

When one private accounting firm is competing against another for government clients, it helps to have an edge—proof that the staff understands government financial management and is committed to continually learning more.

The CGFM credential sends that message, said Stephen Blann, CGFM, a senior manager of the governmental accounting and auditing division of Rehmann Robson, a member of The Rehmann Group.

The firm's partners feel so strongly about the value of the designation that they include a brief description of the CGFM credential on government proposals, as a way to highlight the qualifications of team members seeking to work for government clients.

Blann said earning the designation shows potential clients that the firm's staff are willing to go the extra step to specialize in the government environment. The CGFM often becomes a point of discussion with his government clients, and many are impressed with the rigorous standards expected of CGFM holders.

Blann, who passed the CGFM Examinations in 2001 when he was six years into his career, uses his CGFM credential on his business cards and stationery and hangs his CGFM certificate prominently on his office wall, along with his CPA license.

He sees the CPA and CGFM as complementary, but he likes the fact that AGA holds its CGFM holders to a higher standard of continuing professional education (CPE) than the AICPA. He said the CPE requirements for maintaining a CPA license are very unrestrictive, but to maintain the CGFM, the CPE hours must be specific to governmental finance. "This keeps you focused on things of more practical value," he said.

Blann works out of the Jackson, MI office, managing a team of 12 people who handle about 75 government audits a year for Michigan counties, cities, townships, taxing districts, school districts and Indian tribes.

When the CGFM designation was first rolled out, a handful of people in the government auditing division became CGFMs by virtue of their education and experience, and the designation started showing up on internal resumes. Blann was intrigued, and joined AGA in 2001 specifically to start the process of earning the CGFM himself. Blann studied on his own for the exams. He read material on federal accounting issues provided by his office and relied on his day-to-day work experience to pass all three exams over a period of a few weeks.

The only reason some of the answers came easily is because he works with GASB pronouncements, including GASB 34 implementation, and other state and local issues every day. In fact, he has advised certain staff members to wait and get more work experience before trying to tackle the exams.

"I would not say it was easy," he said. "There were parts that were easy and parts that were very confusing, so it was a bit of a mixed bag." Blann said that by nature he seeks continuous improvement, and the exam showed him that he could always learn more. "The exam did highlight some areas that I walked away saying, 'I ought to be doing more research on that and make sure I have a solid handle on that area.'"

Blann believes the CGFM credential is becoming better known. He's starting to see the CGFM listed as a preferred qualification on job listings more and more often. And for CPAs in private practice making government their specialty, the CGFM is valuable, he said.

While Blann did not receive a raise or promotion specifically for earning the CGFM, that wasn't his main motivation.

"Earning the CGFM designation gave me a real feeling of accomplishment," said Blann. "It was an external validation that the investment I had made into my chosen career path had really paid off in terms of developing tangible, marketable skills—and that really means a lot to me."