

Go For the Sure Thing: An Accounting Internship/Job-Seeking Discussion Case

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After the choice of college and major, the next significant decision for many accounting students is an internship. Through the experience of one of our students, this discussion case provides an opportunity for others to 1) determine what job attributes are important, 2) develop expectations for an internship experience, and 3) create a decision model for job/internship acceptance. Our student Jason made a choice between Tiny CPAs and Big Regional Firm. Both firms were located ideally. The deciding factor was the likelihood of a position being available at graduation. The internship experience was adequate, but the job offer fell through.

THE CASE

Jason held his head in his hands and wondered just how he was going to give Elizabeth the news. The new mortgage payment was due soon and Jason had just found out that there was no job waiting for him. Just when they thought everything would work out, things were more muddled than when he began the accounting program four years ago at State University.

Jason was a non-traditional student. He was about 40, married with two small children, and lived in a small resort town about 90 minutes from the State University. His wife, Elizabeth, was the mayor and loved her job even though the pay was very low. She enjoyed helping the little town prosper and grow into a wonderful place to vacation or to raise a family. Jason completed his finance certificate program at the tech college in town, but realized that he would need a four-year degree to get the kind of career necessary to supplement his wife's modest earnings.

Jason began the accounting degree program at State University and did well, getting good grades, working effectively with teams of traditional students, and managing the grind of commuting at least three hours, four days per week. The commute was worse in winter when ice and snow made driving difficult.

After three rigorous years, he was getting ready for his internship. He wanted to reduce his commute and worked tirelessly to network in the resort town. And, he was successful. He had two offers. The first was from Tiny CPAs, a local firm with two CPAs and a staff person. One of the CPAs wanted to retire, but there was just too much work and with the improved economy, the clients needed even more services. The CPAs liked Jason and Jason liked the homey atmosphere and the promise of a full time job at the completion of the internship. The clients were mostly wealthy farmers and small business owners in town. The work was mainly write-up work, compilations, reviews, with a heavy dose of taxes. Tiny CPAs had a strong reputation for providing excellent advice on farm financial management.

Jason also had a connection that resulted in an offer from Big Regional Firm that just happened to have a small office in the resort town Jason called home. The internship opportunity was fantastic with all the training and perks of a large organization, but close to home. The office did school district audits and small town audits in addition to taxes and small business audits. They also consulted with the large luxury resorts in the area. The only problem was that the small office couldn't guarantee Jason a job upon graduation. They told him it depended on the work load. So, Jason chose the sure thing and accepted the offer from Tiny CPAs.

The internship went fine, but Jason was a little disappointed in the lack of professionalism at Tiny CPAs. First, the building was really seedy looking, both inside and out. The office was desperately in need of paint and updating. The carpet was about 30 years old and even cleaning didn't make it look any better. Jason's work space was a banquet table with a folding chair at one end of the open space that served as the reception area for the firm. The two partners had offices, but there wasn't any attempt to provide Jason with a cubicle or any privacy for his work. One of the partners managed to round up a five-year old desk top computer for Jason to use. Then, while other students on their internships talked about the formal training they received, Jason was trained by the 'what we did last year' method after being given files from some of the clients to study the way things were done last year. Finally, when reviewing spreadsheets, Jason was shocked to see spreadsheets without consistent labels, formatting, or any documentation. Granted, the spreadsheets did the job, but were really hard to follow. But, the guys were hardworking and pleasant. Plus, he didn't have the long commute, so he tried to make the best of it. He asked lots of questions, and even offered suggestions for improving the spreadsheets. But, the partners were swamped with work and had little time to help him. Jason even suggested a system for keeping track of client information on the computer to make comparisons between tax years easier. Jason explained that just such a system would help streamline the work so that the team could be more efficient while maintaining the accuracy that was so important to the tax work. The partners just rolled their eyes and said they really didn't have time to consider any of that. So, Jason spent his internship doing fairly low level work, entering basic data into tax forms, making copies, assembling packets and calling clients for missing documents.

But, he told himself that everyone has to start at the bottom and he could help the firm become better over time. It was the ideal location and the CPAs, both residents of the town where Elizabeth was the mayor, were really nice guys. The internship ended and the guys took him out for lunch. They talked about how they appreciated the contributions he had made. Jason started to look forward to working full time. They were really good at doing taxes and helping their clients. So what if it wasn't a fancy place with the most up to date software. It was a good job and a short commute.

Jason and Elizabeth were really looking forward to Jason's graduation when they would have two incomes and the budget wouldn't be so tight. They started looking at houses, just for fun, but happened across a perfect property, close to Elizabeth's office, good schools, and affordable now that they had Jason's income. They put in an offer, it was accepted, and the closing was in six weeks. They were feeling like all their hard work was finally paying off.

That's when he got the call from one of the guys at Tiny CPAs. They were sorry, but they were going to have to retract the offer for a full time position. They realized that it wouldn't be fair to bring in Jason when they don't have time to properly train him.

REQUIREMENTS

Part A—Jason’s Situation

1. Identify the things that were important to Jason when making his decision on what offer to accept.
2. How would Jason’s internship have been different at the Big Regional Firm that did both tax and audit work?
3. Do you think Jason made a mistake in accepting Tiny CPAs offer? What could he have done differently to avoid this outcome?
4. Tiny CPAs gave a reason to Jason for retracting the offer of full time employment after the internship. What other reasons might they have for deciding not to employ Jason?
5. What should Jason do now?

Part B—Your Situation

6. Think about the things that are important to your career decision. Rank them from most important to least important.
7. How would you decide which of two internship offers to accept?
8. How would you respond if one firm was pressuring you to make a decision before you had completed your interviews?

TEACHING NOTES

Overview and Learning Objectives

After the choice of a college and major, the next significant decision for many accounting students is an internship. This case provides an opportunity to consider the many factors involved in selecting an organization within the field of accounting. For students considering public accounting the choice of a large or small accounting firm is examined. For students not interested in public accounting, the case helps identify what characteristics of employment are important to them.

The objective of the case is to provide an opportunity to have a focused discussion regarding internship/career choices in the field of accounting. The case describes Jason’s experience with internship and potential employer. By having students put themselves in Jason’s shoes the issues involved in choices may come to life.

The primary learning objectives of the case are:

1. Students will choose a set of attributes important to their job choice.
2. Students will develop their expectations for an internship experience.
3. Students will create a decision model for job/internship offer acceptance.

Implementation Guidance

The case is appropriate for use in professional development courses taken early in the accounting major. While not associated with any accounting content, the case provokes students to think about a situation in which the job or internship offers are not perfect and the choice is not easy. Then, they must consider an unexpected outcome from the decision. The case was tested with no grading involved, just discussion, and the classes, about 40 students each, were engaged.

When teaching the case, the instructor read the case to the students. This was done for two reasons. First, the instructor’s reading style was engaging and enhanced the drama of the case. Second, everyone finished at the same time and discussion could take place immediately without losing the interest of fast readers. No grading was associated with the case because the purpose is to jump start students’ thinking beyond just getting a job offer.

The case requires about 30 or 40 minutes of class time for reading and discussion. It requires no pre-class preparation by students. The short duration and the lack of required student preparation makes the case useful in several situations:

1. A class period when the instructor knows student preparation will be weak. For example, it could fill in time after an exam in a night class or on the first day of class.
2. A class period when attendance is limited by bad weather or premature departure for breaks. The case provides productive activity without leaving non-attenders behind.

Evidence Regarding Case Efficacy

Students have responded positively to the case. Two sections of fraud and forensic accounting students completed the case and were anonymously surveyed prior to the discussion of the case. Fraud and forensic accounting is a 400 level elective for the accounting program. For this course the student population is primarily seniors, many are working on their 150 semester hours (i.e. fifth year students). An Appendix to this section (Appendix: Evidence of Case Effectiveness) includes the survey questions and results. A majority of students indicated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following statements:

- This case helped me analyze how I would choose between two job offers.
- This case helped me establish a clear set of expectations for an internship experience.
- This case helped me think about what attributes of a job are important to me.
- Having completed the case, if I had two job offers, it would be easier to decide which offer to accept.
- Completing this case was a valuable educational experience.
- I would recommend this case to other students.

Instructor Introduction

This teaching case, based on an actual student’s experience, focuses on career exploration by accounting students and incorporates organizational size/structure issues. Students are asked to consider internship/career choices in public accounting. The choice of a large or small accounting firm is examined.

The objective of the case is to provide an opportunity for faculty to have a focused discussion with students who will be considering internship/career choices in the field of accounting. Findings from articles including similar issues/questions are provided to the instructor and may be used to contrast the in-class responses from current enrollees.

This is a discussion case focused on internship and career choice. As a discussion case there is no “right” answer, however, there are common answers and the case provides the opportunity to raise key concepts. The discussion itself will vary based on the student mix, as students will have a mixture of work and internship experiences to share. In addition, some students will have been contemplating internship or career choices.

1. Identify the things that were important to Jason when making his decision on what offer to accept. (Objective 1)

Case factors:

Job availability after internship “sure thing” and partner looking to retire

Location

Firm atmosphere

Firm reputation

Community ties.

Factors found by Kimmell, Keltyka, & Ofobike (2008):

81% of students indicated that they had already decided, prior to the interviewing process, what firms they hoped to work for after graduation.

Firm characteristics most cited were:

Reputation

Company size

- Work-life balance
- Genuine concern for employees
- Friendly office atmosphere
- Opportunity for professional growth.

Students indicated that a firm's involvement on campus was very important (47%) or somewhat important (38%).

42% of respondents indicated that they had friends working for the firm they were interested in which positively impacted their view of that firm.

Many of these factors were raised by students as surveyed in 1970 regarding full time employment Trump et al (1970).

- Nature of work
- Opportunities for advancement
- Starting salary
- Working conditions
- Job security
- Training program
- Fringe benefits
- Location
- Company reputation
- Opportunity for graduate study
- Prestige of industry.

2. *How would Jason's internship have been different at the Big Regional Firm that did both tax and audit work? (Objective 2)*

Case trial in class students mentioned the following:

- More formal
- Better training
- Different culture
- Corporate
- More institutional.

Bagley, Dalton, & Ortegren (2012) surveyed both graduate students and professionals regarding the selection of a Big 4 firm or a non-Big 4 firm. They found graduate students had a more limited view, but overall their perceptions matched those of working professionals. When asked, graduate students listed the following advantages and disadvantages of Big 4 firms:

Big 4 Advantages:

- Prestige
- Compensation and benefits
- Networking/future job opportunities
- Larger clients
- Better training
- Experience in variety of industries
- Opportunity for international business experience
- Better resources

Big 4 Disadvantages:

- Too many hours
- Stressful/too competitive
- Working environment (i.e. less personal or friendly)
- Less exposure to the full audit
- Too much travel
- Large offices

Fewer opportunities for advancement.

Dalton, Buchheit, & McMillan (2014) surveyed upper-division accounting students and experienced practicing CPAs regarding relevant factors in selecting an Audit or Tax position.

Students' perceptions included:

Audit:

- More client interaction
- Better future job opportunities (in industry)
- Greater knowledge of business processes
- More interesting/stimulating lifestyle

Tax:

- More stable daily routine
- More specialized skills
- More collaborative client relationships
- More likely to help clients save money
- Work is more "black and white".

TABLE 1
DALTON, BUCHHEIT, & MCMILLAN (2014) SURVEY RESULTS

	Tax Student	Audit Student	Tax Professional	Audit Professional
I would learn more about companies if I pursued a career in auditing as opposed to tax.	4.37	5.16	3.22	4.39
I would have a more interesting/stimulating lifestyle if I went into auditing as opposed to tax.	3.37	5.76	1.73	3.63
In the future, it would be easier for me to get a job within industry if I went into auditing as opposed to tax.	3.60	4.49	3.02	3.90
I would travel more often if I went into auditing as opposed to tax.	5.75	5.99	4.38	4.48
I would get more opportunities to interact with clients if I went into auditing as opposed to tax.	4.54	5.38	2.56	4.15
I would have a more stable daily routine if I went into tax as opposed to auditing.	5.40	5.14	3.09	3.66
I would be more likely to help my clients save money if I went into tax as opposed to auditing.	4.88	4.11	4.02	3.50
My job would be more black and white (i.e. less ambiguous) if I went into tax as opposed to auditing.	4.23	4.47	2.11	2.78
I would develop more specialized skills if I went into tax as opposed to auditing.	4.37	3.82	N/A	N/A

As found in Table 1 working professionals agreed with students a) that auditors learn more about company operations and b) that auditors travel more than tax professionals.

Tax professionals disagreed that auditors have more client interaction.

Both auditors and tax professionals disagreed that tax is more black and white (less ambiguous) than audit work.

Both upper level accounting students and experienced public accountants were surveyed regarding perspectives on the tax and audit tracks.

3. Do you think Jason made a mistake in accepting Tiny CPAs offer? What could he have done differently to avoid this outcome? (Objective 1 & 2)

Case trial in class found students generally agreeing that Jason had not made a mistake in accepting the offer from Tiny CPAs. Instructors may want to discuss the possibility that it is easier to move from a larger firm to a smaller firm.

It may have been in Jason's best interest to continue to explore job opportunities and keep networking, even though work at Tiny CPAs was a "sure thing."

4. Tiny CPAs gave a reason to Jason for retracting the offer of full time employment after the internship. What other reasons might they have for deciding not to employ Jason? (Objective 2)

Case trial in class students mentioned the following:

- Firm didn't appreciate suggestions from Jason

 - Perhaps threatened by change

 - Perhaps set in their ways (especially technology)

- May have known all along that a position would not be available

- Jason perhaps put too much weight on the "offer"

Other possible factors:

- Firm future outlook changed

- Jason's work was good, but not compatible with firm

- Firm not willing to create physical space of a third office

- Small town tensions with Jason's wife, the mayor.

5. What should Jason do now? (Objective 3)

Suggestions for Jason include:

- Network

- Call Big Regional Firm

- Discuss part time work with Tiny CPAs

- Contact an area accounting temporary placement service.

6. Think about the things that are important to your career decision. Rank them from most important to least important. (Objective 3)

Bagley, Dalton, & Ortegren, (2012) included the following factors:

- Firm prestige

 - Compensation and benefits

 - Networking / future job opportunities

 - Characteristics of clients

 - Size

 - Industry

 - International

- Firm training opportunities
- Resources of firm
- Hours / Work-life balance
- Stress / competitive atmosphere
- Work environment
- Scope of work
- Travel
- Firm office size
- Opportunities for advancement.

7. *How would you decide which of two internship offers to accept? (Objective 1 & 3)*

Bagley, Dalton, & Ortegren (2012) surveyed professionals regarding the selection of a Big 4 firm or a non-Big 4 firm.

Reasons for selecting their current firm were as follows:

Big 4 participants:

- Recruiting experience (43.75%)
- Prestige (33.33%)
- Networking/future job opportunities (27.08%)
- Compensation and benefits (12.50%)
- Location (10.42%)
- Working environment (10.42%)

Non-Big 4 participants:

- Working environment (39.72%)
- Fewer or more flexible hours (28.04%)
- Recruiting experience (21.50%)
- Location (11.68%)
- Compensation and benefits (11.21%)
- Diversity in experience (10.75%).

8. *How would you respond if one firm was pressuring you to make a decision before you had completed your interviews? (Objective 2 & 3)*

Violette & Chene (2008) surveyed six public accounting firms (two multistate regional and four local) regarding their recruiting and interviewing methods. These firms were known to actively recruit at a specific university's campus. Firms were asked about their pre-interview, interview, second interview, and final selection process. Three stand out characteristics were 1) leadership potential, 2) strong interpersonal communication skills, and 3) enthusiasm and motivation toward the profession.

In contrast to the 8th case question, firms were found to provide extra time to top candidates recognizing that potential hires were likely discussing multiple offers with friends and family. Although some offers might be extended on the spot during a second interview, most offers were made via telephone a few days after. Students were generally given 10 days to two weeks to respond. Students should let firms know whether or not they are interested, but should not hesitate to take some time to fully consider an offer. Firms were found to be open to candidate's questions to clarify details or address concerns.

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APPENDIX

EVIDENCE OF CASE EFFECTIVENESS

	Question	Response*	0	1	2	3	4
1.	This case helped me analyze how I would choose between two job offers.	Response Frequency % Frequency	1 1%	-	3 4%	39 51%	34 44%
2.	This case helped me establish a clear set of expectations for an internship experience.	Response Frequency % Frequency	3 4%	2 3%	8 10%	39 51%	25 32%
3.	This case helped me think about what attributes of a job are important to me.	Response Frequency % Frequency	-	1 1%	3 4%	28 36%	45 58%
4.	Having completed the case, if I had two job offers, it would be easier to decide which offer to accept.	Response Frequency % Frequency	3 4%	-	9 12%	42 55%	23 30%
5.	Completing this case was a valuable educational experience.	Response Frequency % Frequency	1 1%	1 1%	2 3%	46 60%	27 35%
6.	I would recommend this case to other students.	Response Frequency % Frequency	2 3%	1 1%	1 1%	44 57%	29 38%

*Students were anonymously surveyed using the following Lickert scale:

1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree; 0 = Not Applicable or non-response.