



The **Big 4** Playbook

The Insider's Guide to
Earning a Job at
a Big 4 Accounting Firm

RUSSELL BENAVIDES

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Step 1 – Understand Who the Big 4 Firms Are](#)

[Step 2 – Understand Why it is Beneficial to Work at a Big 4 Firm](#)

[Step 3 – Know What an Ideal Big 4 Candidate Looks Like](#)

[Step 4 – Choose the Right Accounting Program](#)

[Step 5 – Decide What Your Specialty Will Be](#)

[Step 6 – Dominate the Recruiting Process](#)

[Step 7 – Rock the Interview](#)

[Step 8 – Impress in the Office Visit](#)

[Step 9 – Choose the Right Firm](#)

[Step 10 – Nail the Internship](#)

[Final Thoughts](#)

[Appendix – Tips for the Experienced Worker](#)

[Appendix – Actionable Checklist](#)

[Appendix – Question and Answer with High Level Big 4 Personnel](#)

Introduction

I sat in the car, staring in disbelief. I could not believe what I was holding in my hands. For 5 years, I dreamed of this piece of paper and now here it was sitting in my lap, the golden ticket for an accountant, a written full-time offer from a Big Four Accounting Firm. The long hours of study, the interview preparation, the internship. All of it had paid off. This was indeed the best moment of my life and I was ready to sign on the dotted line so that I could join the ranks of the best accountants in the world.

Dream of working at Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG, or PwC? Do you dream of walking into the partner's office and being handed the ultimate prize in the accounting industry? Have you worked your butt off for the past few years in hopes of obtaining a job offer from the Big 4? Do you want a job that will launch your career from day one?

If so, then this book is for you.

I'll be the first to admit that earning an internship or a full-time job at Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG, or PwC (The Big 4) is hard work, and it doesn't happen overnight. It takes good grades, strong leadership skills and a certain inner fortitude to push yourself beyond your comfort zone.

You could be an ideal candidate for the Big 4 but ultimately fall short of a job offer because you did not know how to sell yourself in the interview process. Or you could have the grades to work at the Big 4 but lack the necessary leadership capabilities to succeed at the Big 4. Or you know you could kill a one-on-one interview if you could only pass the test of the firm social events.

With this in mind, I created *The Big 4 Playbook* for the aspiring accountants in college, high school, or elsewhere who dream of working at Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG, or PwC. It is my goal with this book to help make the process of earning a Big 4 job easier and less stressful for you.

Based on my multiple years of firsthand experience, I will offer you tips and advice on how to earn a Big 4 accounting job.

But before I continue, let me tell you a little bit about my Big 4 experience.

I have been through the Big 4 recruiting process twice, once while at Boston College and then again as a graduate student at Vanderbilt. My first attempt to earn a Big 4 job did not go so well unfortunately. Luckily, I regrouped while at Vandy and earned an audit internship at one of the Big 4 Firms.

The audit internship went really well for me. I earned great ratings from my engagement teams and even received the highest rating an intern can receive on one evaluation. Because of this, I received a full-time offer.

Before I started full-time at the Big 4 Firm, I spent the summer studying for the CPA exam and ended up passing all four sections on the first try. As a result, I was

able to earn my CPA license after a year of working as a full-timer, and I am still a licensed CPA today.

During my time as a full-time employee at the Big 4, I worked for over two years as an auditor and for almost another year as a tax consultant. In both instances, I worked my way up from staffer to senior. In fact, I earned the title of audit senior in less than two years.

Now, I have made it my priority to share with you all the lessons I learned along my Big 4 journey.

It is my goal to provide you with the valuable insights and secrets that I learned and utilized in my career to become a top notch employee at one of the best accounting firms in the world. Armed with this knowledge, I believe you can not only earn the job you have dreamed about but you can also outshine the rest of your colleagues and shoot to the top of your class.

As you read on, *The Big 4 Playbook* will answer the following questions:

Unsure of how the recruiting process works? I will walk you through each step of the Big 4 recruiting process starting at Step 6.

Fearful your GPA automatically eliminates you from consideration? You will love my insights on how to overcome this in Step 3.

Want to dominate the on-campus interview? Have a leg up on your classmates with my PROVEN answers to the most important interview questions in Step 7.

Terrified of the Big 4 social events like I was? Learn in Step 6 how I overcame this fear and convinced the firms I possessed the social skills needed for the job.

Struggling to decide whether to go into audit or tax? It can be a tough choice. I struggled with it myself. My insights in Step 5 help to determine which is best for you. I wish I had known about them when I was in school.

Already landed a Big 4 Internship? Great! Now become a star intern like me with my PROVEN tips for interns in Step 10.

Still on the fence as to whether a Big 4 Accounting Firm is the right career move for you? Read in Step 2 what working in the Big 4 can mean for your career.

Afraid your school already eliminates you from consideration? Don't worry. It doesn't, and I will tell you why in Step 4.

Can't decide which firm to sign with? In Step 9, I give you the checklist I used to determine which firm was best for me.

Applying to undergrad or graduate school? You will want to read in Step 4 the criteria I used to determine which school gave me the best odds of earning a Big 4 accounting job.

If any of these apply to you or you just want to add these valuable secrets to your already strong resume, read on and you will be closer to realizing your goal of earning a Big 4 accounting job.

The Big 4 Playbook is divided into 10 easy to follow action steps for you. The order of these steps was designed to first educate you on who the Big 4 Firms are and what an ideal employee looks like. Then from there, you will learn about the steps you must take to make yourself into this ideal Big 4 candidate. Each piece of the process is vital and should not be overlooked.

By the end of this book, I am confident you will have a strong game plan in place that will convince the firms that you are a person they **NEED** to hire.

Step 1 – Understand Who the Big 4 Firms Are

Before I delve into advice on how to earn a job at a Big 4 firm, it is important for you to understand who the Big 4 are and the history of the major accounting firms in the world.

For most of the twentieth century, the accounting world was dominated by eight major firms. However, in 1989 several firms merged to create Ernst & Young and Deloitte & Touche, which left us with six big players in the accounting market. In 1998, Price Waterhouse merged with Coopers and Lybrand to form the entity of today, PricewaterhouseCoopers. Lastly, in 2002, Arthur Andersen was forced to close up shop as a result of the fallout from the Enron scandal. As a result, we are now left with the following Big 4 Accounting Firms: Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, PricewaterhouseCoopers, KPMG, and Ernst & Young.

These firms provide services to clients in almost every major city throughout the world. As a consequence, their impact on the accounting and financial landscape is unmatched. Further, Fortune 500 companies, major government agencies, and top-rated financial institutions entrust these firms to provide them with top quality assurance, tax, and advisory work. With these firms on board, major companies are better able to establish a sense of trust with investors and the general public that their financial statements are indeed accurate and unbiased.

While the four firms perform similar services for their clients, each one takes on a personality of its own thanks in large part to its history and the people who work there. Read below for a brief insight into each firm's history and beliefs.

Deloitte

This firm began in 1849 when William Welch Deloitte opened his accounting office in London. He was later joined by George Touche. Several other partners came and went during the 1900s as the company expanded into the United States and other countries around the world. Admiral Nobuzo Tohmatsu joined as a partner in 1968 from Japan. In 1998, the international name became Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, and the firm has retained that name as well as their international reach.

Deloitte is structured so that it has many member firms throughout the world, each with their own specialties and personalities. In the United States, the firm does business as Deloitte LLP while providing clients with services in audit, consulting, tax, financial advisory and more.

Ernst & Young

Ernst & Young began at the turn of the twentieth century when Ernst and Ernst was established in Cleveland, Ohio by accountant Alwin C. Ernst. Shortly thereafter, accountant Arthur Young formed an accounting firm in Chicago with his brother in 1906 called Arthur Young and Company. The firm as it is comprised today was created in 1989 when then Ernst and Whinney merged with Arthur Young.

Today, Ernst & Young strives to provide clients with service that stretches

across borders and is of the highest quality throughout the world. Consequently, E&Y is organized under 4 global regions that allow the firm to create teams of specialists to work with their multinational clients.

KPMG

KPMG International Cooperative is a global firm that was created in 1987 when Peat Marwick International merged with Main Goerdeler to create Klynveld, Peat, Marwick, Goerdeler. In the United States, the firm operates as KPMG LLP.

The firm provides services globally in the three traditional accounting areas of tax, audit and advisory. The firm works hard to provide professional experts who can focus on helping their clients solve complex financial problems.

PricewaterhouseCoopers

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) was created in 1998 when the existing firms of Price Waterhouse and Coopers & Lybrand merged. Each of these individual firms dates back to the mid-1800's with offices starting in London. PwC expands the traditional services of tax, audit and advisory to include assurance, human resources, transactions, performance improvement and crisis management.

The firm is global, but the United States branch does business as PwC LLP. As with the other firms, PwC offers global solutions, but they focus their teams on specific industries to provide in-depth expertise for clients.

As you make your way through the recruiting process, I encourage you to look deeper into each of these companies to learn more about their history and services. I have simply provided for you a brief synopsis of each to give you an understanding of the four players on which I focus this book.

Step 2 – Understand Why it is Beneficial to Work at a Big 4 Firm

Voted Best Place to Launch a Career

It is important for you to understand how valuable a job at Deloitte, E&Y, KPMG, or PwC can be. In 2009, *Business Week* released its rankings in an article, Best Places to Launch Your Career. Not only were each of the Big 4 firms ranked within the top 10, but they actually comprised the first four spots on the rankings. Think about that. No matter what firm you want to work for, each of them is ranked ahead of all other companies as the best places to launch your career. The reason a job at one of these firms is so valuable is because of the clients you serve, the knowledge you gain while on the job, and the extensive training you receive.

Exposure to Complex Issues

The exposure an employee receives early on and throughout his or her career is unmatched. From day one, you will be asked to assist on projects that involve complex accounting and financial issues not seen at other firms in the market. Further, each firm entrusts their employees to interact and work closely with clients on a day-to-day basis.

As an intern, I was given the opportunity to meet individually with employees at a Fortune 500 company to discuss my assignments. You will not find these valuable opportunities anywhere else.

High-Profile Clients and Diverse Industries

The clients you serve as a Big 4 employee include some of the most well-known companies in the world. If you look down the list of the Fortune 500 companies, nearly all of them do business with a Big 4 accounting firm whether it is through audit, tax, consulting or other advisory work. Every Big 4 office provides you with the opportunity to work with the biggest companies in your city's market. This top-notch client interaction is unparalleled in the industry.

In addition to the well-known, high profile clients, a Big 4 firm also provides you with the opportunity to work in a variety of industries. Early in your career, you still may not know what industry really piques your interest.

During my first two years at the firm, I worked on engagements in the following industries: retail/restaurants, local government, software, distribution services, and technology/direct marketing. Because I was exposed to such a wide variety of industries, I was able to make an informed decision on the industry I wanted to specialize in going forward in my career.

Work with the Best Talent in Accounting

Another benefit of working at a Big 4 firm is the ability to work with and

interact with fellow team members who are the brightest individuals in the accounting world. Since the Big 4 work with the best clients in the world, they only recruit and hire the best of the best. As such, when you come on board your first day, you can rest assured that you will be working on a day-to-day basis with bright colleagues.

Each day at a Big 4 client, you will come in contact with complex issues that you may not understand. This is where it becomes helpful to work with a great team. When these issues arise, it is a huge benefit to be able to consult with your fellow team members about a possible solution. If it cannot be solved by the team, it is easy to reach out to an expert at the firm who is familiar with the problem. It is hard to find this breadth of knowledge and expertise at other firms.

Extensive Training

During your time at a Big 4 firm, you will receive extensive training in order to improve your level of expertise and to keep you aware of the issues affecting the industry. Because of the size of each, the firms are able to constantly provide their employees with top-notch, in-house training. Throughout the year, there are webcasts and newsletters specific to your industry to help you stay abreast on the important topics related to your clients. Moreover, you will attend yearly training sessions to ensure you are adequately prepared to face the challenges you will encounter along each level of your career.

As you advance, you will be expected to become an expert and leader in the industry you serve or in your specialized field. As such, the firm will help you to establish milestones in your career to reach the appropriate levels of expertise. You will also be given a mentor who you can consult with to ensure you are making the right steps in your career. Utilizing these vital resources is essential to success in a Big 4 career.

Step 3 – Know What an Ideal Big 4 Candidate Looks Like

As I discussed earlier, the Big 4 firms pride themselves on having the best of the best employees. However before you can begin to market yourself to these firms, it is important for you to understand what it is that they are looking for in their ideal candidate.

High Grade Point Average

One of the first things a Big 4 firm looks at in an applicant is their GPA. For most of their candidates, a firm will require at least a 3.5 GPA in order to be considered. Firms use this as an initial barometer for applicants because a higher GPA shows to them that the applicant cares about his or her grades and is disciplined enough to meet the standards required to work in the Big 4 accounting industry.

But there can be exceptions to this GPA standard. For instance, if your overall GPA is less than 3.5 but your business school GPA or accounting courses GPA is greater than 3.5, you will still be considered a qualified applicant. If your GPA is still below 3.5, emphasize during the recruiting process that you have the additional skills listed below to help bolster your candidacy.

Strong Leadership Skills

In order to be considered for the Big 4, a candidate must exhibit the capability to be a strong leader. These firms ask their employees to lead teams at an early stage in their careers and it is important for them to know you are capable of undertaking such a task.

Leadership examples of typical candidates include: president or other position of the student body or club; leading a group of students on a charity effort; volunteering as a local tutor; organizing an intramural team; or leading a group project for class. The list goes on and on. What is important to highlight to these firms is that you are not afraid to take the initiative to lead a group of people to achieve some collective effort.

Strong Communication Skills

Because you will be interacting with clients on a regular basis, firms look for candidates who are able to speak in a professional demeanor. How you speak, your vocabulary, the slang you use, and your body language all combine to create an impression – either good or bad. As such, an ideal candidate needs to exhibit the ability to speak with and interact with others in a professional manner.

Strong communication also extends beyond client interaction and includes your interaction with your fellow team members. Are you able to speak to them in a respectful manner? Are you able to explain the answer to a question that a younger member of your team may have? Can you provide appropriate feedback to others on

your team? Can you articulate your question to your manager or partner? All of these examples are areas in which strong communication is necessary.

Lastly, communication also includes your ability to effectively write. You would be surprised how much writing is involved in a Big 4 accounting job. For instance, as an auditor, you are constantly creating memos and work papers that describe the work you will perform or have performed. Also, it is important not to forget that so much of our communication now is via e-mail. Therefore, it is important to prove to the firms that you can write a professional e-mail that can be sent to a client.

A Team Player

No matter what specialty you have chosen, you are going to be working with other people as a part of a team on a daily basis. Because of this, firms are going to want to know how well you interact with others. This does not mean you have to be an extroverted personality who is great at interacting in a social setting. It more implies that you are able to mix well with other types of people and can work with others toward a common goal. Important questions about you as a team player include:

- Do you treat other team members with respect?
- Do you blame others for mistakes?
- Do you help others when they need it?
- Are you willing to pick up the slack when needed?
- Do you complain or are you overly sarcastic?

These are all things that interviewers will be trying to determine from you during the interview process. Ultimately, working well with others is essential in any job, but particularly at a Big 4 firm as you will be working long hours under a lot of stress. Therefore, it is vital for you to be able to integrate and become a strength of your team.

Conflict Resolution

How you handle conflict is another significant quality Big 4 firms look for in candidates. Often times in your interview, you will be asked to describe a time in which you encountered a conflict and how you dealt with it. Firms highlight this quality in the interview process because it helps them understand if you are capable of handling difficult issues that occur while on the job. When dealing with clients, numerous situations will arise in which the two of you disagree. When this happens, firms want to know that you are capable of coming to a compromise in a respectful manner.

Firm Knowledge

It may sound simple, but interviewers want to know that you are familiar with

the details of their firm. A quick review of their website is the easiest way to do this, but most candidates don't bother. There is a common view that the Big 4 are cookie cutter versions of each other, so it doesn't matter which one hires you as long as one of them makes an offer. This is not true.

Each firm has its own personality, interests and focus. Read through their website to become familiar with each firm to show you are interested in them specifically.

A Good Fit

During the recruiting process, a firm is also looking for clues which show that you will be a good fit for them. Even though it may seem as though employees at each firm are the same, it is important to realize that subtle differences in personality exist at each firm. Some candidates might fit perfectly with one firm and not so well with another. It is important for you to grasp this during the recruiting process and cater yourself to each particular firm.

In the end, the firm will look at and evaluate you based on all of these qualifications. If you feel weakness in any of these areas, work on it before the recruiting process. For example, if your grades do not meet the GPA standards, strive for a GPA greater than 3.5 this semester to show your grades are improving. If you are in the recruiting process already, highlight other areas that are your strengths and emphasize how these will be valuable to the firm.

Step 4 – Choose the Right Accounting Program

The school you choose to attend for your undergraduate and graduate degrees does play a role in your ability to earn a job with a Big 4 firm. If you attend a university where Big 4 firms often recruit, it is easier to get your foot in the door for an interview. With this in mind, I have outlined some important questions for you to consider when deciding what university to attend. Some of these questions apply to high school students, while others may apply to current college students. All are important to keep in mind when evaluating your portfolio.

Does the Big 4 recruit at the school?

If your goal is to find a position with one of the Big 4, you increase your chances if you attend a school where they actively recruit. Fortunately, the firms recruit at all types of schools across the country, from big state schools to small private schools. Most of the time a firm will only recruit schools near their office. But since there is at least one Big 4 firm in every metropolitan city, the likelihood that they recruit at your university is high.

For example, I worked in the Dallas office during my time working for the Big 4. Our recruiting efforts focused on schools in Texas and the bordering states. These schools included Texas at Austin, Texas A&M, Texas Christian, Southern Methodist, Baylor, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Brigham Young, Texas Tech, and Stephen F. Austin.

If you are still deciding what undergrad or grad school to attend, I would recommend reaching out to the director of accounting at the school to see how actively the Big 4 recruit at the school.

If you are already in school and know for sure the Big 4 does not come to your school to recruit, there are ways to still be noticed. Here are my suggestions:

Use all the connections you have: *Do you know anyone that currently works for the Big 4? If so, try to connect with them in some way. Send them an email letting them know your interest. Offer to take them out to lunch or buy them coffee.*

Utilize LinkedIn: *See who you know that may already know people at the Big 4. Ask them to introduce you to them.*

Attend a Career Fair: *Is there a university within driving distance where the Big 4 recruits? If so, find out when their career day is so that you can attend the event. If I was at the event working for the Big 4, I would be impressed by someone from another school who took that kind of initiative to introduce themselves.*

How long is the program?

States now require CPA applicants to have completed 150 hours of study in order to become a CPA. In order to adjust for this, most schools have automatically added on a fifth year of study for their accounting majors. After five years, you will walk away with both an undergraduate and a graduate degree in accounting. If your

school does not offer a fifth-year program, it is important for you to start planning where to attend graduate school well in advance of your undergrad graduation.

Is there built-in time to take the CPA?

Each firm requires you to become a CPA in order to advance in the firm. For most, the hardest hurdle to becoming a CPA is passing the CPA exam. The exam consists of four separate tests and each requires a significant amount of study time. As such, it is difficult to study for this exam if you have already started your full-time work.

Therefore, a great benefit for you as a student is to attend a university that provides time within the academic calendar for students to study for and take the exam. Further, because you are taking the exam while still in school, you can study with your fellow classmates and friends and bond over the misery that is the CPA exam.

What is the success rate for students passing the CPA?

Unfortunately, less than half of the individuals who sit for the CPA exam each year pass it, making it one of the toughest professional exams offered. Consequently, you need to strongly consider the pass rate of students who attend a particular university. If very few of the students pass the CPA the first time, the program may not be teaching them what they need to know. Statistics highlighting percentage rates can usually be found on the school's website or through third-party resources.

Are you able to intern at a Big 4 firm during the school year?

The busy season for auditors and tax professionals runs from January through April. During this time, firms hire interns to help with client projects and get a feel for what it is like to work in the industry. Working as intern during this time provides valuable insight to students as most are able to experience what it is really like to work as an accountant for a Big 4 firm.

Because of this, I believe it is valuable to enroll in an accounting program that allows for students to intern during this period even though it occurs during the school year. Luckily, most universities have adopted an academic calendar that accommodates a spring internship for accounting students. For most programs, students will intern during the spring semester of their senior year and return to school briefly after their internship is over.

If you currently attend a school that does not allow for a spring internship, this is not a problem. The firms still hire interns during the summer months, and this can still be a valuable time to work as an intern. More and more firms' busy seasons are stretching into the summer months, so there is still plenty of work to be done and things to learn.

How many students are in the accounting program?

It is far easier to stand out in a small crowd than it is a big one. You can increase your chances of being noticed by the Big 4 if you attend a small school where the Big

4 recruits. This can be particularly beneficial for those applicants who have trouble standing out in big crowds. For them, it would be much easier to stand out in a recruiting event that is more intimate and includes fewer students.

What city and state do you plan to work in after you graduate?

It may be hard to answer this question currently, but it is something you will need to consider moving forward. Because offices tend to only recruit students from schools near them, you increase your chances of earning a Big 4 job if you decide to work in a city near your school.

If you want to work in a distant city, consider these options. First, you can go through the recruiting process at your school and make it known to the local recruiters that you would like to work in X city because of X reason. If the local recruiters think you would be a good hire, they will refer you to the office in the city of your choice for an office visit. During this office visit, you will have to re-interview with the new office.

Another strategy can be to intern in the firm's office near your school. If you earn a full-time offer after your internship, you can request that your offer be transferred to the office where you want to start. I have known numerous interns who have done this successfully. Usually a partner from the local office vouching for you to a partner in the new office is enough to warrant a transfer.

Another consideration when choosing what office to work in are the CPA requirements set forth by that State's Board of Accountancy. It is important to realize that the requirements for each state are different and some states make it especially difficult to become a CPA.

For example, in my experience, the requirements in Texas are some of the most stringent in the country. The state board requires you to have taken a three-hour, board-approved ethics course as part of your 150 hours. Even though I had taken six hours of ethics courses during my academic career, none of the classes were board-approved. As a result, they could not be applied to my application. Ultimately, I was forced to take an online approved ethics course after I had started as a full-time employee. This delayed my earning of a CPA license by several months.

The lesson I learned from this is to research the CPA requirements well in advance for the state in which you wish to be licensed. It is better to find out you need more accounting course hours while you are still in school as opposed to after graduation.

Even with this set of questions as a guide, you still may be unsure about where to enroll for undergrad or graduate school. Because there are literally hundreds of schools with accounting programs to choose from, the task of choosing the right one for you can be daunting. The [US News and World Report](#) has created a ranking of the top 31 schools for accounting. This is a great place to start looking. In 2013 the top five schools on the list are:

- University of Texas – Austin
- University of Pennsylvania – Wharton

- University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign
- University of Chicago – Booth
- University of Michigan – Ann Arbor

In order to shed light on this decision-making process, I will walk you through my thought process for choosing the schools I attended for my undergraduate and graduate degree.

For undergrad, I decided to attend Boston College for numerous reasons. First, the school's academic reputation was outstanding. Secondly, the undergraduate business school was highly recognized in the business community. Next, Boston College's size, sports reputation, and location all fit my requirements for a university. Whether or not the Big 4 recruited at the school was not at the front of my mind. So for those of you who are kicking yourself for not thinking about this when you chose your school, don't fret. I didn't think about it either. Frankly, when I chose to attend Boston College, I was still not 100 percent sure I wanted to be an accounting major. All I knew is that I wanted to attend the business school during undergrad.

Ultimately, I settled on accounting as my major at the start of my sophomore year. From that point forward, I aimed to make the best grades I could in my accounting and other business courses to ensure that I had a strong GPA when I graduated. During this time, I also spoke to professors about how to strengthen my resume in other ways in order to show the firms I was more than a high GPA. I decided to volunteer at a local school, and I also worked during the summers.

While at Boston College, it is safe to say that I failed at the Big 4 recruiting game. Even though the Big 4 actively recruit at the school, I failed to make an impression on any of them. I went to one recruiting event during my time there, and I ended up leaving early because I couldn't handle the social interaction that was involved. I passed my resume along to each of them at the career fair but did not follow up with them the next day to let them know how much I enjoyed meeting them. Everything you could do wrong, I did do wrong.

Ultimately, I earned a summer internship at a local firm in Dallas the summer after my junior year. I was only able to earn this position because of a contact through a family friend. I did learn from this intern experience that a small firm was not for me and that I needed to figure out a way to earn a full-time job at a Big 4 firm.

It was during this summer that I began researching the best Masters in Accounting programs to attend. Boston College did offer a fifth year program for its undergraduate students, but I had made up my mind that I needed to attend a different school to diversify my resume. I performed hours of research utilizing the same criteria I have set forth for you in this book. I determined the best schools for me to attend were Vanderbilt University, University of Virginia, or the University of Southern California. Each program was highly ranked and would provide me with great access to the Big 4 firms.

In the end, I decided Vanderbilt University was the right school for me for the following reasons:

- Guaranteed access and interviews with all Big 4 firms

- Spring Internship built into the academic calendar*
- Likely referral to any office location I chose*
- CPA exam testing period offered after graduation*
- Prestigious university*
- Small program size (only 24 people when I attended)*

Now, the requirements you set forth for yourself may be different from mine. There are many ways to go about your academic career, and all of them still have a good chance of earning a Big 4 job. But this strategy worked perfectly for me. I ended up earning a job at a Big 4 firm in large part because I set out with a clear goal in mind and executed my game plan.

Overall, it is important to know yourself and what is the best option for you. This will go a long way to ensure that you present yourself in the best possible light to these firms during the recruiting process.

Step 5 – Decide What Your Specialty Will Be

As I discussed previously, each of the Big 4 offers services in a number of different categories. Before embarking on the recruiting journey, you will need to have a good idea of about which service you want to pursue. For those unsure of what direction to take, this can be a stressful decision. I went through quite an ordeal during the early stages of my career trying to decide which service to specialize in.

Fortunately for you, I learned from that experience and am able to offer advice on how to go about determining which path is right for you. As you read on about the two most popular avenues for beginning your career, think about the work you want to be doing and what work environment is best for you. Imagining yourself in the job and performing the day-to-day work goes a long way in resolving which job is best for you.

Out of college, most accounting graduates go on to work for the Big 4 firms in one of two service areas. These career paths are:

- Audit
- Tax

Each focuses on different aspects of accounting and requires a different set of skills. The question becomes how to determine which is best for you. I have outlined for you a detailed analysis of each to help get a better understanding of what it is like to work in each service line.

Audit

The audit function of the Big 4 accounting firms is the largest service line in most offices. As an auditor with a Big 4 firm, you will be assigned to different audit engagements that the firm serves in your region. The audit engagement involves following procedures, testing financials and reaching an opinion on the reasonableness of a company's financial statements. Further, auditors conduct procedures to assess the effectiveness of a company's internal controls. The length and scope of an audit varies from client to client, but the most in-depth audits usually are for SEC filing companies.

In my experience, joining the public accounting ranks as an auditor is the more popular pick for accounting graduates. People tend to view the audit profession as the sexier profession since the Big 4 work with big, high-profile audit clients. Further, I found that professors in accounting also tend to push their students towards auditing, as it is a career path that opens itself up to many different avenues.

The reason you decide whether or not to pursue an audit career is up to you, but here are some things to keep in mind when making your decision:

Do you like working in a team environment?

Auditors usually work in teams on-site at the client's office location. Audit