

Making it count

Claire Collins left school at 16 and was told by her parents 'don't bother with qualifications'. After a brief spell in the civil service she worked in an accountants and found a job she loved. She is now a Partner with the City firm [Buzzacott](#). In the first of an occasional series where women share their career journey, Claire tells us about her own route to success.



What led you to your career choice and how did you get there?

When I left school with a bunch of reasonable exam results there wasn't much in the way of careers or further education guidance from my school. The most support I got from my careers teacher was 'can you type?' I thought I might try banking, but didn't receive any offers.

I saw a position at the job centre for a role in the Cabinet Office in Whitehall and was offered the position. It was my first real job in the heart of Westminster. It was a poorly paid job and once I had learned it, I was bored a lot of the time.

Every week I saw adverts in the free magazines for accounts trainees, which I really knew nothing about except they were being paid a lot more than me! I looked into accounting courses at my local college and discovered they were offering evening classes to study a three year course for the AAT qualification. The Government (my employer) paid for the course and I started attending 2 nights a week. My role at the Cabinet office had no relevance to what I had started studying and I felt that even if I transferred across I would be bored and under challenged in no time at all.

I started looking at the job ads and came across one for a small firm of Chartered Accountants

in the City for a trainee. I went for the interview and didn't get the job even though they had liked me. Two days later I got a call from the agents to say that they had created another role in the firm and wanted to offer it to me as a proper accounts trainee. The new role came with an additional £250 a year in salary. I loved working in my first accounts job; learning so much and the people who took the time to train me and guide me. I had always liked numbers, but English and reading had been my strongest subjects so I had never assumed I would go into a numbers orientated career.

Unfortunately our little firm was swallowed up by a top ten firm a couple of years later and I never thrived as part of a larger faceless conglomerate. Once I took my last exams and was AAT qualified I moved on to Buzzacott where I am still after 27 years.

What do you most look forward to in your working day?

A lot of accountants who train in what we call Public Practice move in to industry when they qualify, but I have never been tempted. The thing that keeps me in Practice, and I look forward to each day, is the variety and that no two days are ever the same. Sometimes it has been too much of a challenge, but I can always look back and say I have been pushed to my limit, tested and

forced to continually stretch my mind and learn new skills working for an amazing firm. Every day there will be something new from a client that I will not have addressed before and my team look to me for answers and/or views.

I also enjoy working with a portfolio of clients from around the world and working in so many diverse industries. It's great getting to know them along with guiding my team and interacting with my colleagues.

What motivates you at work?

Bringing on board a new international or domestic start up and giving them outstanding advice that they value; developing my team and seeing them progress up the career ladder and expanding the team as we become more successful as a firm. In the words of the 80s show the A-Team, 'I love it when a plan comes together'.

Recent figures suggest that although 44 per cent of accountants in the UK are women, less than a quarter are partners. What barriers exist to career progression for women in the sector and what measures would you like to see taken to tackle them?

Having a family will unfortunately slow down your career progression, but I do not believe it is a barrier to progression to partner if you take

the decision to continue to work. My firm may be an exception, but we have a female managing partner and a number of other female partners who have children. What a working professional mother needs from her employer more than anything is flexibility to enable her to juggle career and children.

Tell us three words that sum up your attitude to life.

Don't sweat the small stuff; life is too short; take your work seriously, but not yourself; no regrets.

What advice would you give to your younger self setting out on her career?

Be more forward in asking for promotions that were deserved. Women are notoriously bad at being upfront, unlike most men. Be more clear about your objectives and how you are going to achieve them. Do what you love not what you think you should do or pays the best

Who inspires you in your work or personal life – or both?

Our team leader who I have worked with for the last 15 years has taken our team from a straggly team of bits and pieces to a highly successful team of over 100 people with a variety of specialisms. In my personal life I have always admired Tina

Her Edit



Turner. She is a woman who took on another man's two children, brought them up as her own along with her own two children whilst touring and singing for years and still maintained her dignity, beauty and human decency whilst being severely abused by her husband.

What has been your biggest triumph?

Professionally speaking the day I qualified as a Certified Accountant back in 1994. It was after 7 years of studying including the three years night classes with the AAT. I had sat 30 three hour exams (mostly first time passes) in that period to achieve that qualified status and for someone who had not undertaken any further education after 16 it was a massive boost to my confidence.

Personally speaking the day my children were born. Becoming a mother changed me enormously and my views and belief in my own abilities.

And your biggest disappointment?

The end of my marriage and how it would affect my children's lives in the future

Tell us three things that make you smile.

Witty off the cuff humour; friends and family time; hot sun on my skin

You've had a difficult day at work – how do you restore your equilibrium and raise your spirits?

A glass of wine, red or white as I don't discriminate; put on heavy rock music as loudly as possible; a cuddle from kids or my partner, don't mind which!

Your top tip for managing difficult clients/colleagues.

Think carefully about what you say before you say it; count to ten if you have to! Try to understand where they are coming from better. If you cannot understand their viewpoint then always ask 'why?'. Patience and politeness go a long way

What are your ambitions for the next decade?

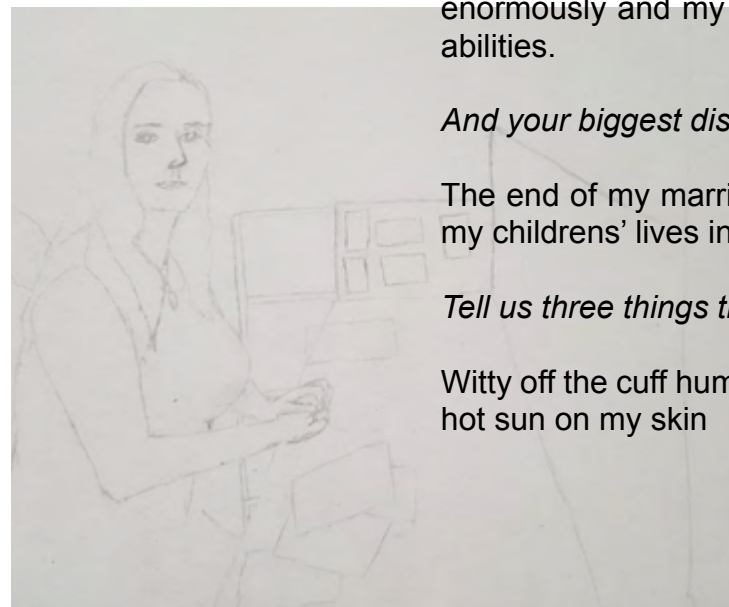
To make partner to show younger women it can be done; more travelling and holidays; be fitter and healthier than I am now

What are your three wishes for the future?

Continued good health; to see my children start their careers and actually enjoy what they do, whatever career they choose. Just enjoy life.

Draw us a picture of you at work.

Courtesy of my daughter!



IMAGES
Above: Courtesy of Claire Collins
Right: drawing of Claire by her daughter