

CPA Profile

Ronan O'Brien



Title: Partner

Company:
Walsh O'Brien Harnett

Qualifications:
CPA, MIATI, QFA

Why did you decide to start out on a career in accountancy?

To be honest accountancy was my plan B; plan A was to become a sound engineer and tour the world. It seemed like an easier route into the rock and roll lifestyle than forming a band (it's not!). When the penny dropped, I dusted off plan B and plotted my route to an accountancy qualification. My father, Donal O'Brien, had a practice with his partner Jim Harnett, O'Brien Harnett & Associates, and I could have started there, but I decided to get some experience on my own. I signed up for the accounting technician course and got a job with Image Publications in their accounts department.

Why did you choose CPA Ireland as your qualification route?

After qualifying as a technician, I started in O'Brien Harnett & Associates as a trainee accountant. I decided to go the CPA route as it seemed less restrictive than other routes at the time, and I hadn't entirely let go of plan A yet.

Please provide a brief history of your career.

I studied to become an accounting technician while working in Image Publications, after which I moved to O'Brien Harnett & Associates and qualified as a CPA.

O'Brien Harnett had a lot of charity and not-for-profit audit clients. I honed my skills as an auditor while also carving out a niche for myself, firstly by transferring schools from manual to computerised books and records, and then charities and not-for-profits from both manual and Excel-based systems to Sage 50.

After qualifying as a CPA, I then decided to look for another challenge. A position in EY's Technology and Security Risk Services department came up which blended my skills as an auditor with my interest in technology. My role in EY was to assist the audit departments

by carrying out technical and security audit tests on large client systems. Whilst I enjoyed my time in EY, I felt the work was very much on the technical side and that I was neglecting the accountancy qualification I had worked so hard to get just a few years earlier. At the time, the Charity SORP 2005 was quickly gaining traction and a lot of the audit clients I had worked with in O'Brien Harnett began asking for assistance with adopting it, so I made the decision to go back to my former position.

From there my career in O'Brien Harnett progressed from promotion to manager, then director, and finally promotion to partner, taking over my father's position in the firm. I am now a partner with Walsh O'Brien Harnett, formed in 2016 following the merger of O'Brien Harnett & Associates and Sherry McNabola Murray. I lead the firm's charities and not-for-profit team, providing audit and assurance services to clients in a sector that has gone, and continues to go, through a huge amount of change over the past decade. From the Charities Act 2009 to the establishment of the Charities Regulatory Authority in 2014, the revision of the Charity SORP, and now the implementation of the Charities Governance Code.

How do you find your CPA qualification has helped you in your role?

Certainly, I could not be where I am today without the qualification. Having access to the resources on the CPA website has been a great advantage over the years. I also find Accountancy Plus to be a genuinely informative read.

What has been your biggest career achievement?

The merger in 2016 of O'Brien Harnett & Associates and Sherry McNabola Murray to form Walsh O'Brien Harnett, and the relocation to our new office at 104 Lower Baggot Street in 2017, both

stand out as career highlights. Walsh O'Brien Harnett is now a top 20 firm in Ireland with approximately 50 staff. We were nominated in five categories in this year's accountancy awards.

What or who inspires you most in business?

I have huge admiration for my clients in the charity sector, many of whom have spent most of their lives helping others. I also respect anyone who has had the courage to start their own business.

If you were advising someone just starting out with their CPA qualification, what tip would you give them that would make their journey smoother?

Find an employer who will support your journey, attend all lectures, and don't give up. It will seem tough at the time, but it will be worth it in the end.

What do you think are the most pressing issues for accountants?

Leaving the obvious Covid-19 issues to one side, I think AI will soon be the biggest issue for a lot of people, including accountants. AI will be able to do many tasks quicker and better than you, so I think we should embrace it. We should be able to use it in a way that enables us to get out from behind our desks to meet our clients and grow our businesses.

How do you unwind?

I was never a fan of sitting in and watching Netflix, but in the current Covid-19 self-isolating, social distancing world, I have found myself becoming quite the binge watcher, to the detriment of sleep. I also enjoy playing the guitar and golf, both badly.

What traits do you admire most in others?

Self-motivation and a can-do attitude. If you have those traits you will not go far wrong, and both in my opinion can be learned and developed.