

ICB Member Job Profile: Roberta Woodcock FICB

I started out on the bookkeeping trail after realising that algebra and equations were not my thing; so with my parents support I went to night school to find out if bookkeeping might suit me better, thankfully it did.

My career has not followed a conventional route, but my bookkeeping skills have always been there. I left school, at 18, and joined the Civil Service, deployed to the Collector of Taxes. This involved collecting money, dealing with queries and cold calling on businesses and individuals in pursuit of payment and serving writs, alongside keeping manual ledgers and performing daily accounts reconciliations. The collector in charge soon discovered that I could reconcile ledgers and make adjustments quicker than most and without guidance, but being able to do this held me back so I decided to move on. A spell with a firm of accountants followed completing clients' books, tax returns and payroll seeing my skills further enhanced until a move away from the area forced me to seek work elsewhere.

An advert for an assistant to the accountant in a large international company led me to a job which would not only further my career, but take my skills in a new direction. The job comprised of entries into prime books, preparing journals and initial reports from which the monthly accounts would be prepared; nothing too complicated or stretching but it kept me busy. The Group Treasurer, however, noticed something on the occasions I covered for the Cashier dealing with the banks and placing money on the London Money Markets. A few months later the Cashier left and I was not so much offered the job, but informed that I was being given the job, keeping the cashbooks, dealing with petty cash, placing money on the markets. Little did I know then that I was about to enter the strange and exciting world of corporate treasury, I was to learn about the Money Markets, banking, leasing, arranging borrowing lines, derivatives, and fine wines (but that's another story!). The company went through a management buyout, became a Limited company and, finally, floated on the stock exchange. Whilst technically, I was a long way from pure bookkeeping the principles enabled me to learn and to understand treasury management.

It was to be a job, that even now, I look back on with great fondness and recognise as a turning point in my career, so why leave? Another relocation this time to South London and a return to the Civil Service, joining the international arm of an organisation about to be privatised. Five weeks into the job and it was announced that there had been a change of plan we were being closed down not sold. It was too late to return to my old job, so I sat tight to see how long the ride would be. It turned out to be considerably longer than I'd anticipated. Closing an international organisation with outposts all around the world, whilst still producing monthly accounts and transferring service delivery to other providers, takes quite some time. I became manager of the small accounts team responsible for banking, bill payments, general ledgers and obtaining financial information from outstations and preparing the monthly consolidation accounts. As our closure date was getting closer, colleagues transferred to other departments, and I agreed to stay and switch off the lights on the last day with little idea of what would come next.

On closing our outstanding work moved across to the residual finance team and I received an offer of a three month transfer which would take me to Christmas. January came and went, no one asked me to leave in fact I began to pick up additional responsibilities for reconciliation work, contract disputes, and estate management. The organisation had a property portfolio which had to be disposed of and as it didn't quite fit into anyone's job description, so it fell to me. My role was a really strange mix, and in the office I was known as the 'O and S Girl' (Odds and Sods). If it was out of the ordinary or a one off piece of work it was mine. I faced the usual question from my new bosses why hadn't I qualified as an accountant? - my standard reply because I'm a bookkeeper. This time, however I met my match they discovered that I had exam qualifications but no professional qualification, so I found myself studying for the ICB's Advance Bookkeeping qualification. I discovered recently that I was in the first cohort of students to take the exams and probably one of the early members.

Twelve months later I faced redundancy again, but fate again played a hand. The Prison Service were implementing stand alone financial systems throughout England and Wales and the development team were looking for someone who understood transaction processing and bank reconciliations, to basically take the system apart to ensure it worked correctly. I joined in the New Year and settled down to developing

the transaction modules and writing user guides, and found myself training the trainers who were to implement the system and train staff at each location. This was my first official step into the world of training. The implementation project came to an end and I moved on to run the Helpdesk. Not much scope for a bookkeeper you might think, but when a system goes wrong it goes wrong and its a case of unpicking all the books of entry and putting it back together again to ensure the financial information is accurate. I also came back into contact with ex-colleagues including my old boss who asked if I'd progressed my professional status further, not something I'd given much thought to. I decided to try for Fellowship, as now I felt I could demonstrate real depth and breadth of experience required and was delighted when my application was successful.

A period of running the Helpdesk and producing the department's monthly consolidated accounts, saw me offered a chance to move into training, I'd enjoyed it once so why not. The government were introducing Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) so there was a need to ensure the financial skills across the organisation were able to meet the new challenges. I took the post and the opportunity to train as a trainer going on to run a team delivering financial training throughout England and Wales. A year later I once again found myself in the wrong place at the right time. My love of finance and training had led me to represent the department on a couple of working groups being run by the Government Accountancy Service (GAS) and they were seeking someone to evaluate training being undertaken by departments across government; I was asked to apply. I received another invitation from Homerton College, Cambridge University, inviting me to apply for a postgraduate course in Training and Development, they had been impressed by a piece of work I'd produced for my trainer training and wanted me to undertake a further qualification.

So I found myself walking through the doors of the Treasury building, quite an accomplishment as this is a department all aspiring Civil Servants aim to have on their CV. Even better my new boss had agreed to fund my studies at Cambridge. The RAB project ended but I stayed with Government Accountancy Service organising accountancy conferences, chairing specialist groups for financial trainers, forensic and system accountants, editing a quarterly journal for accountants in government and for

my dissertation undertaking a major research project on the development of accountancy in central government: 2003 saw me graduate.

January 2004 and I left the Civil Service to set up my own training company Serrena Services Limited, with a view to leaving finance behind me. I had not taken into account that my reputation was already walking down the road in front of me and despite efforts to train in a different field I kept coming back to finance. Six years later and I have established myself lecturing in such delights as Public Finance, governance, budgeting, strategic business management, public policy and leadership and management. I am also the Chief Examiner for CiPFA in Governance and Public Policy and have been appointed to the Institutes Advisory Panel with special responsibility for promoting and representing those of us who either work for other people or who's careers have gone down another path away from traditional bookkeeping roles.

So what of my original qualification ? Well I do my own books and accounts, assist others in preparing their books and just to make sure I really keep my hand in I am the Treasurer of my local church and a school Governor with responsibility for overseeing the finances. I'm often asked if my ICB qualification is still important to me? Yes it is. Bookkeeping is what has allowed me to be in the wrong place at the right time and to take advantage of the opportunities presented to me. I am deeply proud of those four letters - FICB - after my name, as I know how hard I worked to achieve fellowship status.