



Personality project

In a competitive working environment, how important is it to be nice? Alison Coleman finds out

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A successful career in business and finance requires a broad set of skills that go beyond the ability to crunch numbers. Technical skills and competencies are critical, along with general business knowledge and IT expertise, but so too are good communication skills and the likeability factor. In what is essentially a people business, being pleasant, approachable and personable counts for a lot.

That’s a view backed up by recent ICAEW research, in which 562 members in senior roles were polled. Asked for their views on the key skills, behaviours and personal qualities needed for success in their current roles, a third (33%) saw likeability as a main personal trait needed for success, while 32% said it was a key to success for future senior finance leaders.

It’s not difficult to understand why likeability, as part of a broader set of personal skills, is seen as so important. ICAEW global director of student recruitment, Sharon Spice says: “This research demonstrates that qualities such as being likeable and being able to get the best out of people are crucial aspects of career success, and are not just a ‘nice to have’.

“Students coming in to the profession will need to ensure they have a range of skills and behaviours,

and then continue to develop and expand on these throughout the rest of their careers.”

When looking to hire new chartered accountants, employers are increasingly focused on personality, and expect candidates to have strong communication skills, a positive working manner and to be highly effective in the workplace. It may not be explicit, but likeability is clearly an important factor, regardless of the chosen accountancy career path.

According to Karen Young, director at Hays Accountancy & Finance, nothing affects reputation as much as a good professional attitude on top of learned aptitudes: “You can no longer rely purely on exam success and technical skills to get ahead in your career as an accountant. Being nice to your colleagues doesn’t mean you have to become their best friend, nor is it appropriate to be thought of as a pushover, but it is important to be polite and professional and to treat your colleagues with respect.”

Likeability can also be a driver of productivity. Sven Hanger, principal consultant on the accounting and finance team at recruitment firm MERJE, says: “Accountants are required to use the numbers to help improve the business and interact with members of other departments and offer advice. This is where

interpersonal skills become vital. It’s not just about being likeable, but more about getting the job done.”

It can also help enhance client relationships and strengthen negotiating skills. Dominic Franiel, head of student recruitment at EY, says: “We have diverse teams from many different backgrounds that work with clients from a broad range of sectors. When it comes to successful relationship building, negotiation and teamworking, being inclusive and flexing your personal style in different situations with different people is key to success.”

He sees effective rapport building and relationship management as key skills for success in many professions, including accountancy. Being liked can only bolster the effectiveness of those skills. “When we last reviewed our student selection process, line managers felt that strengths such as adaptability, collaboration, relationship building and consultative capability were critical for success at EY,” he adds.

But are trainees and newly qualified chartered accountants aware of the likeability factor and how it could influence their future careers? Duncan Smith, chief of staff, group finance at Barclays, believes so. He says: “I am seeing more people joining our graduate programme who are very talented, very nice and very aware of the value of good interpersonal skills.”

They are also seeing the bigger picture in terms of the full suite of skills, values and behaviours needed for a successful career. Newly qualified ICAEW Chartered Accountant Chris Nelson, based in Fraud Investigations and Disputes Services at EY, believes that coming to work with the right attitude, investing in your colleagues and embracing diversity are central to a successful career and winning the respect of those around you.

He says: “Being liked is an important character trait that will add positively to your career over time. However, I believe that it is much more important to develop a growth mind-set, the ability to empathise and to celebrate diversity every day. These skills will help you to build stronger relationships which become more important as your seniority increases, which will help you become a more effective individual and successful leader.”

Likeability can’t be taught, but it can be improved and developed. As ICAEW senior strategic insight manager James Baglin points out, the people who took part in the research and viewed likeability as an important quality had been in their careers for a long time.

He says: “They have developed their own personal skills and qualities over the course of their careers rather than being taught them. Different things are needed now and

in the future, and these personalised skills such as likeability are perennial, humanistic and intrinsic.”

However, Nelson insists that self-awareness, personal style and an understanding of how to engage in active conversation can be learned, but adds: “It is important to balance development with authenticity and to think about your personal brand and what you stand for as an individual.”

Likeability and approachability are behaviours that are easy to recognise in a face-to-face workplace setting but may not translate in quite the same way over social media. Hays’ Young says: “How you behave outside work will naturally sometimes be different to how you interact with your colleagues in the workplace. Always reflect before you react or post, as a resentful outburst on social media could affect how people view you in the long term, both professionally and personally.”

Ultimately, being nice and showing kindness and consideration to others makes for a more pleasant, efficient and productive workplace for everyone.

Lucy Whitehall, wellbeing consultant at CABA, says: “Kind people are quick to give credit for good work, and forgiving when the pressure gets to others. In the fast-paced accountancy industry this is highly valued as it enables teams to function more efficiently and productively.” ■

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