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Go Green: Environmental Opportunities for the Future

By Joanne Sammer

The green revolution is going strong and represents a range of career opportunities for finance and accounting professionals. Although green accounting and finance jobs exist in emerging fields, such as alternative energy generation and other sustainable industries, you don't have to be an expert in cap-and-trade emissions trading to land a green job.

There are a number of ways accounting and finance professionals can help organizations when it comes to sustainability. "Accountants can influence the greening of organizations at a leadership and strategic level, from a management accounting and performance management perspective or in roles related to financial and enhanced business reporting, and assurance of disclosures," says Stathis Gould, senior technical manager with the Professional Accountants in Business Committee of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC). Because of their financial role in their organizations, these professionals are often well placed to influence change by making sure sustainability issues are factored into business cases, capital expenditure decisions, cost allocation and strategy.

Making a Difference

When discussing jobs with new organizations or changing roles in their existing organizations, accounting and finance professionals should recognize that they are well positioned to help organizations develop a broad view of sustainability that includes economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility. "A sustainable business creates profitability in a way that enables organizations to survive and to create a better world," he says. IFAC's Sustainability Framework, <http://www.ifac.org>, is designed to help organizations make sustainability an integral part of their business model and to help accounting and finance professionals take a leadership role in this transformation.

Whether working in a large or small company, accounting and finance professionals can begin taking immediate steps to make these businesses more sustainable by promoting energy efficiency, minimizing waste, improving materials use, and reducing water consumption. In the process, these efforts are more than likely to improve the company's bottom line. For example, by regularly reviewing energy bills and taking frequent meter readings, accounting and finance professionals working in small companies can help operational managers track the use of energy and identify opportunities to control energy costs.

In larger companies, accounting and finance professionals can pursue opportunities in environmental management accounting. For example, a manufacturer or health care organization can use management accounting principles to identify ways to reduce its disposal costs by retooling its operations to reduce waste. In this case, the organization investing in environmental initiatives will rely on its accounting and finance professionals to ensure that any changes will help to maximize the return on investment, to identify available tax incentives and tax credits, and to track these costs and improvements over time.

Finding Opportunities

There are a number of ways for finance and accounting professionals to find green jobs. Individuals can begin by identifying companies with active environmental management programs. Many companies in a range of industries issue annual reports detailing their efforts at environmental stewardship, sustainability and social responsibility. This information can highlight which companies are taking these efforts most seriously and where green job opportunities may lie.

Most public accounting firms also offer job opportunities in their environmental practice areas, which offer services like environmental compliance audits and systems development for managing environmental compliance. And as climate change remains a key issue, state and federal government agencies, international organizations, and non-profits can also be important sources of green job opportunities for finance and accounting professionals.

Environmental issues only promise to become more important in the future, making it likely that environmental accounting opportunities will continue to grow. Just about every company has an impact on the environment in some fashion, so finance and accounting professionals have an opportunity to take steps to minimize that impact and improve their organization's bottom line no matter where they are working.

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