



Employer in the
spotlight –
Johnny Tai

Check in to a brighter future

Knowledge and experience top the list in hotel accounting

by Aldric Chau

Accounting has an indispensable function maintaining financial stability in a complex organization such as a hotel. From inventory and supplies to guestrooms and banquetting sales, accounting governs a complicated capital flow. Johnny Tai, accountant at Sheraton Hong Kong Hotel & Towers, talks about an AAT member's gate-keeping role in this sophisticated work flow.

The hotel's finance and accounting team has a total of 19 staff who oversee different areas including revenue management, expense and cost control, and payroll systems, all of which are backed up by a centralized information technology team. Johnny Tai has been the supervisor of AAT member Pauline Wong for ten years. He has witnessed the career growth of this dedicated AAT staff member and her competency in mastering technological changes.

Changes in the hi-tech era

"Technological advancements have totally changed the mode of our accounting operations," says Johnny. In the past the accounts payable team had three members. Because of the computerized system, adopted some years ago, all the work has been consolidated and is now managed by Pauline alone. Johnny says she has

demonstrated immense competency in adapting to the change. Downsizing the team has inevitably caused an impact on operations. However, Johnny is impressed by Pauline's ability to maximize her productivity to handle the increased workload and work effectively with the systems.

Magic of the AAT Exam

Johnny learned about the AAT Examination through Pauline and other colleagues. The qualification became popular among his team a few years ago. "Since 2008, I have seen that some of our younger colleagues have been keen to acquire the AAT qualification. I think it is good for Pauline and others to go back to school to update their knowledge after years of work." Johnny believes that studying for the AAT Exam has helped Pauline master technical updates, and the knowledge she has absorbed is

all directly applicable to her work. Johnny says that since she has completed her studies, Pauline has performed much better in areas such as financial accounting. She is now trained to look at problems from the accounting perspective and is able to provide a sound rationale for her solutions. “As a result her confidence at work has improved,” Johnny says. Pauline can now handle every task assigned to her independently without much supervision. She is also able to offer help and guidance to other team members.

Well-designed syllabus

Johnny, an accounting veteran, thinks that attaining a professional qualification is vital, especially given that accounting roles have become more diverse over the last decade. “To my surprise, Pauline and a few other co-workers managed to complete the AAT Exam within a relatively short period of time and at an affordable budget. Another point that impressed me is Pauline, who is a working mother, was the first colleague to attain the qualification,” says Johnny. He points out that the localized syllabus of the AAT Exam suits the needs of Hong Kong personnel who need to acquire some instantly applicable skills to handle increasing demands from work. According to Johnny, the mode of learning and level of the AAT Exam studies make the course perfect for beginners. “Accounting may intimidate people with its professional image and tough requirements. However, AAT serves as an easily accessible platform for those who are interested to explore the profession at a flexible pace,” he says.

Although technical knowledge is important, how it is communicated also determines how far one can go along one’s career path. Johnny believes that AAT Examination Paper 2 “Business Communication and Organization and Management” was the major reason behind Pauline’s significant improvement in written and verbal communications skills. As Sheraton is part of American company Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, there are many occasions where Pauline has to work with colleagues from overseas, making good business communications skills a must for Pauline.

Star performer at work

While Johnny regards Pauline as one of his star performers, she has faced challenges in some areas, such as legal related issues. Since she has little relevant work experience in this field, she sometimes found it difficult to handle legal issues. However, Johnny has found that Pauline performs better in this area after taking the AAT Exam because her studies for Paper 6 “Fundamentals of Business Law” not only gave her an overview of legal principles, but also honed her ability to research on her own whenever she encounters any difficulties. “During discussions on legal issues at work, Pauline is now more confident in expressing her views and understands the subject without the need for too much explanation,” says Johnny.

Accounting is a highly diversified function operating across different industries. Some accounting personnel are responsible for areas such as budgeting, foreign exchange or the ledger while others tend to be more closely associated with sales analysis, such as providing sales forecasts and revenue reports to senior management, and updating variances and year-on-year growth of sales. “Therefore, there are still many opportunities for Pauline to explore. With her strong foundation in accounting gained from her studies for her AAT qualification, I believe that Pauline is well-prepared to take on more challenges at work to unleash her potential.”

Entry criteria

“A mix of technical knowledge and practical experience are what it takes to succeed in hotel accounting,” says Johnny, adding that he highly values staff members such as Pauline who have both qualities. If accounting personnel are interested in this specific industry, Johnny advises that employers usually look for those who have relevant hotel experience, whether it’s in the accounting stream or not. After all, hotels operate a unique business model. In terms of personal qualities, Johnny highlights the importance of attention to detail and having a service-oriented mindset, which he maintains is paramount in any services industry.

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