

EMPLOYEE SATISFFACTION, CULTURE, AND MENTAL HEALTH:
A STUDY OF WORKPLACE PERCEPTIONS IN ACCOUNTING FIRMS

by

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Abstract

This study examines how employees' experiences differ across global, regional, and small-scale public accounting firms, focusing on work-life balance, compensation, workplace culture, stress, and overall job satisfaction. Using survey responses from 50 accounting professionals, 39 of which were classified into firm-size categories, this research compares both quantitative and qualitative perceptions to determine whether common assumptions about firm size hold true. The results show that employees at small-scale firms most frequently reported advantages such as flexibility, work-life balance, and closer client relationships, while respondents from global firms highlighted higher compensation and broader professional opportunities. Regional firm employees often described balanced experiences with strong learning and career development. Salary differences across firm sizes followed expected patterns, though the variation was modest due to wide differences in respondent positions, ranging from associates to partners. Qualitative comments reinforced these trends: global firm employees commonly mentioned heavy workloads, while small-scale employees emphasized family-oriented culture and reduced hours. Overall, while firm size influences workplace perceptions, the findings also suggest that individual teams, roles, and personal experiences significantly shape how employees view their jobs. This research provides valuable insight for accounting students, current professionals, and employers by illustrating the trade-offs associated with different firm sizes and offering a clearer understanding of workplace expectations within the accounting profession.

Background/Introduction

The accounting profession offers a wide range of career opportunities, from financial reporting and cost management to auditing, taxation, and nonprofit work. For example, “accountants can be auditors, tax preparers, or work inside organizations on financial reporting, cost management, budgeting, business acquisitions, new implementations, or internal auditing, as well as filling roles in governmental agencies and non-profit organizations” (Wolf 2008). Among the many options available, two of the most common career paths for graduates are public accounting and private (industry) accounting. Public accounting firms provide external services such as auditing and taxation for individuals and companies, whereas industry accounting focuses on internal work for a single organization, including month-end reporting, sales tax preparation, and financial evaluations. Typically, accounting students begin their careers in public accounting, later transitioning to jobs in industry (Lazzaro 2018). Public accounting often provides new graduates with valuable experience and training, which can later be applied in industry roles. Lazzaro (2018) also found that “when students are most interested in monetary compensation or other benefits they are more likely to choose public accounting”.

There are a variety of firms within the public accounting industry, with the largest serving clients globally with office locations across the world and the smallest having only one office location and serving clients in their local area. The Big Four accounting firms are the four largest global professional services networks in accounting, audit, tax, and consulting. These firms are Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), Ernst & Young (EY), and KPMG. They audit approximately 80% of all public US companies and employ 1,300,000 people between all the firms combined, often hiring many new accounting graduates each year. Major advantages to working in a Big Four accounting firm are the prestige and credibility, networking, travel

opportunities, working with larger and more global brands, employee perks and benefits, consultation opportunities, and salary. Some disadvantages to working in a Big Four accounting firm are high stress and pressure, long working hours, focus on a single client, corporate environment, and potential relocation (Cantor, 2024). Another disadvantage of Big Four accounting is the relatively lower likelihood of advancing to the highest positions at the firm. For example, “only 2–3 percent of those entering a Big 4 firm will ultimately achieve the status of partner” (Spence and Carter, 2014).

In addition to the Big Four accounting firms that bring in lots of revenue, there are midmarket firms that are not as big as the top four public accounting firms, but are still larger and have around 1,000 - 10,000 team members. Midmarket firms range from those having lots of recognition and known names to others that are not as well-known. Some mid-tier firms focus on a specific niche, whereas others may do the same kind of work as Big Four firms. A few of the biggest and most well-known midmarket firms are RSM, Grant Thornton, BDO, and Crowe. Working at a mid-tier accounting firm can offer opportunities to specialize, allow for a better work-life balance compared to Big Four accounting firms, and opportunities to gain broader experience compared to smaller firms. However, some of the disadvantages of working at mid-tier accounting firms include less networking and prestige, less mobility, and typically lower salaries than Big Four accounting firms (Cantor, 2025).

It is clear that working for smaller, more local firms is very different from working in a Big Four accounting firm. Although the principal and foundational accounting knowledge is used in both Big Four and smaller firms, there are apparent differences in both, especially for employees. For example, in smaller firms, there is a closer-knit environment with stronger relationships and more collaboration, opportunity for broad skill set development instead of

working on one specific task for a long period, more autonomy, greater client interaction, and opportunity for entrepreneurship as an employee may move up the chain of command and have a voice in the business side of the firm (CPA Credits, 2023). Some of the downsides of working in smaller firm accounting is the lack of opportunity, limited networking opportunities, lower salaries, working with private businesses instead of global, more recognized brands, less credibility, and limited access to training and technological advancement.

Employees choose to work for specific firms for a variety of reasons, and the decision to join Big Four accounting firms versus midmarket or smaller firms ultimately comes down to personal preference and career goals. Previous experimental research highlighted that "Big 4 and non-Big 4 job seekers weigh the importance of job characteristics differently. In particular, Big 4 job seekers place more importance on firm prestige relative to non-Big 4 job seekers, who place more emphasis on firm atmosphere (stress), firm tone (serious or casual), and work-life balance" (Bagley et al., 2012).

One of the key factors influencing accountants' career decisions is the trade-off between the opportunities offered by large public accounting firms and the lifestyle benefits of private or smaller firms. Public accounting, particularly at the Big Four level, provides exposure to a wide range of clients, industries, and travel opportunities, requiring adaptability and strong communication skills (Hatane et al., 2021). For many students, the Big Four's prestige, brand recognition, and higher starting salaries, along with the potential to advance to partner, are powerful draws. Yet these same firms are also associated with long hours and high stress, which pushes some students to consider midmarket or local firms where the culture emphasizes work-life balance and more manageable workloads. "A recent study found that turnover at CPA firms with revenues exceeding \$75 million is 17%, whereas 1 in every 6 firms experiences

annual turnover of 20% or more” (Johnson and Pike, 2018). As Hatane et al. (2021) note, “One of the characteristics of the private accountant profession is the opportunity for accountants to have personal time and time with family”. Smaller and local firms also offer unique benefits such as closer client relationships and greater variety in day-to-day work, which can be appealing for students seeking hands-on exposure across different business functions. These preferences align with generational expectations as well: younger accountants increasingly value flexibility, meaningful work, and balance over pure financial gain (Hatane et al., 2021). Research further supports these trends, finding that “Despite the implementation of these [work-life balance] practices in U.S. public accounting firms, however, turnover has continued to increase” (Nouri & Parker, 2020). Together, these factors highlight how students weigh prestige, advancement, and exposure against flexibility, culture, and personal fulfillment when choosing a career path in accounting.

Post-COVID expectations for remote and hybrid work are reshaping how students and employees evaluate different types of firms. Technology is also influencing the profession, with AI, automation, and data analytics changing workloads and skill requirements. A recent Thomson Reuters survey reported that “1 in 10 accounting and tax professionals are currently using ChatGPT/generative AI or planning to integrate these technologies into their operations” (Thomson Reuters Institute, 2023). At the same time, skepticism remains, as “only 51% of accounting professionals consider ChatGPT and generative AI should be applied to tax, accounting or audit work” (Thomson Reuters Institute, 2023). Rather than replacing accountants outright, AI is expected to streamline repetitive tasks while expanding opportunities in areas requiring human judgment and analysis. This outlook aligns with U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections that accounting and auditing employment will increase by nearly 6% over the next

decade, adding about 91,000 jobs by 2033 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Alongside these technological changes, the number of accountants has decreased as The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) estimates that about 75% of CPAs would have reached retirement eligibility by 2020 (Accountancy Age, 2024), which has heightened competition for talent and influenced how firms position themselves to recruits. Together, these trends make flexibility, innovation, and technological adaptability increasingly important factors for both accounting students and professionals.

Each type of accounting firm presents distinct advantages and challenges, and employees experience these trade-offs differently depending on firm size. Factors such as work-life balance, compensation, career advancement, client exposure, and organizational culture all shape how professionals perceive their workplaces. This study draws on survey responses from current employees across Big Four, midmarket, and local firms to provide a descriptive look at these experiences. The goal is to compare and contrast employee perceptions across firm sizes, exploring how factors such as career choices, work environment expectations, and day-to-day experiences shape these views.

By analyzing the perspectives of current accounting professionals, this research provides valuable insights for students considering their future careers, whether in public accounting of a particular size, transitioning to industry roles, or exploring alternative paths. Additionally, the findings offer current employees a clearer understanding of the broader public accounting landscape, helping them evaluate potential career moves or changes. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the diverse opportunities and challenges within public accounting and contributes to a more informed approach to career planning in the profession.

Purpose

The goal of this research study is to shed light on the differences in employee experiences between large public accounting firms and smaller, more local firms. This study explores how these differences within accounting firms affect employees' work environments and perceptions, aiming to highlight the unique challenges and benefits employees face depending on firm size. By understanding these effects, we can gain insights into the opportunities and struggles employees encounter in different environments, from the largest firms to the smallest. This research will provide undergraduate accounting students with valuable insight into the benefits and drawbacks of working at different firm sizes as they consider their own career paths. Current professionals in the field may also find value in comparing their experiences to broader trends, helping them reflect on their workplace environment and long-term goals. Employers can also benefit by seeing how their firm compares to others, which may help them when it comes to recruiting new hires, keeping good employees, and building a better work environment.

Methodology

To address the research questions, this study investigated the differences in workplace perceptions between past and current employees of both global, regional, and small-scale accounting firms. For research classification purposes only, we classified global firms as having at least one physical office location globally, regional firms as having more than one office location in the United States, and small-scale firms as having a singular office location. We aimed to use this data to determine whether commonly held beliefs about these work environments were accurate. To gather responses, we employed a survey methodology targeting current employees from each type of firm. The survey was first developed and submitted for approval to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval, the survey was

distributed via email, LinkedIn posts, flyers at networking events, word-of-mouth, and CPA discussion forums, and the results were analyzed using the Excel, SPSS, and Statistical Analysis System (SAS) to draw conclusions.

Results

Of the 50 total survey responses collected, 39 could be categorized into global, regional, or small-scale firms, and these are reflected in Exhibit 1. The graph shows several patterns in how employees across firm sizes perceive the main advantages of their workplaces. Flexibility and work-life balance were selected most frequently by employees at small-scale firms, with small firms showing the highest counts in both categories, suggesting that smaller organizations may offer more schedule control and a better personal-work balance. Client relationships were also identified as a major advantage for small-scale firms, aligning with the expectation that employees in smaller practices get to engage more directly with clients. In contrast, compensation appeared to be a greater perceived advantage at global firms, where respondents selected it more frequently than regional or small-scale employees. These findings highlight that while larger firms may offer stronger financial incentives, employees at smaller firms tend to value relational and lifestyle-focused advantages such as flexibility, work-life balance, and closer client interaction. While some patterns do appear, the gap between firm sizes was not nearly as wide as what earlier research would lead one to expect.

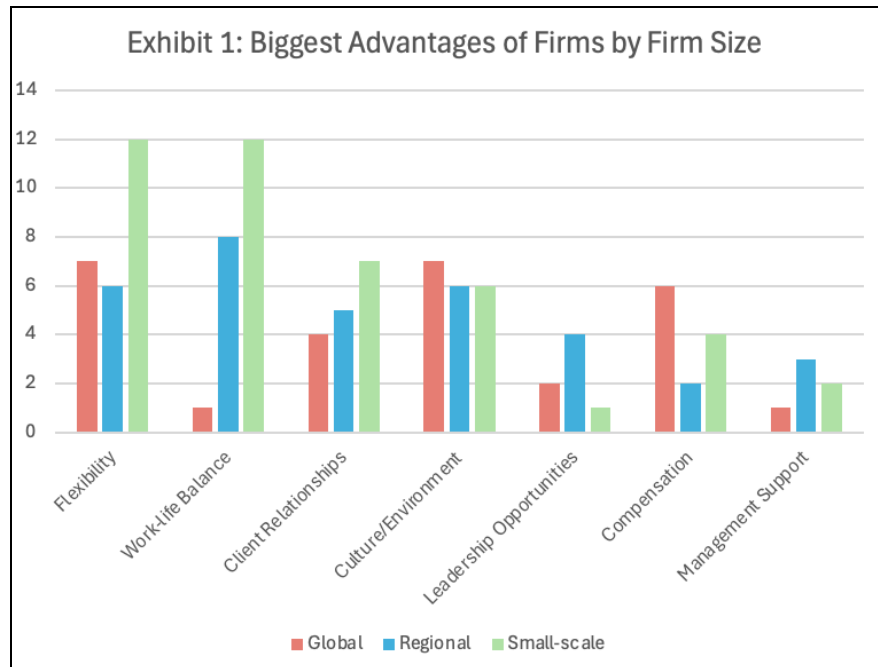
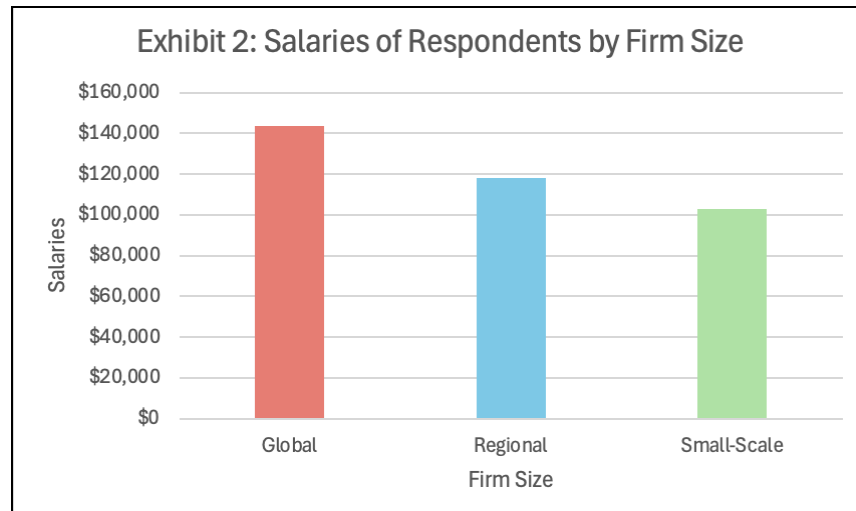


Exhibit 2 compares the average salaries of respondents across global, regional, and small-scale firms. As expected, employees at global firms reported the highest average salary, followed by regional firms, with small-scale firms reporting the lowest. While this trend aligns with common industry expectations (larger firms generally offering higher pay), the overall differences shown in the graph are relatively small. It is important to note that these salary averages are influenced heavily by the variety of positions represented in the survey respondents. Respondents ranged from associates to partners, so the resulting salary gap reflects individual roles as much as it reflects firm size. Due to this variation, the differences in salary across firm sizes should be cautiously interpreted, as they likely include some natural measurement error due to the wide range of job levels included in the data.



The qualitative responses provided additional insight into how employees experience their workplaces across different firm sizes. Several global firm employees mentioned that while they value the opportunities available, the scale and workload can feel overwhelming. One respondent noted, “Enjoy the firm, although would prefer to go back to when we were smaller,” while another shared, “I love what I do but I don’t love the volume of work.” In contrast, employees at small-scale firms emphasized flexibility and a strong focus on personal well-being. For example, one respondent stated, “Our firm is a firm believer in family time. They encourage us to spend time with our loved ones and take vacations frequently to rest our minds and bodies,” and another highlighted reduced hours with, “I work 4 days a week during tax season, 3 days a week remainder of year. We have cut out almost all weekend work during tax season.” Regional firm responses generally reflected a balanced experience, with one employee describing it as a “great place to work and start your career,” emphasizing supportive people and strong learning opportunities. Together, these comments reinforce the trends in the quantitative results: global firms often come with heavier workloads, regional firms offer solid development experiences, and small-scale firms provide more flexibility and a family-oriented culture. Overall, these

results suggest that while firm size plays a role, personal experience and workplace relationships can also have an impact on how employees perceive their jobs.

Closure

The purpose of this research was to understand how employee experiences differ across global, regional, and small-scale public accounting firms, and the findings offer a clearer picture of what actually varies across firm sizes. The survey results showed that employees at small-scale firms most often pointed to flexibility, work-life balance, and closer client interaction as major strengths, while global firm respondents highlighted higher pay and broader opportunities. Regional firms tended to fall somewhat in the middle, with many employees describing environments with learning opportunities and professional advancement. Although salary and workload differences were apparent, the gaps were smaller than what people would usually think, largely because respondents worked in a wide range of roles from entry-level staff to partners. The qualitative responses supported these patterns, showing heavier workloads in global firms and more family-focused cultures in smaller firms.

Overall, the study suggests that firm size does influence workplace experiences, but not in a way that guarantees a better or worse environment across the board. Instead, individual workplace culture, job responsibilities, and personal preferences play a major role in shaping how someone feels about their job. For students entering the profession, these findings offer a clearer understanding of what different firm sizes can provide and what trade-offs might matter most. For current professionals, the results offer an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in the context of broader trends across the industry. Ultimately, choosing the best fit in public accounting depends on what someone values, whether that is balance, compensation, growth, or day-to-day variety.

Appendix A

Please select the firm where you are currently employed.

- ☐ Carr, Riggs, & Ingram (1)
- ☐ CliftonLarsonAllen (2)
- ☐ EisenAmper (EAG) (3)
- ☐ Elliot Davis (4)
- ☐ Forvis Mazars (5)
- ☐ KPMG (6)
- ☐ EY (7)
- ☐ PwC (8)
- ☐ Deloitte (9)
- ☐ RSM (10)
- ☐ Thomas Judy Tucker (11)
- ☐ Other (12) _____

How long have you been employed at your current firm?

What is your current position/role within the firm?

Are you a Certified Public Accountant (CPA)?

- ☐ Yes, I am a licensed CPA. (1)
- ☐ No, but I am in the process of obtaining my CPA license. (2)
- ☐ No, and I do not plan to pursue a CPA license. (3)

How many hours do you typically work per week?

- ☐ 30-40 (1)
- ☐ 41-50 (2)
- ☐ 51-60 (3)
- ☐ 61+ (4)

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your overall job satisfaction?

- ☐ Not at all satisfied 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 4 (3)
- ☐ 5 (4)
- ☐ 6 (5)
- ☐ 7 (6)
- ☐ 8 (7)

☐ 9 (8)

☐ Highly satisfied 10 (9)

Rank the following factors in terms of their importance to your job satisfaction, where 1 is most important and 6 is least important.

- _____ Positive work-life balance (1)
- _____ High compensation (2)
- _____ Career growth opportunities (3)
- _____ Positive work environment (4)
- _____ Management support (5)
- _____ Other (6)

Which of the following reasons did you choose to work for your current firm? Multiple answers allowed.

- ☐ Professional advancement (1)
- ☐ Work-life balance (2)
- ☐ Client relationships (3)
- ☐ Brand reputation (4)
- ☐ Ability to interact with top firm leadership (5)
- ☐ Flexibility (6)
- ☐ Location (7)
- ☐ Other (8) _____

How would you rate your work-life balance?

☐ Not at all satisfied 1 (1)

☐ 2 (2)

☐ 3 (3)

☐ 4 (4)

☐ Highly satisfied 5 (5)

How often do you feel pressure to prioritize work over personal commitments?

☐ Never (1)

☐ Rarely (2)

☐ Occasionally (3)

☐ Frequently (4)

☐ Always (5)

How often does your firm accommodate personal or family-related time off?

☐ Never (1)

☐ Rarely (2)

☐ Occasionally (3)

☐ Frequently (4)

☐ Always (5)

During peak audit or tax seasons, how manageable is your workload?

- ☐ Not at all manageable 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)
- ☐ 4 (4)
- ☐ Very manageable 5 (5)

How often do you experience work-related stress?

- ☐ Never (1)
- ☐ Sometimes (2)
- ☐ About half the time (3)
- ☐ Most of the time (4)
- ☐ Always (5)

How often do you feel overwhelmed by your workload?

- ☐ Never (1)
- ☐ Sometimes (2)
- ☐ About half the time (3)
- ☐ Most of the time (4)

☐ Always (5)

Do you feel comfortable discussing mental health challenges with your supervisor?

☐ No (1)

☐ Maybe (2)

☐ Yes (3)

How often do you work on projects involving international clients or teams?

☐ Never (1)

☐ Sometimes (2)

☐ About half the time (3)

☐ Most of the time (4)

☐ Always (5)

How effective do you find the informal and/or formal mentorship in your firm?

☐ Not at all effective 1 (1)

☐ 2 (2)

☐ 3 (3)

☐ 4 (4)

☐ Very effective 5 (5)

How would you rate the availability of career progression opportunities in your firm?

- ☐ Very poor 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)
- ☐ 4 (4)
- ☐ Excellent 5 (5)

How often do you participate in professional development programs at your firm?

- ☐ Never (1)
- ☐ 1-3 times per year (2)
- ☐ 4-6 times per year (3)
- ☐ 7-9 times per year (4)
- ☐ 10+ times per year (5)

How helpful are the firm's proprietary resources or tools (e.g. AI or other advanced technology systems) in increasing your productivity, if applicable?

- ☐ Not applicable (1)
- ☐ Not helpful (2)
- ☐ Somewhat helpful (3)

☐ Very Helpful (4)

How often does your firm engage in volunteer service in the community?

☐ Never (1)

☐ 1-3 times per year (2)

☐ 4-6 times per year (3)

☐ 7-9 times per year (4)

☐ 10+ times per year (5)

Do you feel that your firm fosters a close-knit work environment among employees?

☐ Definitely not 1 (1)

☐ 2 (2)

☐ 3 (3)

☐ 4 (4)

☐ Definitely yes 5 (5)

What do you see as the biggest advantages of working at your respective firm? Select up to three.

☐ Flexibility (1)

☐ Work-life balance (2)

- ☐ Client relationships (3)
- ☐ Culture/environment (4)
- ☐ Leadership opportunities (5)
- ☐ Compensation (6)
- ☐ Management support (7)

What do you see as the biggest disadvantages of working at your respective firm? Select up to three.

- ☐ Lack of flexibility (1)
- ☐ Work-life balance (2)
- ☐ Client relationships (3)
- ☐ Culture/environment (4)
- ☐ Lack of leadership opportunities (5)
- ☐ Low compensation (6)
- ☐ Limited management support (7)

How fair do you perceive your compensation relative to your workload?

- ☐ Very unfair 1 (1)

☐ 2 (2)

☐ 3 (3)

☐ 4 (4)

☐ Very fair 5 (5)

Do you see yourself staying with your current firm for the next two years?

☐ Definitely not (1)

☐ Probably not (2)

☐ Might or might not (3)

☐ Probably yes (4)

☐ Definitely yes (5)

Where is your firm's office located?

Optional: Please indicate your salary range.

☐ Under \$50,000 (1)

☐ \$50,000-70,000 (2)

☐ \$70,001-90,000 (3)

☐ \$90,001-110,000 (4)

☐ \$110,001-130,000 (5)

☐ \$130,001-150,000 (6)

☐ \$150,001-170,000 (7)

☐ \$170,001-190,000 (8)

☐ Above \$190,001 (9)

Please select your gender.

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Non-binary / third gender (3)

☐ Prefer not to say (4)

What is your age?

☐ 25 or younger (1)

☐ 26 - 30 (2)

☐ 31 - 35 (3)

☐ 36 - 40 (4)

☐ 41 - 50 (5)

☐ 51 - 60 (6)

☐ 61 or older (7)

What type of support systems exist in your firm? Please describe the programs and their effectiveness.

Please provide any other comments related to your work experience and job satisfaction at your current firm.

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