



Sunnyie Sy  
New York (Deloitte)



Deloitte  
35/F  
One Pacific Place  
88 Queensway  
Hong Kong



Edward Tsui  
Shanghai (Deloitte)



# Journey into the world

*Secondment programmes broaden young accountants' horizons, John Sedgwick discovers*

**T**he thought of working in Africa had never entered Yeung Lok-ki's mind until a partner brought it up out of the blue. "I was in the middle of an audit for an important international client when one of the partners asked me to come to his office and promptly announced – 'We're sending you to Africa!'" the assistant manager of assurance and business advisory at Mazars Hong Kong recalls.

Yeung, an Institute member, admits the news came somewhat as a shock and his family was initially concerned about his move. "But I knew the company was giving me a chance to prove myself – a chance to experience a different culture and perhaps a different way of working," he says.

So Yeung and colleague Man Tat-kau found themselves travelling to their firm's Cape Town office on a three-month exchange programme last May.

An added benefit is that South Africa is among seven countries that have reciprocal membership agreement with the Hong Kong Institute of CPAs, which is on track to add the U.S. to the list soon. The agreements allow members to practise in the respective overseas country without having to sit for extra examinations or undergo more training.

The young accountants say they were attracted to Cape Town's vast open landscapes, a big contrast to their crowded hometown. They enjoyed African-style barbeques and wine-tasting trips in Stellenbosch, and visits to famous landmarks such as the Cape of Good Hope, Table Mountain and the Addo Elephant Park in Port Elizabeth. More importantly, they learned the subtle differences between Hong Kong's and South Africa's accounting methods.

"It was interesting to learn the various audit systems they use in South Africa," Man says. "Plus I had to speak English every day, whereas in the office I won't only use English, so that was a good test for me."

## **Growing scheme**

As big accounting firms increasingly stress the importance of standardized practices across different offices around the globe, many are planning to expand their secondment schemes as a way to boost staff's exposure to world markets and their knowledge of overseas accounting systems.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, which has one of the most active mobility schemes, sent about 130 employees from China, Hong Kong and Singapore overseas

Yeung Lok-ki, Man Tat-kan  
South Africa (Mazars)



during the 2009 financial year. Most of them went to the U.S. and Australia, with others sent to Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Canada and New Zealand. During the same period, about 1,400 employees from PwC member firms in 100 countries were posted on international assignments.

At Ernst & Young, counsellors are appointed to help seniors and young managers develop their careers, which may include a placement on its 18-month global exchange programme, says Michael Wong, partner in charge of human resources for assurance and advisory. The Hong Kong office sends around 100 employees on international assignments every year, mainly to the U.S., the U.K. and Canada, with a small number travelling to Japan and European countries. “If we send them overseas, we want to do so when they are still young so that they can learn things faster,” he says.

Deloitte China, meanwhile, sends employees mainly to its U.S., U.K. and Canada offices for between 12 and 36 months, though it declines to provide specific figures. Since the

scheme is competitive and costly, the firm tends to send staff who have four to five years of experience.

Christina Antoniou, Deloitte’s national human resources leader and a member of its global mobility council, says the firm values secondments so much that even during the financial crisis, it scaled back in other areas but retained the same funding for the scheme.

“I was anticipating we were going to have this ‘everyone go home and repatriate.’ But even during tough times, the need for secondments is recognized, there is just a lot more emphasis because it’s a big ticket item” for attracting, retaining and developing high-calibre employees, she says.

“You don’t stop your graduate recruitment because you are having a rough year. Otherwise, in two years’ time, you will have a gap in the pipeline and in infrastructure – and it’s the same for secondments,” she says. “As we get more stability and business continues to grow, then secondments are one of the things I would see increasing.”

Edmund Chan, practising director at Mazars Hong Kong, is already working on securing more

## Secondments in numbers

### Deloitte

- Employees at the firm are sent to the U.S., the U.K. and Canada for periods of between 12 and 36 months.

### Ernst & Young

- The firm arranges international assignments for about 100 employees from Hong Kong and China each year.
- These employees – from senior accountants to partners – are mainly sent to the U.S, the U.K. and Canada.

### Mazars Hong Kong

- The firm sends two or three seniors or assistant managers to the mainland, the U.S. or South Africa each year for three months and takes up to five employees from overseas offices.
- Sending a secondee from Hong Kong to South Africa costs the firm HK\$18,000 to HK\$20,000 a year, excluding salary.

### PwC

- Almost 1,400 PwC employees in 100 countries are assigned to live and work abroad on short- and long-term assignments in its 2009-10 financial year. They include about 130 staff from China, Hong Kong and Singapore sent mainly to the U.S. and Australia.

secondment exchanges with offices in Australia, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries. He has been sending employees to international conferences, overseas training and social events, believing that the exposure will help staff improve their communication and language skills, and build their characters.

“When you become a manager, you are not just doing (auditing) work. You need to meet people, you need to communicate... I think this experience can help them open themselves up so that they will be better prepared for their future development,” he says.

The three-month secondment scheme to South Africa costs Mazars Hong Kong between HK\$18,000 to HK\$20,000 per secondee a year, excluding salary. At the moment, the company sends just two to three employees abroad a year and takes on about five professionals from other countries. Such exchanges cost the company a total of more than HK\$100,000 annually.

Some firms have begun incorporating overseas assignments into their internship schemes, using it as a tool to attract top talent to entry-level positions. In the U.S., KPMG interns spend half of their time abroad during an eight-week programme. The method is apparently working – some interns, upon graduation, have returned to work full-time for the firm.

“It’s extremely competitive [to recruit top students], and this is a differentiator,” Blane Ruschak, KPMG’s executive director of campus recruiting, told *Business Week*.

### Bringing the expertise home

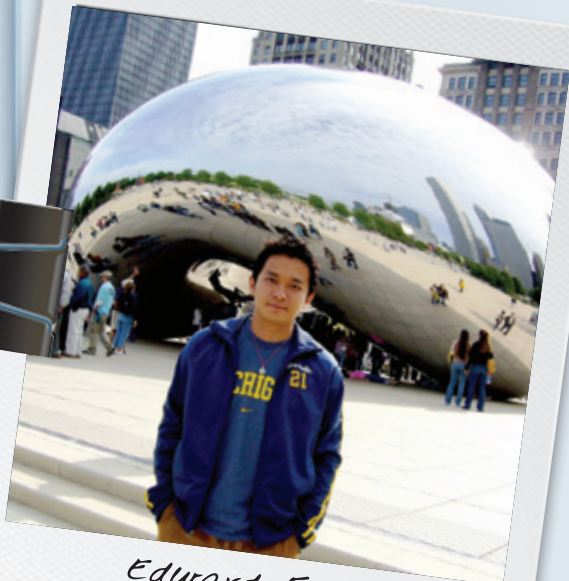
As Chinese enterprises continue to expand, accounting firms are sending more employees to the mainland to learn about China’s

accounting system and culture, and more Hong Kong and mainland accountants well-versed in dealing with Chinese clients are sent abroad.

Edward Tsui, an audit manager at Deloitte’s Hong Kong office, was one of six people seconded to Shanghai for three months, working alongside colleagues from cities all over China and from around the world.

“Every country has its own culture and the people have their own practices. I’m not just talking about different firms, but different departments and different groups have different practices. It really was a great challenge for me to adapt to these changes.”

During that time, he received training on mainland auditing and financial reporting standards. Because of his improved Mandarin skills and technical expertise, he now mainly handles mainland manufacturing clients who are expanding abroad.



Edward Fong  
Chicago (Grant Thornton)

Sunnie Sy, a senior audit manager at the firm, travelled much farther – he was sent to New York for nearly two years through Deloitte’s global development programme.

The auditor was attracted to the multicultural and dynamic environment in New York, a melting pot for colleagues coming from different countries; he indulged in his passion for Broadway musicals and travelled across the U.S., Mexico and Europe with his new colleagues.

“New York is a lot like Hong Kong, very high-tempo and energetic, but when you start living there, it’s a totally different experience,” he says. “Everybody selects New York – people from Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan and Thailand... so we all had the opportunity to meet up and be friends.”

Sy says he was fortunate that his first year in New York coincided with the introduction of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in the United States, so he was able to learn the rules ahead of his Hong Kong colleagues. He gained a promotion when he returned home because of his experience in dealing with numerous U.S. multinational clients and Sarbanes-Oxley audits.

“When I [returned to Hong Kong] and served U.S. clients, I knew how to speak to them... I now understand how they operate, the way they ask their questions, it’s become a lot easier and it makes things a lot smoother,” he says.

Edward Fong is another accountant who found a secondment to Chicago a big boost to his career. The assurance manager at Grant Thornton in Hong Kong says working in America helped him gain a better grasp of U.S. accounting rules and U.S. culture.

“From day-to-day, you watch a lot of U.S. movies or hear a lot of their news, but I don’t think you can really understand what’s going on in a country until you get there,” he says.

Since his return to Hong Kong at the end of 2007, Fong has been able to apply what he learned from abroad to helping multinational companies with operations in Hong Kong and China, as well as mainland enterprises looking to expand overseas.

“Now, I’m one of the contact points if we get referrals from the U.S. office, or if a client in the PRC wants a U.S. IPO, I will be one of the people who are contacted,” he says.

Despite the popularity and success of secondment schemes, Deloitte’s Antoniou says she has noticed that some returnees quit because their firms have not taken advantage of their new experience and skills.

“That’s a real challenge... generally across all industries, the reintegration and harnessing of what people do on assignments, more can be made of it than already happens,” she says.

### Mutual benefits

Human resources managers say secondment schemes work both ways and can be a learning experience for both the secondees and colleagues working alongside them.

“It’s not only people we send abroad who benefit. By taking on some overseas secondees to Hong Kong, the whole firm benefits. Adding a bit of an international flavour to the workforce will also benefit the clients too,” says Andrew Lam, assurance and staff partner at Grant Thornton Hong Kong.

Tim Hosford, a senior assurance manager from Grant Thornton’s U.S. member firm now on a two-year secondment here, believes it is a big plus to have someone familiar with U.S. GAAP and Securities and Exchange Commission regulations in the Hong Kong office.

He helps local clients who need to file financial reports in the U.S. and brings in business from clients of the firm in California and from subsidiaries of U.S. companies.

“In terms of client service and coordinating with member firms, you learn much more by being here,” he says. “I love Hong Kong... it’s like New York on steroids, it’s a crazy city.” **A**