


From AAT apprentice to CFO and partner

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Former AAT apprentices Mark Clayton and Victoria Wainwright talk about stepping outside their comfort zones, the importance of kindness and how they'll never stop being trainees.

Mark Clayton (<https://markclayton.co/>) is CFO of China 2 West Services (C2W), a manufacturing and supply chain management company.

Victoria Wainwright (<https://www.azets.com/en-uk/about-us/our-people/victoria-wainwright>) is office managing partner at mid-tier accounting firm Azets.

Both started as AAT apprentices. Here they give their advice to anybody hoping to tread the same path.

How we got there: Our apprenticeship-to-CEO journeys

Mark: I studied AAT as an apprentice at a local practice in Northumberland. In 2007, at 20 years old, I left the UK for a gap year in China with an AAT qualification and not much in my pocket. I was then offered a role as finance and sourcing manager at C2W, before building a career in China through hard work and the belief that anything's possible.

Victoria: I left school at 16 without a clear idea what I wanted to do. My grandmother spotted a job ad in the local paper for a role working at an accountancy practice. Luckily, I loved it! I completed my apprenticeship and became one of the first AAT-qualified people to study for a chartered accountancy qualification at ICAEW.

What advice would you give your former apprentice self?

Mark: Back yourself more. Don't let fear, self-doubt or your background limit your potential. You're capable of more than you think.

Victoria: Believe in yourself – you can do it! I wasn't an academic high-flyer and failed some exams when studying for chartered qualifications. Determination and goal-setting will get you there.

What's the best way for a current AAT apprentice to follow in your footsteps?

Mark: Don't ignore the incredible learning experience in front of your eyes. AAT gives you real-world finance skills that employers genuinely value. What determines how far you'll go is your mindset. Be curious, take responsibility early and don't fear mistakes: people are more forgiving than you expect.

Also, don't pigeonhole yourself as 'just finance'. Great CFOs understand operations, sales, IT, manufacturing, HR and customers – not just the numbers. Get out from behind the desk. Learn the business. Build relationships. That's how you become indispensable.

Victoria: Step outside your comfort zone. Push your boundaries and say 'yes' to opportunities, even if they feel like a stretch. And don't hesitate to reach out for help from peers and mentors – people want to see you succeed.

What did you learn as an AAT apprentice that you still use today as a CFO?

Mark: Discipline. AAT taught me accuracy, ethics and the importance of doing the basics well – even when no one's watching. As a CFO today with thousands of people depending on trust, those early lessons remain the bedrock of how I work.

The second lesson? Humility. My apprenticeship taught me I'm always a student: a mindset that's stayed with me for 20 years.

Victoria: AAT developed my soft skills*. Being able to communicate with people, from the managing director to your colleagues is invaluable.

We've got 10 apprentices today. Sometimes, trainees are shy when they start their jobs. AAT helps them come out of their shell; it's always nice to see how quickly their confidence grows.

**AAT refers to soft skills as power skills due to their value in the workplace.*

How has continuous professional development (CPD) helped you progress?

Mark: Continuous learning is the reason I'm a CFO today. After AAT, I studied CIMA, earned a master's in global management, became a CPA (certified public accountant) and constantly upskilled myself in areas beyond finance, such as supply chain, leadership, psychology, even diplomacy. I'm now learning AI. This isn't just about logging CPD hours on an Excel sheet: it's about becoming the kind of person who grows faster than your environment.

Victoria: CPD has been vital in my career, helping me evaluate my work and deliver a good service to clients.

What's the best way to raise your profile as an apprentice?

Mark: Be someone people want to work with. Deliver consistent results (nothing builds a reputation like reliability), volunteer for projects outside your comfort zone, ask thoughtful questions (curiosity shows ambition and intelligence), network and share your journey publicly. I use LinkedIn for this.

Victoria: Get involved with networking, professional bodies and local societies.

I became an ICAEW council member at 26-years-old and served on multiple boards, including the West & North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce. I've also championed women in finance, hosted events, and supported girls in STEM.

What's the best way for apprentices to acquire leadership skills early in their career?

Mark: Leadership starts long before you get a title. Learn to listen (great leaders understand before they speak), put people first and get involved in community/charity projects. My charity work has taught me more about leadership than any textbook ever could.

Victoria: Be kind to everyone! If you make people feel valued, you'll go a long way.

Mark:

1. Purpose matters. Fulfilment comes from having a career you're proud of but also helping others. In 2011, I founded Come Together Community, a charity which has raised \$455,000 (£337,000) for local causes.
2. Find a mentor. Whether it was the practice partner during my apprenticeship, my dad, or my boss/business partner in China, mentors have helped me grow.
3. Remember: your AAT apprenticeship gives you credibility!

Victoria:

1. Always have a 'can-do' attitude.
2. Seek out a good mentor. They don't have to be colleagues.
3. Positivity, passion and purpose. If you remain positive and have passion for what you do (you really need to care about your clients and work!) then you have the purpose for what you're doing.

Christian Koch is an award-winning journalist/editor who has written for the Evening Standard, Sunday Times, Guardian, Telegraph, The Independent, Q, The Face and Metro. He's also written about business for Accounting Technician, 20 and Director, where he is contributing editor.

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