

# Counting on the future

**R**ole-playing job interviews with your dad might not be the coolest thing to admit to, but for Gemma Stephenson, the preparation proved crucial in landing her first job as a trainee accountant. Gemma, 23, was in her final year of a maths degree at Cardiff University when she began to consider future career paths, prompted by a polite reminder from her parents that she "really ought to think about getting a job".

She knew she wanted to work with other people, have a recognised qualification and earn good money, but accountancy was not something she had previously considered. The Prospects website at [www.prospects.co.uk](http://www.prospects.co.uk) was responsible for planting the seed. She explained: "It's for people who are leaving university and looking for their first job. You fill in a quiz about your personality, skills and so on and it then gives you a list of suggested careers.

"I looked in the financial field and accountancy was one of the things it suggested. I then looked up exactly what it means. The website basically tells you what an accountant is, what the training involves and what exams you do. It's really useful in letting you know exactly what you're in for." Using the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) website, at [www.icaew.co.uk](http://www.icaew.co.uk), Gemma then found out which accountancy firms took on trainees.

## Job interview

"You can send off for a pack about who hires trainees and what you'd be expected to do," she said.

"I wrote off to about five and got a response from Hazlewoods LLP, in Cheltenham. They were looking for 12 people to train."

Nervous about her first "proper" job interview, Gemma enlisted the help of her dad, Garry, who, she said,

**NIONE MEAKIN** describes how Gemma Stephenson, a maths graduate (pictured below), took the plunge and landed her first job as a trainee accountant for Hazlewoods LLP in Cheltenham



became her manager. She explained: "He helped me a lot. He'd interviewed people before and he knew what they wanted from me. I'd have to go outside the room, then come in and

*'You can't just turn up to an interview and wing it; they will give you a grilling'*

introduce myself. He told me how to sit, what to say, what to avoid saying and to keep my hands still.

"I could have cried, it was so embarrassing, but it was so useful in

the end. You can't just turn up to the interview and wing it. Chartered accountants are clever and organised and they will grill you – it's a professional career. They won't expect you to know everything, as they're going to train you, but they want to know you're serious and have an interest in the area."

Her first suit also helped Gemma to feel the part. "It made me feel more confident and I was like a different person – a professional instead of a student," she said. That interview took place in May and comprised a

general knowledge test and a personality and maths test.

### Stress and tension

"They asked me why I did my maths degree and why did I want to do accountancy? In the general knowledge test they even asked me what the capital of Canada was. I was so panicked I wrote Cambodia!"

Once the Interview was over, Gemma came out and promptly burst into tears.

"There was so much stress and tension, I'd never had an interview before and I just didn't have a clue what to expect," she said. And it didn't end there. Gemma was asked to return for a second interview – standard procedure – with the human resources manager and the manager of the section in which she would be working.

She then faced an agonising two-week wait, in the middle of sitting her finals, before she heard back from Hazlewoods. "I was convinced I didn't get it", she said, "Then the woman phoned me and said I'd got the job. I was really shocked. Of course, I accepted it and then felt really, really relieved."

### Working world

"I was quite excited for a while and then a month before I was due to start I became really nervous. I was scared of starting a new job, I was terrified as I didn't have a clue what I was doing, I'd never worked in an office and I was worried about meeting all these new people and I thought to myself what if they are all stereotypical boring accountants?"

On 5 September she took the plunge into the working world. "My first day I was absolutely terrified, not as nervous as when I first went to university, but I was feeling pretty sick" she recalled. "I arrived 40 minutes early as I wanted to make sure I was there on time. I saw lots of other people sitting in their cars as well. I later found out they were all the other trainees!"

The trainees were then ushered into the building, where they were introduced to the managing partner



Norwich Union

and told what they would be doing for the next four weeks. Basic book-keeping was first on the list.

"We started with why you'd keep accounts, then who keeps them and who does them. Then we started doing stuff about what a debit is and what a credit is, what kind of things goes into the books. We covered balance sheets, assets, liabilities and profit.

"I got home and thought, what on earth have I let myself in for?" The next few weeks were spent in Bristol at the Financial Training Centre, where the group was versed in the intricacies of VAT and money

*"My first day I was absolutely terrified and I arrived 40 minutes early"*

laundrying. Then it was back to Cheltenham where she was tasked with completing manual accounts for a number of clients. Each trainee is assigned to a qualified chartered accountant, who supervises their work and checks it before it is sent out. Gemma said: "So far I've done quite menial tasks and I didn't realise I'd be doing quite as much as that, but I understand why I have to do it. It's all part of being at the bottom of the pile and working your way up. You have to understand how things work at a basic level."

As her confidence grows, so does her enjoyment of the job. She said: "I do actually enjoy doing someone's accounts and I find it quite

interesting. Nobody's books are perfect and you need to do a lot of looking through them for things – I like that, it's a bit like detective work."

At Christmas she will sit two exams in accounting and auditing. Trainees must sit about four exams in each year of their three-year traineeship, before becoming a chartered accountant – a qualification Gemma hopes will give her flexibility and freedom in her working life.

### Flexibility and freedom

She said: "At the moment, I'm thinking when I finish this I'm going to want to have children and I want to be able to work from home. With this qualification, this allows you to do what you like. I could choose to work for a company two or three times a week or almost be freelance."

While Gemma said her maths degree had provided a good foundation, she was keen to stress that it is in no way essential to training as an accountant. "Even if you've got a history degree, as long as you can show you've got numerical skills, they may take you on," she added.

In terms of advice to others thinking of following her path, she said: "With accountancy, you've got to really want to do it. They can tell if you don't. When you're training, you've got a full-time job but you've also got to study for exams. It's quite hard work and you're in it for the long-haul. But if you put the work in, it can really pay off."