part of it and that I was kind of missing out if I didn't get the job. So yeah, it changed my mind and I actually declined my other offers.

Simon Papworth

Yeah, and for me, I thought I'd just do a little intro. And you know, I didn't dream to become an accountant or train to be a chartered accountant. But after school I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I think lots of people have that. You know you don't know what you where you want to go, what you want to do. So, I took a year out before I did university and started a short course, AAT. I had a year of studying accounting to just find out like what like what's it like, whether I enjoy it or not. I had deferred an offer at university to study geography and history. So, I studied that at Swansea University for a year and I

thought 'I really don't like this. It's not for me'. I enjoyed the university life. I didn't enjoy kind of geography and history, so I decided to switch to accounting and finance and then studied that for three years. And then I met someone from Audit Wales at a careers fair and they explained about what the work they did and kind of the value of the work. I think that that was really important for me. You could work for a multinational corporation, and it's all about profit, isn't it? At the end of the day. I really took to the idea that you know this is valuable work in the public sector and it means a lot. The work that that goes on in public sector is really important for society and the Welsh population. And it's important to scrutinise that as well, and to make sure that they're doing it correctly. So that was a big draw for me.

Harriet Rees

I actually went to university and did dentistry. And so, I did the first year of dentistry at Bristol, and then it was about maybe two weeks before second year and I just thought 'this is not for me at all'. And so, I was able to pass on my qualification, like my first year passing level and go straight onto the second year but have another science degree. So, I went down and did Physiology which is like human body function and I like specialised in psychiatric disorders. And then I finished Uni and didn't know what I wanted to do. So, I got a job in a doctor's surgery and worked there as a receptionist and then just had the idea that maybe I should do accounting 'cause I really like maths and now I'm here. I'm like 'oh my God that was such a good decision to make' but it's really interesting 'cause I think that at university the biggest skills that you learn and not always necessarily in the subject you study. It's more like what you learn about yourself, the way in which you study. That sort of thing. And I think that's definitely what I've carried on, now going into learning, and working for sure.

Alex Swift

On that same point about learning, actually, what would you say are the main benefits of the graduate programme?

Simon Papworth

Yeah, I think the big one is you're trained to be a chartered accountant and you know you're on the ICAW kind of training for ACA, which is the same as the big four. If you're looking at the big four like PWC, KPMG, Deloitte, they do the same thing. You know it's up to that reputation. So, you're studying towards like a really reputable qualification, and

they pay for your studies for that. So, you go for Caplan, you go to college, you study towards them and you're given the correct support for that as well and also in your work as well, you're you've given the line manager and they're really supportive as well. You can have a meeting with them at any point to discuss your learning development. So, for me those are the kind of two main areas which help with your learning and development.

Harriet Rees

Yeah, I'd agree, obviously you're basically learning whilst earning money at the same time, which is like a huge positive at our age because everything costs money. But, I guess, it's also nice starting a job with a lot of other people who are in the same position as you. So being in a cohort, you're not the only new person and you do have lots of other people who are either experiencing at the same time or a year ahead of you, two years ahead of you, and so and then obviously, I know Simon just said then about line managers. You also have buddies. And the whole network of Audit Wales, all of them sort of push you in your development, and they prioritise your development. And I mean there's a running joke as well that as part of your training file, there are these things called ladders, and there's like certain things that you have to tick off so it could be something like 'think creatively' or 'manage a team', and you have to give examples of times that you've done that throughout your training, and the running joke is that managers will push you to do things and say, 'you can sign off a ladder, if you do it'. Yeah, I think there's just a lot of support. It's a big network and it sort of eases you into working life, and sort of like out of university life and into work in life bit by bit.

Simon Papworth

And also I think, I just remembered you have the option for us a secondment as well, so you can go on one internally. You can work on performance audit or you can work in another area of the public sector and it gives you a new insight into a different area of accounting. So, you know even choosing to be a trainee at Audit Wales, you still don't really know where you want to end up, so they give you a year of opportunity to see somewhere else which is really valuable.

Alex Swift

Yeah, on your point about easing into working life, Harriet, obviously it's very natural to be worried about coming into working life. What would you say to someone who's starting in Audit Wales or a similar place and who's naturally anxious or worried about starting here?

Harriet Rees

I mean, I'm in a different position where I had a job before I came, and so I've worked since I was about 15. But I think I was worried coming from university where you're just studying and then having a job where you're just working are two very separate things. Whereas when you come to this job you'll be working and studying together, and I think that scared me and I really think it's important just to remember that everyone sort of has the same goal for you. It's not a case that when you're in work then people are like 'okay, well now you're working so you shouldn't be doing anything to help your studying'. They're not separate, they are combined, and you have support there. I mean naturally you will be anxious about it, but I don't think I don't know if Simon agrees that it's anything really that...I think it the thought of it is worse than it actually is.

Simon Papworth

Yes. I mean, it's easy for us to say 'don't be worried about. It's absolutely fine', but of course, like we, we've all been in that position where we're nervous about that first day. But what are you worried about? You're worried that you're not going to be good enough. You're worried that people are going to say, 'you're not working hard enough' or 'you're not good enough to be here' but the truth is everyone starts in the same position and they don't expect huge amounts from you from the beginning. You know, they realize you're coming in at a level where you don't know anything at all, so all they want you to do is ask questions.

Harriet Rees

Yeah, someone told me when I first started that an auditor's job is to ask questions so to not be afraid of asking them. So, I think that just goes for all parts really.

Alex Swift

Thank you both for those responses, talking about nerve wracking processes, tell us a bit about the assessment process and what that was like for you.

Simon Papworth

It's probably very different, 'cause you did you start in Covid?

Harriet Rees

I started in October 2020. I did my assessment centre in person, but I had my interview over Skype.

Simon Papworth

So, I'm coming into my third year as a trainee and trying remember exactly what we did. So yeah, you'd rock up to Cathedral Road office. Probably nervous like I was and be greeted by Sian who is the trainee coordinator, and she's lovely. She can have a conversation with anyone and make you feel at ease. And then you'll probably be in a group of maybe eight or nine and there will be various stages, so I think we had maybe an icebreaker to get to know people and then you'd have a role play where you would potentially be opposite a client and you'd have to discuss a scenario. You'd also have a written exercise where you'd have to do a little bit of audit work, so basically they're just trying to get to know whether you'd be fit for the role, but I think also with Audit Wales, they want you to understand them as well, because there's a choice. It's not like they're going to take you no matter what. You get to choose whether you go there or not. So, I think there's a real emphasis on them helping you to understand the organisation. They invite trainees like us, who would be in the same position, to chat to you. They have audit managers come just to talk to you during lunch, so there's a real emphasis on...it's a two-way thing. It's not just like them scrutinising you. You're there to learn about the organisation as well. That's what I got from the assessment day and the assessment process.

Harriet Rees

Yeah, I guess what I liked about Audit Wales, which is different from other grad schemes I applied for is...I don't know how many of these you did Simon, but I did every single one I could. The first part of your application is these online aptitude tests and for like most of the big firms you do these aptitude tests and then they're all marked online, and you get instantly told whether you've passed or not. And if you don't get through those tests, then you don't actually meet a human until you've passed those tests, so you can only do those once every six months or whatever it is. So, the difference with Audit Wales is that the first part of the application I had to answer 4 questions and so I had to write like 500 words or something for each of the questions. I think one was like 'give an example of a time you've shown initiative' or 'why do you think audit Wales is a good fit for you?', so you'd answer those questions, and you send them off and then Audit Wales would come back and then they would invite you to the assessment centre and you'd have to do the aptitude test in that time. So, you are basically... the doors not shut to you right at the

start and I was, you know, it took me ages to get through those aptitude tests for other for other firms, so I think it's a good way for you to sort of get yourself out there and be picked from the first, but I think you've got a better chance in being yourself when you're applying to Audit Wales than you do sometimes with the firms.

Simon Papworth

I definitely agree. I did so many of those aptitude tests and took like hours on them. So yeah, I think Audit Wales definitely give you that opportunity to meet them first and the most important thing is that face to face, they care about you rather than your ability to answer cryptic problems.

Harriet Rees

And I think as well, after my assessment centre, whether you're successful or not, you have the opportunity to ring Sian. She gives you personal feedback, so they score you. That's how they do the assessment centre. They score you out of 10 on certain things. And I think I rung back the week after mine and she gave me all my scores and said exactly what they thought I was good at and what I wasn't, which I think was really helpful then, not just for Audit Wales, but also for other places as well. Even if you're not successful, they've still got things in place to sort of help you out, which is lovely, really.

Alex Swift

You mentioned the pandemic. Now Harriet you started your graduate programme during the pandemic. Simon, you said you've been here since 2018, but you've both obviously experienced working during a pandemic. How's it been for you?

Harriet Rees

I don't know any different. I was meant to start in the April, and it got pushed back then because of COVID. They were sort of hoping we'd be able to have our induction in person, but that just never happened. And so yeah, I started in October and I worked from home and I didn't meet anyone. We started going back into the office in April. So, I was here for a good six months before I actually started meeting people, and I think that some people said, 'oh, you know, it must be so hard doing your exams at home and so hard to study and at home, and not having the support with exams'. I had no distractions. I wasn't having to say no to my friends when they were going out on weekends because no one was going out. So, I think that was a huge positive for me. And I think as well,

people made that extra effort to introduce themselves to me because it wasn't that 'oh well, I just haven't bumped into them in the office'. They sort of have to go out of their way to introduce themselves. So, I've found it okay, but I have loved going into the office. I really love working and with other people and the ease of being able to like, ask questions and getting to know people having those incidental conversations rather than always being a purposeful conversation. I guess it's been more of a transition for you Simon.

Simon Papworth

Yeah so I started in September 2019, so I had six months of normal working, so I met everyone. So yeah, different to Harriet in that way, but I suppose when COVID hit everyone was in the same boat. It wasn't just me and the trainees, it was the whole organisation, completely different way of working and it was very good. I think my line manager, we had at regular catch ups, and you know the organisation dealt really well with some kind of that lack of face-to-face time. Instead, we're having more meetings together, which was good. The year was difficult I think for learning. Development was hard because I think I learn from observing. I learn from, you know, seeing the audit managers or seeing senior people in the office and how they work. So that was a bit more difficult. So, I'm definitely happy to be back in the office more regularly, but I suppose that will be the future of our work will be more working at home. It's definitely fast forwarded, kind of working from home. I think that was always going to be a thing in the future, but I think now we know it works.

Harriet Rees

What do you prefer? Do you prefer working at home, or do you prefer the office?

Simon Papworth

I like a mix. I think I definitely like two days in the office and three days at home. I think it works really well, but nothing beats meeting people.

Alex Swift

On a related note, just close this out, what are what are your hopes for the future? What are you aspiring to if you like?

Simon Papworth

In the short term, I'd love to, you know, graduate from this scheme, and really become a chartered accountant. I know it's quite, you might think, 'oh, that's quite a low bar', but it is a difficult process. If you want a challenge, if you want to develop yourself and grow then this is great, but it is difficult. I think the exams are the hardest exams I've taken. So, I think for the hope for the future within my work, I'd love to in two years' time say 'yes, I achieved that. That's great' but I think in general, you know with work and with life, you want contentment. You can keep pushing and want to be motivated for more and more. But at some point you've got to be content in in the job that you're in and the work that you're doing. I think yeah, quite vague, but yeah, to be content in where I am.

Harriet Rees

Yeah, I completely agree. I'd say to qualify as my first goal, and it is true. It is hard. I mean I've only done certificate level so far, and I found them hard enough and I don't even wanna, I'm starting my next exams in January and everyone's telling me to brace myself. So yeah, I'm nervous for it, but that's going to be the first goal and I guess I want to get myself in a position where I have options and I think accountancy is such a widespread profession. There are jobs in almost every sector of life and the sort of job, the day-to-day job that you can do with accountancy can be quite different. So, I think my aim is to sort of take all the opportunities I've got and to try and get as much experience in different areas while I'm here, 'cause they encourage that as well. And so yeah, I just want to be in a place where I've got options and yeah, I think options buy you happiness. Yeah, you can pick what you want to do for what suits you. So yeah, that's my hope for the future.