

An Interview with Paul Aplin OBE

The journey so far:

Paul grew up in the West Country, and went to a 'secondary modern'/comprehensive where he studied O- Levels (GCSE's) giving him the chance to go on to study A-levels. However things didn't go according to plan and in fact Paul got 2 grade E's "the lowest grade to pass with". Whilst he had university offers they all fell through, but in clearing he was offered a place at the then 'Cambridge College of Arts and Technology' (now Anglia Ruskin University) to study biochemistry. Upon graduating Paul remembers the difficulties in securing a job in science back in 1978, and so "applied for every job within the local newspaper every week".

After a few weeks Paul got a letter asking for an interview at a local firm of chartered accountants and although he "had no idea what a chartered accountant did" he attended, as "a job was a job". After a successful interview and although having "no real intention of staying or training as an accountant" Paul later signed an accounting training contract. "I found I enjoyed it" states Paul who is still with the same firm 39 years later!

How did Paul get involved with the institute?

Originally interested in audit, Paul found himself seeking a career in tax after his firm took on experienced Big 4 personnel who he believed would have a greater chance of partnership over him. "In a small firm I could see that audit career prospects weren't great". However Paul noted that the firm didn't have a tax partner so he embarked on taking his CTA (chartered tax adviser) exams at the age of 32 and was the only CTA in the firm and so was offered partnership a few years later.

A couple years later Paul remembers seeing a small piece "about 4 sentences long" in the 'Taxation magazine' saying that HMRC were going to start a new electronic filing system using two software providers; one of which was used within his firm. Intrigued Paul phoned the system providers and asked if they also could use this software to which they were told "no because we don't have the software out yet...but how would you like to be the test site" Paul agreed. As a result his firm would file the UK's first ever-electronic personal tax return. "The great thing about being the only person to have done something is by definition you must be the expert".

Following this great achievement Paul was invited up to London by HMRC to talk about next steps, and met a number of members from the institute's (ICAEW) tax faculty. He was subsequently asked to speak at the next tax faculty conference in Oxford. Little did Paul know that this would lead to him joining the faculty's technical committee, then the main faculty committee as a member, vice chair, deputy and ultimately chair.

Taking on leadership roles within the institute wasn't without thorough thought from Paul. Paul remembers a number of conditions he placed on his acceptance of joining the tax faculty committee:

1. No journalists - "I had no experience interacting with journalists"
2. No politicians - "I also had no experience with politicians!"

However unbeknown to Paul, once he had accepted the institute position, the government commissioned a report from Lord Carter on boosting electronic filing and of course Paul's involvement in the ICAEW response was requested, due to his expertise in the field, which required press and politics! Paul ultimately joined the internal HMRC board, which oversaw the implementation of the Carter Report's proposals.

Paul however did face difficulties initially when integrating into the HMRC Carter Board due to him being the only non-HMRC member and thus "an outsider". However he did find that people 'warmed' to him, when they realised that although he did at times disagree with the majority of the committee, he was doing so to offer genuine challenge and constructive support, not just to be difficult.

After successfully navigating the taxation community, becoming an integral member of the tax faculty at the ICAEW, and working on governmental initiatives Paul decided that he wanted to make some personal career changes “For some years I was pretty much known for tax”, and decided in 2014 that he would stand for vice president as there was “more to me than just tax and certainly more I wanted to say about the profession”. After another successful campaign as vice president Paul was later elected as President of the ICAEW 18/19.

At this distinguishable stage of his career Paul notes a number lessons learnt:

1. “Set your sights high, it doesn’t matter what school you go to, you can still get the top job”
2. “Always seize small chances. 4 sentences in a magazine got me onto HMRC’s and the ICAEW’s tax faculty’s radar”
3. “Never give up! I failed my final ICAEW exams twice”
4. “Decide what you want out of your career, you don’t have to decide on day one, as sometimes unexpected paths gradually lead you to places you never thought you could reach. It might just be the thing you thought you wouldn’t be any good at that you find is your real forte. Sometimes it can happen by accident like somebody throwing a ball towards you and finding that you’ve caught it and made the touchline”

What were Pauls’ presidential goals?

1. **Globalisation of the accountancy profession:** “Although building/restoring trust in the profession, wider business and society is important and necessary, Paul felt that as a profession we were in danger of becoming inward looking, and he wanted us to do everything we could to reach out globally; not only to our members but to colleagues within other professional bodies, because you can’t have a strong national economy without a strong national accountancy profession, and the same can be said for the global economy. Paul believed that we don’t want/need an economy where one professional body is trying to out-power another, but a system where institutes are treated as equals. Paul was able to make headway during his presidency by improving collaboration with other institutions, through bodies such as ‘Chartered Accountants Worldwide’, which brings together various chartered accountancy bodies.
2. **Leaders in digital technology:** “Digitalisation is changing everything we do in our personal and business lives on a scale and at a pace that is unprecedented. To illustrate it took 75 years for the telephone to reach 50m people. It took 19 days for ‘Pokémon Go’ to reach 50m...digital connection made the difference”. During the last year the institute has setup online learning programmes i.e. ‘finance in a digital world’, carried out a series of road shows for practitioners who are looking to improve their digital capabilities, and made the Bloomsbury online library available to practice members, to provide digital resources in relation to tax and accountancy.
3. **Improving access:** Justine Greening said it best at the signing of the Social mobility pledge back in March - “talent is evenly spread across the world, but opportunity isn’t” to which Paul wholeheartedly agrees. “It shouldn’t matter what your background is (school, family, socio-economical). Improving access into the profession was/is something Paul believes we can/should change. “As someone who has been incredibly lucky in life, I’ve reached the point where I would like to help spread some of that opportunity around”. During Paul’s year as president, the BASE Programme (a national business and accounting competition for school or college students aged 16-17), was made digital so that more people could get involved (twice as many as last year). Additionally, the ICAEW signed the social mobility pledge which is a commitment to give people from all backgrounds a taste of work at ICAEW, and hopefully

the opportunity to progress into a full-time job which is important to Paul because he “could not have dreamt of the life I live, and wants others to have that opportunity too”.

Paul is also passionate about the ICAEW Foundation which funds bursaries', which led to Paul fundraising more than 10 bursaries' in East Africa and South East Asia during his presidency. "Each individual life matters, that's 10 young people who had no hope of a career in finance who now do have that opportunity. One beneficiary is now mentoring other students which means that 1 bursary changed multiple people's lives"

Unbeknown to many, presidency at the ICAEW is a voluntary role, which Paul held whilst continuing with his full time partnership role at his firm. When asked how he balanced both roles and responsibilities Paul noted that, "long working days and weekends were required!" He also thanked technology which "enabled him to work productively in various places i.e. trains, airport lounges, anywhere in the world".

Being ACA qualified Paul has a lot of experience balancing various responsibilities, which he believes aided him, during his presidency. Although Paul didn't get as much time with his Dog "Misty" as he would like, he did note the importance of getting "thinking time" in the midst of his busy schedule. (Something Paul looks forward to doing more of now that he recently stepped down as President).

Although Paul found balancing work difficult at times, he found ways to manage his responsibilities in accordance with the type of life he wished to lead. "When you're really stressed, and you've got lots of thoughts competing, what you really need to do is take a piece of paper, draw three columns and label them; Other people's problems, My problems, Problems I can't do anything about. Write all your thoughts out, and things become more controllable"

Paul believes that communicating well with our colleagues is key to dealing with stress "share it, share it early because then people are keeping an eye on you, people will be supportive and give you advice"

It's important to share our burdens with those who can help. It doesn't make you a failure, or a weaker candidate, but shows you know how to utilise your network efficiently. It's also important to prioritise our commitments as many try and balance professional qualifications, full time work, side hustles, hobbies, health & wellbeing and a healthy social life.

The ICAEW has achieved so much in the last year from raising 10 bursaries' under the institute's foundation to the signing of the social mobility pledge to which Paul attributes the success to the "amazing team at the ICAEW, and 100s of volunteers."

What's next for Paul?

Although Paul stepped down as President on the 5th June 2019, he hopes to continue his involvement with the institute and especially the charitable foundation. "I definitely want to continue providing a voice for the ICAEW foundation. It's not a one-year thing, but something to continue supporting. I will be looking to retire from my firm early 2020, after 40 years of general practice, and taking time over the summer to think about what I want to do next as I can't imagine sitting in a deck chair for the rest of my life as of yet! I've never felt more alive than I currently do" It's likely that Paul will seek some Non-Executive directorships.

Paul Aplin's career has been inspiring and as unique as they come, but ultimately he believes in the importance of global collaboration and providing opportunities for all. Globalisation is the major driver of change in society today and it's important we all play our part in shaping it. For Paul this means "It's not about going into other communities and trying to get them to follow our rules and practices, but helping them build their own national accountancy bodies, sharing knowledge and experiences in the spirit of partnership. It's about treating people as equals."

We at NGA echo Paul's words closely, it's imperative in a world that's forever changing that we as a community of accountants continue to evolve in learning how to work effectively with one another and other professions, respecting, appreciating and celebrating our individual differences.