



mindset that can help to engender an enhanced work ethic amongst existing staff,' says Colin Howe, vice president of the UK200 Group and managing principal of Hillier Hopkins LLP. 'You always rely on new blood to keep your own people up-to-date, along with their formal training – so it makes for a healthy mix; and clients and colleagues all benefit.'

'The professional networking and business development skills gained within larger firms are also sought after,' says Reeves: 'smaller firms looking to grow will always appreciate extra support in terms of winning new business. Candidates from large firms are viewed as strong assets in this respect.'

Scott Lavery, manager of the public practice division at recruiters Badenoch &

says: 'Those who have come from the Big 4 may have a degree of flair and drive that's very welcome in growing practices. However, they may not have the breadth of experience – with different types of clients, and across diverse kinds of work – as those from other small or medium firms. Our perception is that in the Big 4, there can be many individuals working only on different parts of a particular assignment.'

SMPs themselves need to be mindful of presenting an appealing offer to potential recruits, as many of their targets may have reservations about switching from a 'blue chip' environment, regardless of the dwindling options open to them. 'Accountants who have qualified in the Big 4 are naturally protective of their CVs and of the direction their careers

don't need all those layers,' says Connolly. 'But people from the Big 4 may perceive fewer opportunities for progression – when in actual fact, they can grow their responsibilities; it may simply be that they don't get the job titles that are more accessible in larger firms.'

And for those who make the move, visibility will be high. One of the biggest challenges of moving from an environment where promotions are often awarded according to the year of joining, is that small firms will thrust their people right into the action – and judge them accordingly. 'If you do well, you'll flourish,' says Callander. 'But if you aren't up to the job, there's nowhere to hide.'

Connolly says people need to be more self-sufficient in a smaller firm. At Alex Picot, seniors are required to identify and make a case for their own training needs, rather than embarking on a prescriptive set of courses dictated by a central training department. 'Many people who move from larger firms actually find that refreshing,' he reports.

#### so different, so appealing

But there is still plenty to attract big-hitters. 'Work tends to be more client-focused – there's often greater personal contact, which people welcome,' says Howe. And those who join from larger firms also say they enjoy a better work-life balance: 'There's not that same sense of dragging every little last bit of resource out as far as you can, or of making chargeable hours the highest priority above all else.'

So, from a cultural perspective, those arriving from the Big 4 may be used to working alongside people who have broadly similar academic backgrounds, professional ambitions and even outlook in life; in a smaller environment, the demographic could be quite different, needing greater adaptability. But it shouldn't be assumed they'll automatically head back when the upturn comes around. It may be that the recession is providing a wake-up call to people who regarded large firms as the only route to lasting, worthwhile careers.

Of course, many of them will return to the Big 4, says Scott Lavery. But not all: 'Some may end up discovering that a smaller practice provides them with a rewarding variety of work and better balance in their life,' he predicts. 'And they'll be more than happy to settle in for the long run.' ■

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## 'For smaller practices, the benefits of indirectly tapping into the enormous training capability of large firms are enormous'

Clark, believes there's a marketing angle too: 'smaller firms are usually keen to promote the Big 4 or top 10 credentials of their people,' he says. 'They'll often make it a positive sell on partner and team profile pages on their websites. It's regarded as adding quality to a department.'

#### not plain sailing

For smaller practices, the benefits of indirectly tapping into the enormous training capability of large firms are enormous. However, James Callander of FreshMinds, a talent recruitment and research company, warns 'Huge employers such as PwC or KPMG can support and nurture talent in a way that's difficult for smaller firms to match. But the risk is that the person you take on is only equipped to perform in those conditions – surrounded by a strong peer group and protected by a clear structure that safeguards against mistakes. How well someone will do in an environment where they may be more directly involved in, say, client pitches, is really down to them as an individual – and it's hard to assess if they've been somewhat mollycoddled at their previous employer.' So it's not necessarily plain sailing for ex-large firm accountants. Don Connolly FCCA, a partner at Alex Picot, a five-partner firm,

take,' says Lavery. 'They'll look long and hard at a move that represents a departure from their original game plan.'

'However, the greater accountability and earlier responsibility often appeals to them; instead of being on a large audit for four months – doing one small piece of the jigsaw – they may have greater autonomy, more of a mixed bag of work and closer contact with clients at a senior level.'

#### self-sufficient

Other challenges may present themselves, though. 'If you come from an environment where there's in-depth technical support, the buck tends not to stop with you; you have specialist colleagues to whom you can refer your clients,' says Howe. 'In a medium-sized firm, you have to take more hands-on responsibility – fielding the calls and identifying the right expertise within the firm or, in the case of smaller UK200 practices, other member firms.'

While flatter structures – without the politics, bureaucracy and occasionally ruthless competitiveness associated with major employers – may appeal, misconceptions can exist around promotion prospects. 'Smaller firms have more dynamic environments, so