

# WHY I LEFT ACCOUNTING FIRMS – AND HOW IT CAN CHANGE

I recently read in *Accountancy Age* that 67% of firms rank talent acquisition and retention as their top priority, according to the 2024 UK Accountancy Sector Outlook Report. It got me thinking, why do so many accountants leave firms, and more importantly, what can be done to keep them?

## A Decade in the Profession

My journey began ten years ago, walking into my first firm with 200 other trainees. We were excited, hopeful, and ready to learn. The promise? Financial stability, international experience, and career acceleration.

### YEAR ONE – EXCITEMENT AND CAMARADERIE

It was all about learning and leaning into the social energy. Seniors warned us of tough times ahead, but we were earning money and building bonds. What more could we ask for?

### YEAR TWO – PRESSURE SURFACES

As responsibility increased, the cracks began to show. Stressed partners, reactive managers, and growing expectations created a noticeable shift. Still, I stuck around, anchored by the support of my internal team.

### YEAR THREE – THE GREAT RE-EVALUATION

Nearly everyone was planning an exit. Overseas, out of audit, or to another firm. I stayed, knowing the end of my article period would bring clarity.

### YEAR FOUR – THE GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY

An international secondment gave me the global exposure I'd always wanted. But it also revealed that the same problems existed everywhere: strained leadership, underutilized staff, and disillusioned teams.

### YEAR FIVE – HOPING FOR CULTURE FIT

I returned home and joined a smaller firm. Finally





leaders who supported their teams, and a more balanced way of working.

#### YEAR SIX – THE BIG MOVE

Relocating again, I joined a mid-sized firm that turned out to be just another cog in the wheel. Then the pandemic hit, and like many, I took the opportunity to reassess.

#### YEARS SEVEN TO TEN – A NEW CHAPTER

I transitioned into business development for a professional services firm providing integrated remote talent. It was the first time I felt like I was building something meaningful, supporting global firms with purpose-driven solutions. Today, I help firms grow with strategic talent, not just plug holes. And it's given me a fresh perspective on how the accounting profession can evolve.

#### Why I Left – And What Needs to Change

I didn't leave audit because of the technical work. I left because too often, the systems, leadership, and culture didn't nurture long-term growth. But there's a path forward and it's one that GCO Partners is already helping firms adopt.

#### BROADER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Firms must offer more than technical upskilling. Opportunities to explore business strategy, tech, or operations can reignite passion and loyalty.

#### EMBEDDED, EMPOWERED TEAMS

The future isn't temp staff, it's integrated professionals aligned with your firm's goals. GCO's Talent-as-a-Service model does exactly that: placing skilled professionals who deliver from day one and stay the course.

#### REAL FLEXIBILITY

Flexible work shouldn't be performative. Professionals need autonomy with accountability, whether working fractionally or full-time in remote roles.

#### BETTER LEADERSHIP

Partners must become enablers, not gatekeepers. Support your teams first, revenue follows.

#### INSPIRING CAREER PATHS

Leadership should feel aspirational. A culture of overwork doesn't inspire the next generation. Modern firms must model balance and purpose.

#### SMARTER INCENTIVES

The talent war isn't just about paychecks. Performance-based incentives, international exposure, and meaningful recognition matter more than ever.

#### THE FUTURE IS INTEGRATION, NOT ATTRITION

The profession isn't broken, it's at a turning point. The firms that will win the future are those that treat talent as partners, not placeholders.



**ROBERT ALERS**  
VP - US Partnerships

At GCO, we help firms reimagine talent partnerships with TaaS embedding professionals who scale with you, from peak seasons to long-term growth. Because the next generation will only stay where they see purpose and opportunity.