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is a door opener,”
Tera Mak says.**

Photography by Nolly Leung

A World of Accounting Wonders

Dedication marks the way to the top

An accountancy career is not exclusively reserved for university graduates. With unwavering determination, everyone can enjoy a successful profession in the field – but only if they are willing to put in extra hours of hard work. Sino Land's Tera Mak talks to T/Dialogue about how she shapes her career by persevering.

By Li Ven-yee

Having worked as an accountant at Hong Kong-listed property developer Sino Land for two years, Tera Mak has a job which is coveted by many. But her success today did not come easy at all. While others may spend as little as three years to get themselves qualified, Mak undertook a bumpy and lengthy study path that took her almost seven years to make the transition from accounts clerk to a professional accountant. But she never threw in the towel.

“It had been very difficult. I took a long and winding path,” says Mak. “But it doesn’t matter even if one has to go in circles, because not everyone is lucky enough to take the straightforward, shorter route. All one needs to do is to stay focused.”

After completing Form 7, Mak failed to enter university because of low grades.

With her mother’s encouragement she studied for LCCI and, to her surprise, received a distinction in the accounting subject. That gave her an immense confidence boost and was the prelude to her joining the world of accountancy. In 2000, the assiduous Mak studied for an HKIAAT accredited diploma programme and started a job during the second year of her studies. Although Mak was entitled to claim exemptions, she started her Accredited Accounting Technician (AAT) examinations during her first year of study and took two years to complete all eight papers. Over the following 18 months she completed the Professional Bridging Examination (PBE) and, at the same time, embarked on a two-year associate degree programme before enrolling into a bachelor’s degree programme in accounting and finally, onto HKICPA’s Qualification Programme (QP).

Tips for Success: No U-turns

While not following any hard and fast rule, Mak sees perseverance and determination as keys to success. “I did not claim any exemptions from the AAT exam papers, so together with PBE I had to complete 12 papers in total.” During her study years, she had to juggle between working overtime, taking exams, studying and attending lessons. She often went to classes between 7pm to 10pm at night after finishing work as an accounting clerk, and buried herself in heaps of books at the library when weekends arrived. Not only did Mak have to sacrifice a huge chunk of her regular social life, but because her company did not grant study leave she had to study during her personal annual leave too.

“There was a lot of pressure to succeed. My colleagues would ask

about my exam progress. It was fairly competitive because achieving one extra level means you are one step closer to promotion,” says Mak. “It could be stressful, but it also acted as a catalyst for motivation.”

Reading extra materials in addition to the exam study packs, such as news of the accountancy profession and accounting journals, is also important as it broadens a student’s horizon and exposure towards the business world – something Mak thinks many young graduates don’t treat as being of sufficient importance. She also says it is vital to form a study group with other accounting students while preparing for exams, and to spend time effectively, such as learning from past mistakes.

“I failed Paper 8 – Auditing of AAT exam twice. Even though I was upset and doubted my ability to get through, I quickly got over it and asked myself what went wrong until I eventually came up with ways to improve my study techniques,” Mak says. “I finally passed the auditing paper on the third take and afterwards, when I took the QP, I passed the auditing paper in just one go.”

Find Your Own Path and Set Your Goals

However, no young graduates should blindly follow Mak’s footprints. While Mak encourages youngsters who are keen on an accountancy career to work towards achieving a professional

qualification, as she says this is the best way to open doors in the field, she thinks the most important thing is to know what one wants in life.

“It is very important to spend your time wisely. You will need to decide if accounting is really the career for you. If so, just work towards your goal and do not look back regardless of the difficulties you may endure on the way,” Mak says.

“But where you want to be in a profession very much depends on your ability, personality and career goals. While listed companies will only hire qualified accountants, demand is also high for junior levels of accounting staff, such as assistant accountants or senior accounts clerk. CPAs and AATs have different roles, just like doctors and nurses. The CPAs are those who want to be decision makers and advisors to business. Not everyone wants to be CPA and to bear significant responsibilities and the stress that goes with the job. Being an AAT is a great alternative.”

Mak feels that the AAT is the foundation which broadens exposure to the accountancy world and gives young people a taste of different elements of the accounting world so they can better decide for themselves which aspect of the accountancy profession appeals to them more. Those who do not have a university degree or who cannot afford to take a degree programme but who would like to start a professional career in

accountancy can use the AAT the first rung of the ladder that can, if they want, take them all the way to the top.

“QP is more about applying theory to real life, while AAT training is about laying the groundwork. But AAT incorporates areas that are not touched on in more advanced levels, such as the use of accounting software. This is something a university graduate may not know about because accounting software operation is not in their syllabus. The same goes for book-keeping: this is another area that AATs are trained to do and which accounting graduates may not grasp well,” Mak explains.

Despite her remarkable educational record, Mak is far from complacent. She is currently working on a master’s degree in professional accounting at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University as she strives to take her career further. Her next goal is to take the Chinese Institute of CPA examinations in 2009.

“Looking back, it was rather insane to have so many things on my plate all at once. It certainly wasn’t easy. But I hope by sharing my past experience, I will be able to tell youngsters that they do not face a dead end even if they fail to get into university or if they do poorly at school in their early years. The AAT qualification is a door opener. It provided me with many options for further study or for pursuing a professional qualification,” Mak says.