

CMA's Significance in the Middle East |

BY FADI GANNI

The number of people enrolling in the Certified Management Accountant (CMA®) program in the Middle East (particularly the Gulf region and North Africa) has increased significantly in the past five years. A number of factors have contributed to this growth, but globalization is an important one as it contributes to many of the major changes worldwide.

Blurrier global barriers and a constant rise in competition have made international recognition one of the best ways for a financial professional to compete in the international business arena. Employers are now harder to please. They demand high standards of achievement from prospective employees and expect no less than the mastery of the trade, a high level of professionalism, and a commitment to continuous professional education.

As a result, there's a vast pool of professional designations available in the market that cater to every industry and every specialty imaginable. How, then, has the CMA become one of the most coveted international certifications in the Middle East and the Gulf?

An international curriculum

Having an international curriculum has helped. While every industry has its own credentials, the toughest part is selecting the one that optimally matches your career and professional aspirations and provides a global opportunity in terms of recognition and international curriculum.

Accounting designations rarely cover the international perspective on the managerial front. In fact, the most popular accounting and finance designations tend to focus on specialized technical topics such as audit, tax, and financial accounting. National credentials spotlight national laws and practices, and the more international ones are generally geared toward U.S. laws and practices. But the CMA is different.

“The CMA designation carries a more international content in terms of topics covered. This allows candidates to gain valuable and practical professional skills regardless of their location. The designation carries the same opportunities wherever you are, and this certainly provides an advantage for CMAs if they decide to explore international markets,” says Andre Naddy, regional operations manager of Morgan International.

With topics ranging from global business to financial statement analysis and organization management, the CMA covers global issues and practices. This allows candidates to be more aligned internationally in terms of business practices, which translates especially well in the Middle East's booming countries.

A managerial perspective

In addition to its international curriculum, the CMA focuses on educating and training management accountants in strategic business areas. The certification offers a broad business competency and mastery of management-level skills for professionals in the accounting and finance fields. Its managerial approach contributes largely to the CMA's popu-

larity in the region because it provides job candidates with the right tools to analyze financial documents and make informed decisions on the managerial front. And its subject matter doesn't stop at external financial reporting.

Joseph Khoury, country manager at USM Holding in Qatar, earned his CMA designation in 2008 and experienced its benefits firsthand: "I worked at USM Lebanon for four years, but the highest position I could have had in the company back then was chief accountant. That was why I left USM and joined the United Nations. After I earned my CMA designation, I received many offers, including one from USM. I accepted the job and was promoted from chief accountant to country manager. I never would have had that opportunity if it hadn't been for the CMA, which enhanced my skills, increased my self-confidence, and provided me with a higher level of professionalism. USM needed someone with a financial and managerial background to run the Qatari branch of the company, and I had the skills to assume that responsibility."

Attractive compensation

In its latest salary survey of members, the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA®) found that, for the first time, the average salary of members responding to the survey exceeded \$100,000, which represented a 6.9% increase over the figure reported in 2006. Despite the U.S. economic upheavals in 2007, the year was bright for IMA members in the U.S. The survey also found that members who were certified earned more than those who weren't, which demonstrated another value of certification.

This positive trend is reflected in the Middle East. While exact numbers aren't available, when Khoury

was asked whether he witnessed a salary increase or other career opportunities as a result of having the CMA designation, he said: "Yes, a good one, which makes you forget all the time you spent studying for the exams." Although compensation is greater for those who have earned a certification than for those with no certification, experience also plays a significant role. That's why candidates who pass the CMA examination must have a minimum of two years of experience before they can earn the actual credential.

The CMA exam also offers flexibility for candidates in terms of location because most international candidates don't have to travel outside their country of residence or place of study in order to sit for the exam. This isn't the case with some other exams, where candidates have to travel great distances to take them. Travel papers, expenses, and time off that getting certified would normally require can sometimes be difficult for working professionals or too costly for new graduates.

New initiatives for booming economies

"The CMA certification is very much in demand in the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are big markets, but it's the region as a whole that is going through a big wave of changes in terms of growth in both the private and government sectors. As the market grows, the demand for CMAs is sure to follow suit," Naddy explains.

Other reasons for the growing demand include such initiatives as Emiratisation in the United Arab Emirates, Saudization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Omanization in the Sultanate of Oman, to name a few. These new measures have been

adopted to help reduce the countries' intake of foreign workers and encourage nationals to enter the job market, measures that have proved to be quite challenging so far. Quota systems have been implemented in many countries in an effort to get the private sector to employ a set number of nationals, but, according to a recent employment survey conducted by MEED (Middle East Business Intelligence), 72% of respondents stated that "inadequate skills and lack of qualifications are the principal obstacles for hiring Gulf nationals."

So what is the key to solving this dilemma? Providing the demanded skills and knowledge through education and training in both government agencies and private-sector companies where expatriates make up the majority of the workforce.

What the future holds

IMA's commitment to keep the CMA exam's comprehensive curriculum up to date to reflect changes in practice is an equally important step. For example, many Middle Eastern countries are in serious discussions about conversion to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), so this is a topic of interest and will be tested in more depth beginning in 2010. The initiatives IMA undertakes to meet the competency needs of finance teams around the world will only reinforce the demand for and extend the reach of the CMA designation in the region, if not in the entire international business arena.

Khoury's conclusion provides professionals thinking about sitting for the CMA exam with potent food for thought: "Don't think twice." ■

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