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Success ingredient





Flying colours

Reggie Rathour talks to alumni Edith Ho and Leo Leung as the Institute's qualification programme celebrates its 10th anniversary

Photography by Brian Ching

Edith Ho and Leo Leung have led varied careers: Ho heads the country and consumer bank compliance department at Standard Chartered Bank in Hong Kong, while Leung is the financial controller of Neo Derm (Hong Kong) Ltd., which runs cosmetic beauty treatment centres and shops in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. The pair, however, have one thing in common: They are both proud graduates of the Institute's qualification programme.

Ten years ago, when the Institute introduced the QP, the first locally developed accountancy curriculum, it had only 99 students and few overseas accounting institutes recognized it. Over the last decade, however, the number of graduates has grown to 5,271 – no mean feat given the initial uphill battle the Institute went through to get the programme rolling.

The QP is now internationally recognized by 13 institutes and many of its graduates have gone on to become movers and shakers in the accounting and business community.

Leung, who graduated from the programme in 2002 while working as a manager in the China division of The Bank of East Asia, hails the QP as “a learning experience, which provides a solid foundation on how to apply accounting knowledge in the real business world.”

Unlike most who kick-start their accounting careers in audit firms, Leung says he has always been more interested in business management. “The QP has helped me with my career so far. Accounting is deemed to be the language of business. The knowledge acquired through the training programme is applicable in different industries,” he tells *A Plus*.

Following his graduation, Leung worked as a senior finance manager for shipping company Maersk Hong Kong Ltd. and battery manufacturer Golden Power Corp. (Hong Kong) before joining Neo Derm.

“My present company is a very dynamic one and we are in a very competitive industry,” he says. “As the financial controller, I have to be the

final gatekeeper to ensure business is growing in line with our strategies and business model, and that there are financial and other resources available to support our expansion,” details of which he declines to provide.

Ho, on the other hand, was already a banking veteran when she decided to do the QP. She first studied to become a qualified accountant a year after she joined Citibank’s finance department in 1983 as an executive trainee, but dropped out because of the hectic workload and other commitments.

Around 1998, however, Ho’s former boss, the chief financial officer, encouraged her to try again during a performance review, believing the move would boost her career down the road.

“She believed that I could advance more – that having an MBA degree without attaining the CPA qualification would limit my opportunities, not within the bank but perhaps in other banks,” Ho recalls. “She told me it was not absolutely necessary but it was something that might be useful in the future.”

After chewing over what her boss said for a year, Ho decided to do an 18-month conversion course at The Open University of Hong Kong since she majored in finance instead of accounting for her undergraduate degree. She then studied for the QP and qualified in 2003.

While she was studying, a new line manager at Citibank asked Ho to head up the compliance department. At that point, Ho had already been working in the finance department for more than 17 years and knew its operation like the back of her hand. Even her colleagues joked that she could probably “do the budget in her sleep.”

“Doing something familiar is always easy, but moving away from the comfort zone needs a bit of courage

and I did that in 2001 (when she switched departments) and in 2005,” she says, referring to leaving her old job and moving to her current role at Standard Chartered.

Practical training

Prior to the inception of the QP, people wishing to become accountants in Hong Kong had to qualify through a U.K.-based accountancy body. But the Institute ended the joint scheme in 1999.

Candidates studying the QP have to complete four modules – financial reporting, financial management, auditing and information management, and taxation, each lasting 15 weeks. Students are guided by two experienced practitioners known as facilitators. To qualify, the candidates have to pass a three-hour open book examination for each module and a final exam that lasts six hours in two sessions.

Ho says doing the QP was a “very rewarding” experience and refreshed her accounting and finance knowledge. She particularly enjoyed the QP’s “lively” workshops, where she discussed and exchanged views with her fellow classmates about problems or issues they faced on the job. That approach makes the training more practical, she says.

“It’s not just studying for the exams, which can be so dry,” she says. “The QP with the workshop experience is very good. It gives you the chance to hear how people think about certain issues. I do not really mind sharing what I have with others because if the others see that you are sincere in sharing your ideas, they will also contribute. And at the end of the day, everybody gains.”

Neo Derm’s Leung agrees. The training does not only focus on memorizing all the accounting standards, “you are required to apply the knowledge that will make you more than just a bean

counter,” he says. “I am very confident that I am trained and qualified under an approach designed to develop future business leaders.”

Both Ho and Leung praise the facilitators who steered them through the modules and the workshops. “The workshops built on your confidence,” Leung says. “Talking through a subject or a solution was more useful for our work than being spoon-fed.”

Ho adds: “The three facilitators I had for my four modules would lead the team to think about a problem and get the participants to work it out. If the answers were not really up to the point, he would lead you to think again until you could come up with the right solution. They were never there to give you the answers.”

Both graduates recall the training as being tough and extremely busy. Statistics from the Institute’s student education and training department show that the passing rate for each module is between 55 percent and 65 percent and that for the final exam is 60 percent to 70 percent.

Lifelong learning

To ensure that CPAs continue to hone their professional skills, the Institute regularly offers a wide spectrum of training courses under its continuing professional development scheme. Members have to earn at least 120 CPD hours for every three-year rolling period.

Leung says the CPD courses are an indispensable part for accountants coping with the changing business landscape: “Of course changes will always make people feel uneasy, but as business leaders, we should be ready to adapt to any changes and lead our companies through challenges.”

After the financial crisis broke out, like other financial controllers,

Profile

Edith Ho

- 1983** Joined finance department of Citibank Hong Kong as an executive trainee
- 1990** Promoted to vice president of Citibank's finance department
- 2001** Joined Citibank's compliance department
- 2003** Completed the QP
- 2005** Promoted to director of Citibank's compliance department
- 2005-present** Joined Standard Chartered Bank (Hong Kong) Ltd. as head of country and consumer bank compliance

Leo Leung

- 1997-2004** Worked as manager of the China division of The Bank of East Asia
- 2002** Completed the QP
- 2004-2009** Joined shipping company, Maersk Hong Kong Ltd., and later battery manufacturer Golden Power Corp. (Hong Kong) as senior finance manager
- May 2009-present** Joined Neo Derm (HK) Ltd. as financial controller



Leung says he reviewed Neo Derm's performance and carried out in-depth analyses to make sure the company was not facing volatile or unsustainable risks.

To achieve this, he makes use of all the "accounting knowledge, experience and business sense" he has acquired through the QP and his various jobs. "This is one of the most critical times for us to apply our accounting knowledge to help the company succeed," he says.

From an accountant's perspective, selling beauty is like selling any other tangible products, Leung says. "We are calculating the profitability, the margin, revenue sources and risk exposure. We also look at the segmentation of the business," he explains. Leung enjoys the challenge of working in different

industries. "Different industries ride on different business models, which can give me more exposure and widen my horizon," he says.

As for Ho, she says the CPD courses have been "very useful" in keeping her up-to-date with the latest changes to standards, laws and regulations that may have an impact on her bank. In particular, she recalls a recent seminar, organized by a law firm about the regulatory update on selling investment products, where a spokesman of the Securities and Futures Commission talked about what they wanted under the new regulations.

Ho admits that compliance work is hard because new rules, especially during the financial crisis, keep coming in thick and fast. "I can tell you it is a challenge

everyday," she says.

Unlike most people who vie to join the front office in the investment banking arm of an international bank, Ho says she has always preferred working in a support function like finance. True to her core as an accountant, Ho says it took her some time to get used to working without a calculator when she switched to compliance.

"Finance is one of the departments that could provide me with the opportunity to work around numbers and the analysis of them," she says. "If you have enough experience, then you can actually see what's in the numbers and provide the necessary advice to managers for them to beef up their revenue or control their costs. That's how we can add value to the business." **A+**