

RSM Tenon's Kelly Futcher, left, and Michaela Birch



What I do...

Kelly Futcher and Michaela Birch MAAT on AAT and working at RSM Tenon. By Ruth Stokes

Working in the audit department of RSM Tenon is varied and rewarding for Kelly Futcher and Michaela Birch. The company is the UK's seventh-largest firm of accountants and business advisers since the recent merger of Tenon Group with RSM Bentley Jennison. Kelly and Michaela are based in Southampton and they work with clients ranging from small businesses to charities and manufacturing companies.

For both of them, working with numbers came naturally, but combining AAT training with hands-on experience has opened doors. Kelly, who has worked her way up to the position of audit manager, is now involved with the training of audit assistants like Michaela, who has just qualified.

'You can see how useful AAT training is to our students,' Kelly explains. 'They start off with the very basics and the course is more related to the job than if they just go straight into ACA, which is very academic. With the AAT day release they get more practical experience.'

Kelly studied for an accountancy degree, followed by a trainee position in 2003, where she studied AAT to

Technician level. After two years working with public sector clients, she decided she wanted to do more private sector work – a decision that led her to RSM Tenon.

Broadening horizons

When she completed her ACA, Kelly got a chance to work for WHK Horwath, a firm based in Australia. 'I think going overseas has probably been one of the biggest challenges of my career but it was a highlight, too,' she says.

On her return in November 2007, she was promoted to a supervisor role, which involved taking on a small portfolio of

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clients. Then just 18 months ago she was promoted to audit manager – a job she loves. 'The opportunities are very varied, and it's exciting when you have a new project or client. It involves lots of different things. Obviously there's the client side of things, and if the team go out and do an audit I'm responsible for reviewing their work before it goes to the director. I also do business development and then there's the staff training side of things, too.'

A good foundation

After two years at the company, Michaela has just completed her AAT and has started studying for her ACA. 'I was meant to be going to university, but I didn't really know what to do,' she explains. 'Then I applied for this job, and everything just fell into place. I did maths at college and I've always enjoyed it, so it was right for me.'

While studying for the AAT, Michaela divided her time between classes and on-the-job experience, which gave her a strong working grasp of the skills needed to progress. 'Doing the course has definitely helped me understand my job better.'

According to Kelly, it's largely due to the vocational nature of the course that RSM Tenon trains and employs AAT-qualified staff. 'The day release course means that there is more time for on-the-job training, allowing students to gain practical experience. Assignments are linked to the organisation where the student works and the focus is on general business issues.' Plus it makes good financial sense: 'There is a cost benefit to employing AAT students, as they gain valuable work experience at an early stage of their studies.'

RSM Tenon supports AAT students by paying course and exam fees, providing paid leave for learning and running an internal training programme which complements the AAT. The company also runs a buddy system, which pairs a more experienced member of staff with a trainee, so help is at hand, if needed. 'The team were very supportive when I joined,' remembers Michaela. 'Then I got a buddy to mentor in the second year and she was an AAT student as well. I embraced it and I like to think I did a good job!'

Having successfully achieved her AAT qualification, Michaela is keen to keep adding strings to her bow. 'I definitely want to continue working and qualify for ACA. AAT has really helped me understand how to balance my study with work. By taking this route, I'm going to qualify quite young. There are lots of options for the future now.'