



40

YEARS OF
EXCELLENCE
1972 – 2012

CERTIFICATION

By Jeffrey C. Thomson, CMA

From CEO to CMA

Each person knows when it's the right time to pursue certification. Maybe now it's your turn to earn the CMA®.

I'm proud to be a CMA. After learning my certification a little more than two years ago, I can say without hesitation that becoming a CMA is one of the top two or three highlights of my three-decade "plus" business career.

You may be asking why I didn't become a CMA earlier in my career like so many others, including a recent IMA® Chair, who became CMAs first, then climbed the career ladder. If I had, the title of this article could have been "From CMA to CEO." But as I've proudly mentioned previously, for 23+ years I worked at one of the world's largest and most prestigious global telecommunications companies that at one point in the 1990s was also the world's most highly valued. During my career there, I had 14 jobs, received five promotions, and held positions inside and outside of accounting/finance. My most senior position was CFO of an \$18 billion operation. Certification generally wasn't viewed as a differentiator or a screener for new or existing positions. Sometimes this happens in a large, insular company where job performance and executive educa-

tion are seen as the path to promotions and enhanced career opportunities. For example, I was lucky enough to participate in the Wharton University Finance and Accounting Certificate Program, and, later in my career, I honed my leadership skills at the Columbia University Senior Executive Program.

After I became CEO of IMA in 2008, I learned that several of my AT&T colleagues had earned their CMA (they were quick to tell me this). While I usually don't look back, I do wish that I had been more proactive in seeking advanced certifications like the CMA, which might have enhanced my career prospects even further. That's the evidence in the market today: Advanced certifications like the CMA increasingly are becoming differentiators, leading to increased compensation and career opportunities. An additional social phenomenon is that individuals no longer stay with one company for more than two decades as I did "back in the day."

Now fast-forward. Why did I decide to seek the CMA, and what did I learn from the experience? I became a candidate because, as one of IMA's senior ambassadors around the world, my passion and

fire were missing that critical ingredient. I had seen firsthand how the CMA enriches careers, organizations, and society, but I thought there was nothing like *being* a CMA to really enhance my personal credibility as a CMA ambassador. I've always felt comfortable exchanging ideas with CFOs and controllers, but that comfort level took a quantum leap once I possessed the certification.

Although I had more than two decades of experience in business as a management accountant, I took nothing for granted when I studied for the CMA exam. I literally studied on trains, planes, and in automobiles, and I felt so enriched by the study process. When I became a CMA in August 2010, my personal credibility as a senior CMA ambassador skyrocketed! Many of the CFOs and controllers I interact with around the world are from the manufacturing sector, yet my experience was in the services sector. Although I could say that I fell asleep in Cost Accounting II class, where I believe manufacturing process costing and related topics were covered, the comprehensiveness and rigor of the CMA program allowed me to truly understand these key topics that are critical to

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the success of the manufacturing sector.

The primary lesson from my experience as a CMA candidate is that although the end game of becoming a CMA is amazing, the process to get there is equally enriching. I learned and relearned so much about the rich body of knowledge spanning the management accounting profession. In addition to my business experience, I was also an educator for more than 20 years and certified to teach mathematics in grades K-12, so I truly believe that the learning process itself can be enlightening and enriching. “Passing the exam” is vital (e.g., SAT, GRE, GMAT, LSAT, CPA, CMA), but learning important business concepts leads to great things like expanding your mind and your career prospects.

This leads to my second lesson. The CMA program is growing exponentially in numbers, respect, and influence around the globe and within the next year will hit 40,000 certified professionals. There is strength in numbers, but they need to be the “right” numbers. One thing is certain: When you pass the relevant, focused, and rigorous CMA exam and have the education and experience requirements, employers can be confident that you’re credible and competent in critical managerial accounting skill sets such as financial planning and analysis (FP&A), strategic costing, risk management, and more. Thus the CMA can help employers fill their current major talent gap with knowledgeable accounting and finance professionals. And it can help job seekers match their skills with the right position.

Also regarding numbers, ICMA® (Institute of Certified Management Accountants), the independent affiliate of IMA that creates and maintains the CMA exam, takes pride in its independence and highest standards of quality, ethics, and values. In the exam’s 40-year history, ICMA has grandfathered only one individual into the CMA program—Dr. James Bulloch, the founder of the program. As a CMA, this fact is important to me because it tells me I earned a credential with the highest standards so that it has real value in the marketplace. The growing, global CMA community is truly an exclusive, well-regarded group whose members have earned the gold standard in management accounting.

My final comments relate to the people of ICMA. On the staff side, Priscilla Payne (now retired) and Dennis Whitney are remarkable. They have managed to grow the CMA program while maintaining the highest standards of quality, ethics, professionalism, and internal controls. On the volunteer side, as CEO I’ve worked with the past two chairs of the Board of Regents, Joe Vincent and Rick Thompson. They’re savvy business professionals who have forged a strong relationship with the senior leadership team and external stakeholders around the world. The CMA program is in very good hands.

Can you tell I’m proud to be a CMA? **SF**

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