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REPORT ON BUSINESS

Accounting's image staid no longer as more women, singles get in numbers game

And 80% are satisfied with career choice

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Portraits of men in tweed jackets, with greying hair and a pen or a pipe in their hands, dominate a gallery of past presidents at the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario offices in Toronto.

But that stereotype of the accountant as old, male, grumpily working long and lonely hours in a dimly lit office is as outdated as a quill pen, according to the first survey of the way Ontario accountants balance work and personal lives.

"There has been a dramatic shift both demographically and professionally in the profession, and we wanted to understand that," says Rick Hall, spokesman for the organization, which represents 31,000 of 68,000 CAs in Canada. More than 2,400 members responded to the online poll this spring.

Among the key findings:

Nearly half, or 48 per cent, of CAs under the age of 30 are women. In contrast, 90 per cent of practitioners over 50 are male.

More than two-thirds said their work gives them ample flexibility to meet the time demands of caring for children or family members, and to pursue hobbies and take vacations. However, nearly three-quarters said they occasionally feel overwhelmed by stress, particularly during spring tax-filing season.

Three-quarters said they do more than 40 hours of professional work in an average week; 25 per cent said they work as much as 60 hours.

More than half bring work home on weekends and evenings, but only 20 per cent said they do work on vacations.

More than 60 per cent of women in public practice choose smaller firms on the assumption that working for a big firm would increase stress.

Eighty per cent said they were satisfied with their career choice, and 72 per cent said they were satisfied with their current job.

Most said they're "satisfied" or "neutral" in their current balance between work and personal life.

Two-thirds said computers, cellphones and personal data devices have improved their quality of life in the past few years, giving them flexibility to work at home to care for a sick child or in bad weather. But many also said they didn't like being continually on call.

The survey also found that employers of 54 per cent of respondents offer flexible work schedules, and 43 per cent provide the option of working from home.

The profession has loosened up notably in the past few years, says Russell French, 32, a vice-president in the restructuring group of Ernst & Young in Toronto. When he started with Ernst in 1998, "it was a more rigid world, very nine to five."

Now, he says, management encourages flexibility in scheduling and many of the firm's 2,500 accountants opt to work three- or four-day weeks. "The rule is we get the job done. I can work from home, and the firm gave me a BlackBerry to keep in touch."

Flexibility is undoubtedly behind the profession's growing appeal to women, says Rosemary Mackelm, a senior manager in tax practice at KPMG in Ottawa. She says choosing an accounting career helped her balance job demands with the needs of her three children.

She is able to work three days a week most of the year and takes each July and August off to be with her children, she says. "I feel very fortunate to have had five years with my children while still being able to have my foot in the door and remain active in the work force."

The increased flexibility of accounting firms is also being driven by a change in the priorities of younger people getting into the profession, suggests Duane Soares, a representative of the Ontario CAs' organization, who travels to schools to talk to potential accounting students at career days.

"They don't want to be slaves to the desk and they want mentors to guide them in their career," he says.

The survey found that 15 per cent of accountants in their 20s and 30s are single. Mr. Soares says many of them start at big firms, which tend to have a lot of young hires and an active social network.

But the survey indicates that, while accounting may offer the ability to balance work and family concerns, most accountants are also aware their lifestyle choices may affect their career advancement.

In the survey, 43 per cent said they believe achieving a good balance of work and personal life could significantly limit their ability to climb the ladder. Another 38 per cent said they think it would have moderate consequences.

Vicki Plant, a senior manager at KPMG Ottawa, says that, as long as employers and colleagues are understanding, accounting is a way to manage the needs of a family and career "without the guilt."

While the spring tax season brings extra work, "when there never seems to be enough time," Ms. Plant says, other parts of the year make up for it. With two young children, she cuts her time commitment to half a week in summer.

"Being an accountant can help you balance both lives," she says. "Dig your heels in and don't be afraid to make it work for you."