

## Successful graduate

# Hunger for knowledge

For Stephanie Ma of Fairwood, both QP and her role in the commercial sector are ways to broaden her professional horizons.

### Practical qualification

Stephanie Ma, senior financial analyst for Fairwood Holdings Limited, has always enjoyed challenges. That is why she chose accountancy as a career in the first place. "I decided to go into the accountancy profession when I was in university," she says. "At that time, I knew it was a reputable profession. When I studied accounting, I found it an interesting subject. The concept of accounting is intriguing: you can show how a company is performing by applying certain accounting principles on the presentation of its financial data."

"I also thought the accountancy profession would be challenging for me because accounting standards keep on improving. Accountants need to learn up-to-date knowledge in order to meet challenges in a dynamic business world – subjects such as corporate law, finance, professional ethics and so on. I like learning new things and keep abreast of changes."

Like many young accountants, Ma joined a Big Four firm upon graduation. She enrolled on the Hong Kong Institute of CPA's QP soon afterwards, graduating the year after she left university. "When I was at university, I listened to a talk held by the Institute about QP. I decided to study QP as the programme is well structured and its well rounded training provides good career opportunity and prospect," she says.

When she started QP, Ma adds, she found it very valuable because so much of its materials was directly relevant to her job. "It is enjoyable because I can apply what I have learned from QP in my daily work," she says. "As an auditor, knowledge from the financial reporting module can always help me find out practical solution for my clients."

In addition to providing real-world experience, Ma says that QP focuses on practical learning and knowledge application via its interactive workshop, as well as open book examinations. Its training help students to space their learning out over the duration of the course more effectively, rather than being tempted to rely too much on last-minute revision. "I especially like the workshops because we had lots of opportunities to practise problem solving. During workshops, students are divided into groups to discuss and analyse cases, and answer questions raised from facilitators. This learning mode helps us not only understand difficult concepts easily, but also enhance analytical thinking and interpersonal skills. The ability to apply knowledge is important, and the open book examination format means that we can spend more time on understanding, rather than just rote learning."

### A wider focus

Ma stayed at the Big Four firm for three and a half years, largely because, she says, she enjoyed the variety of work the role allowed her to undertake. "I learned a lot there when I worked with a lot of different companies from different industries. Also I met a lot of people and worked along with various



#### Graduate profile

Name	: Stephanie Ma
QP graduation	: December 2007
Education	: Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Job title	: Senior financial analyst
Company	: Fairwood Holdings Limited
Past experience	: Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu

colleagues.” However, that range of exposure to the commercial sector was also the reason why she decided to move away from the world of auditing. “When I went to clients for audit, I found that I could learn more there, and so I wanted to know more about the operations of client and get a deeper understanding of the client. It is part of a competent accountant’s job to know all about business.”

Ma ended up joining the first company from the commercial sector that approached her: restaurant group Fairwood. “I believed it was a good company for me to work for: it is listed, it is sizeable, it has a good image and a healthy performance – maintaining a good profit for a long time.”

She works at the company’s finance department in a team that is mainly responsible for financial reporting, analysis and projections. The job has given her a broader exposure of the company’s business that she was looking for, she says. “I have found that I can really understand more on the operations of the company. I can do more financial analysis, for instance with the need to analyse the performance of individual branches – when one does not do so well, we try to find out why. This is very different from auditing. The problem-solving and analytical skills acquired from QP definitely help my current job,” Ma said.

Her plan, she adds, is to try to further broaden her range of skills, both through professional experience and through study. “For my next step, in addition to enriching my knowledge by accomplishing more difficult tasks in my job, I plan to enroll on accounting-related courses and examinations, such as workshop on PRC taxation, or company secretaryship, to further equip myself as a professional accountant.”

### What are the most important skills you have learned in your career?

- **Interpersonal skills:** these are very important to accountants, as we always work with different people.
- **Team-building skills:** most tasks can never be completed by one person due to the tight schedule and heavy workload, so it is very important to be able to work as a group towards one goal.
- **Problem-solving skills:** accountants need to be able to identify the core of a problem and seek advice from others for providing a practical solution.



Interview and reporting by Richard Lord