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Salsa, Scenery, and the CGMA

Posted by AICPA Communications on Aug 16, 2016



Bikram Sachdeva loves salsa and bachata dancing. You might also find him capturing landscapes, skyscapes, and nature scenes with his camera during travels to Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, Mongolia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Jordan—countries where he’s monitored over \$ 1.5 billion portfolio of projects.

Sachdeva is a CPA and CGMA, to name just two of five professional designations on his business card. “I hear a lot of stereotypes when people see my business card,” said Sachdeva, director of fiscal accountability at the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), an independent U.S. Government aid agency that works to reduce global poverty through economic growth. “Some people assume that because

I’m a CPA, I’m not outgoing. They’re surprised when I tell them I love to dance and take pictures, especially because these interests tend to be outside the norm of what people expect from an accountant.”

He shared the following about his experiences:

Your thoughts on leadership? Each MCC funded project is organized as an entity in the country where the work is taking place and has its own management, including a CEO and CFO. I advise the in-country CFOs, technical advisors and fiscal agents, and also at times interface with boards of directors, tax and finance ministers, and central bankers. Seniority—not just experience, but age—and social customs are very important. Because I may look younger than many of these people, the credentials on my business card are very important for establishing credibility. Sometimes, before we begin meetings my clients are very interested to know what every letter on my business card stands for!

How did you get into government accounting? After I got my MBA in finance, I started my career as a business analyst for a technology firm. When the dot-com bubble burst, I went to Arthur Andersen, got my Master’s in Tax, returned to consulting and then switched over to the litigation support practice at Ernst & Young. I did forensic accounting for Navigant Consulting before moving to my current position. I started to get my CPA license when I was in public accounting and now also hold the CGMA, CFF, CFE and PMP credentials.

Which skills do you believe are most important? To support in-country CFOs and fiscal agents, I deal with nearly every aspect of finance, budgeting, and accounting. A lot of my work is strategic and operational. But I also help CFOs figure out how to meet multiple reporting requirements for the U.S. government and for the countries’ own requirements, which often involve International Financial Reporting Standards and statutory reporting. So I think having a working knowledge of multiple technical areas within finance and management accounting is a necessity. Then you’ve got to have a strong understanding of the organization’s objectives and the ability to

influence people who don't report directly to you. In a global environment, putting all of these things together is what being a CGMA is really about.

What is your greatest challenge? Bridging culture and communication. Technical terms may be used differently from one country to another and many times English is not my counterpart's first language—so it often requires getting into a discussion of what terms mean. There are also varying local customs for how transactions take place and are recorded, so you've got to ask a lot of questions and listen carefully. The CGMA helps prepare you for these kinds of international challenges and opportunities.

What about people skills? In the U.S., I think we keep our personal and professional lives more separate. In other countries, people want to connect with and know more about you as a person. So I tell them about my life and passions outside of work—music, dance, and art are some things that bring people together no matter where you're from or what language you speak. Describing my hobbies of dancing and photography spark an interest in me as a person and help establish rapport that makes it easier to get work done.

How do you find time for salsa and photography with so much travel? Believe it or not, there are people everywhere who love to dance, so it's actually easy when I'm traveling. Plus, once my international counterparts learn about my interests, they occasionally join me or offer to take me to places.

Advice for young accountants? If you're a finance person in government, don't lose sight of the public good, and remember, as a taxpayer, part of the money being accounted for is yours as well.

The views expressed by Mr. Sachdeva do not necessarily represent those of his agency or the United States.

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