

Action man

By the age of 34, Scott McNaughton has achieved more than many young ACAs could ever hope for. CALUM ROBSON hears staggering stories from a true inspiration for all trainees

One of the youngest people to attain partnership at BDO Stoy Hayward, Scott McNaughton has also climbed Everest and rowed across the Atlantic – raising thousands for charities.

Few would argue that this would be possible without clear career objectives and a finely-tuned sense of work-life balance.

Professional and personal development

After passing his finals, McNaughton, like many new ACAs, was keen to see what the outside world looked like; asking about an industrial secondment at a post-qualification appraisal led to a six-month stint at media agency M&C Saatchi.

‘It was a relatively new business, but going through rapid expansion, so it lent itself well to me,’ he recalls. ‘I was doing international accounting just as it was establishing its overseas operations; I enjoyed it a lot.’

However, he decided that a longer period in practice would better serve his career, and he returned to BDO, where he was shortly afterwards made manager within the media and technology team.

This was in the late 90s; the dotcom boom was taking off: ‘It was an energetic period; clients wanted much more than simply audit services – they needed finance-raising or flotation support, as well as business plans to help them grow. I built up a big portfolio; many of my clients were dynamic young businesses, backed by venture capital – it was incredibly exciting.’

To New Zealand

Scott had begun to set his sights on partnership but needed to gain more experience. Given the opportunity to work in the firm’s Auckland office for 18 months, he decided to combine career development with travel.

‘I’d never been to that part of the world or even taken a year out. So that secondment allowed me to have a lifestyle change but without letting go of my career. I negotiated two separate two-month periods of unpaid leave to travel, so I was able to spend time climbing on South Island, as well as touring Thailand, Australia and California. And I suppose that was when the adventurous side of me began to develop.’

Although he enjoyed the New Zealand lifestyle, he’s quick to point out that it wasn’t all sun, sea and beach. ‘They work hard there – it’s not a case of having the work-life balance issue all wrapped up; but it definitely had an influence on my outlook. I think my generation was one of the first in the workplace to start proactively trying to create the right mix of career and personal life.’

Returning to London, Scott was highly focused on his career but also pursued outdoor activities, with regular climbing trips to the Scottish Highlands and the Alps. And finding himself increasingly among like-minded people, he began setting his heights higher.

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Reaching for the top

An expedition to the Himalayas presented significantly more challenging peaks. ‘Part of me was asking myself if that was enough though,’ he says. ‘I spent two weeks walking through valleys with Everest in the background – and I suppose the idea of going up there had been germinating inside me for some time; I’d always taken an interest in people who’d done it, even if never thinking I’d actually get there myself. But it became much more appealing.’

He began to put in place a plan that saw him move the idea from dream to reality.

At the same time, he’d started to go through the partnership process at BDO Stoy Hayward. ‘I was suddenly strongly motivated by two different but very clear objectives; they balanced each other – I didn’t become unhealthily obsessed about one. The work side was essential to



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my development but I didn't need to let go of another important aspect of my life.'

Knowing he'd need time out – around two months – to take on Everest, Scott was upfront about his climbing aspirations.

'I wanted to be able to explain to the firm where there would be a mutual gain. It wasn't just about me taking eight weeks out to go on an expedition; I wanted to demonstrate the value of that to the business. Some of those benefits are more obvious – such as visibly demonstrating a strong culture of support – but there would also be positive aspects for my interviewing and mentoring roles, when I'd discuss work-life balance with trainees and potential recruits. I'd be able to present a real-life example of the firm's commitment to its people.'

On climbing Everest

Success through vision

'There were eight of us making the summit attempt, and all of us pretty much strangers – and in the time we spent at base camp and above, we went through teamwork issues that weren't dissimilar to those that could be faced in an office – but obviously condensed down into six incredibly intensive weeks.

'Issues that in the workplace might take months to surface before being resolved, have to be dealt with immediately so that everyone can move forward together safely. It's a fairly severe environment, with some real highs and lows – but from those, I learned a lot about how to deal with team issues, particularly all the interpersonal stuff needed to keep a team running.

'For instance, if anyone was seen to be under-performing, it's clear that'll impact on the whole team's ability to do certain things. We'd have to be both supportive to that individual, helping them to get through – but at the same time making it clear that they have a major responsibility to the rest of us. Getting people to face up to that can seem harsh.

'But by the time we returned, we were a really close-knit group; we'd gone through so much in such a short period of time.

'For me, Everest definitely illustrated that if you set your sights on something and you share what you're trying to achieve with others, there's a good chance you'll succeed. Five years earlier, I'd never have thought it possible. Then I did it, and came back realising that, yes, it was hard work – but having clarity about your aims makes it so much easier.'



Peak practice

Scott needed to away throughout April and May of 2006 – but prior to that were two years of intense fitness training. Over the Christmas holidays, he travelled to Argentina to climb Aconcagua – the highest mountain in the southern hemisphere – before returning to tackle the firm's busy season.

'That trip was a first big test that my training was on track and gave me a real boost. The firm was supportive all the whole way through those months prior to the main climb. I found that I could prepare relatively well for my absence, as I was open with clients and colleagues, and therefore able to manage people's expectations.

'What was more difficult was dealing with working and training continually. December year-ends meant late nights in the period when I returned from the Andes and was also stepping up my training regime. I was flat out – anything that wasn't related to work or Everest had to fall by the wayside.'

Back to reality

In early June, Scott was back in the office, where colleagues had been eagerly following his progress online: 'The reception was fantastic. I made a number of presentations to people about the expedition, and it was great to know that so many people had felt involved – sending me good luck emails, and getting just as excited as we were on the mountain about watching for the weather window that signals the right conditions to make that final bid for the summit.

'You realise how important that support is – when you have so many people driving you and wanting you to succeed.'

Publicity about his trip led to many questions from the profession and the media about work-life balance. Had he found the perfect mix, with a successful career and a fulfilling life outside the office?

'The concept of work-life balance can be confusing; everyone has different definitions,' he says. 'Graduates in their early 20s may want to accelerate their career – and if that means they want to work late hours, then why not?

'They're unlikely to have major family commitments, so they can take on early responsibility. To me, that counts as work-life balance for them as much as working four days a week and leaving by six o'clock counts for someone else. They can both have legitimacy.

'The biggest challenge for people is to understand and communicate what they want. The more they have those conversations with their employers – so that there are clear expectations on both parts – the more they benefit from sharing what they want to achieve. Don't ever assume your bosses will try to hold you back – it's not in anyone's interests.'

Into the deep

Inevitably, the question arose: what now, after Everest?

Along came the Woodvale Challenge, a 3000-mile race across the Atlantic Ocean, which had famously featured Olympic gold medallist James Cracknell and adventurer and broadcaster Ben Fogle in 2005, when they came second while rowing for BBC Children in Need.

'I was hungry for something else to be in the pipeline; Everest had given me an added drive, although I wanted to do something different from mountaineering,' says Scott. 'About six months after the Everest expedition, I'd met someone who used to work for BDO who'd previously taken part in the Atlantic race. That's when I thought: this is the

On rowing the Atlantic

Survival through strategy

'One thing we were both really conscious of was that it was just going to be the two of us, for 10 weeks. It would have been disastrous to discover we were stuck on a 20ft plank of wood with each other if we were arguing. We'd worked with some of the business psychologists that the firm uses.

'From that coaching, we were able to be clear about potential for friction and strategies for dealing with any tension. That was really helpful, and again is something I was able to take back into the workplace. We all have times when we work alongside others and things aren't going as well as we'd like – but we have to be well-placed to resolve them in order for everyone to move on and get where they want.

'At sea, we realised quickly what it was that we'd need to get through each day, and other things mattered less. I'd think: as long as I can get some decent sleep and be able to eat, I'll get there; my threshold of expectations lowered considerably. It's an amazingly hostile physical environment, but the psychological bit was the hardest. I'd trained hard and become physically stronger, so I knew what I'd have to do to make it through. But psychologically, I had no idea what it would be like to row two hours on, two off, 24 hours a day for weeks

and weeks; 70 days were stretching ahead of me. I'd look out at the ocean and know how far we had to go – and then still have to sit up and do my shift at the oars.

'Nothing can fully prepare you for that mental challenge – but at least having certain strategies in place gives you the resources to cope that much better.'



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next challenge.'

The race would entail being at the mercy of the ocean – complete with storms, wild waves, curious whales and straying cargo ships – for a gruelling nine or 10 weeks, from December 2007 through to February, rowing alongside his friend Neil and raising funds for Diabetes UK.

Get on, get ahead

He may have had a more eventful recent few years than most thirtysomething ACAs – but Scott believes work-life balance is within everyone's grasp. The key is to seek value for all stakeholders.

'I always tried to put myself in my employers' shoes – I'd ask myself: if I'm going to make this demand, what am I giving back? And the gain for the firm doesn't have to be about increased billings. Developing and helping to embed the culture is also important.

And for those trainees and newly-qualifieds whose focus is very much on their career, he has this advice: 'Look closely at the business you're thinking of joining; everyone's culture is different.

'Question them about how they advance their high flyers – ask what a meritocracy actually means in their organisation and how early you can expect responsibility. Those questions demonstrate confidence in your own ability as well as your ambition. And don't forget to find out about the people you'll be working for – and with – as well as who'll be your coaches or mentors.'

Looking ahead, his own plans centre on BDO Stoy Hayward's international network and client base. 'I love that aspect of the business – globally, we're moving quickly and I want to make sure I'm part of that.'

In the last 18 months, he's been on client or recruitment business in Moscow, Boston, New York, Paris and Copenhagen, as well as Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and the Philippines. 'It's not as glamorous as you think,' he insists. 'You work hard when you're there and you return tired – but it's fulfilling nevertheless.'

There are no daring expeditions in his sights though – for the moment:

'I'm definitely redressing the balance and focusing on my career for a while, particularly as the international side takes off.

'At the moment, I'm putting together a five-year plan for myself, and whatever I might decide on would be built into that.

'I'm sure somewhere in there will be an adventure that will keep me busy.'



