

The accountant's

SCRAPBOOK

Tony Eyre ponders whether we should be preserving our personal work histories

MANY HOUSEHOLDS HAVE AN OLD-STYLE scrapbook stored away – bulging with newspaper clippings, greeting cards and other memorabilia – recording significant events or simply the ordinary family milestones of a lifetime.

Since the mid-1990s, a multi-million dollar scrapbooking industry has spawned a multitude of online mail-order and specialist stores that supply a limitless range of embellishments to transform the common scrapbook into a work of art and an ongoing hobby.

This upsurge in popularity of the family scrapbook has led me to ponder on the fact that we don't appear to devote the same sort of attention to preserving the memories of our working life. A large chunk of our lives is spent in the workplace – our home-away-from-home – yet so little of that experience is shared with those closest to us.

So, if an accountant were to keep a scrapbook of their working life for the sake of posterity, what would be in it?

Probably the memories of your first job might fill the opening pages. For me, a letter read out at school assembly offering a position as an "accountancy cadet" was the trigger that led me into a career in chartered accountancy.

Mentors play a big part in the professional development of accountancy trainees today, and so too back in 1971 when one of mine was Don McDonald, a senior partner in an Auckland firm. A director of sharemarket kingpin Brierley Investments, Don still made the time to give me lunchtime driving lessons in the Auckland Domain. On one occasion, I reversed his XJ6 Jaguar into a parking sign, giving it a decided lean. He calmly got out of the passenger's side and pulled the sign back into position. Thankfully, he continued to take me for driving lessons – from then on in his partner's Holden Commodore.

A good source for the accountant's scrapbook may be the filing cabinet that has managed to survive the recommended seven-year clean-out. Flicking through the files in a cabinet I have owned for 25 years, I have come across an assortment of work-related letters, certificates, invoices, insurance policies and newspaper clippings that jog the memory and provide some sort of trail in the timeline of my working life.

Chartered accountants don't often make the newspaper headlines but one clipping from my local daily will find its way into my scrap-

book. Working late in my top-storey office one evening, I had to hastily crawl onto the exterior fire-escape and climb up onto the roof as thick smoke and breaking glass signalled a fire in what was New Zealand's first 'skyscraper', the former NZ Express Co building in Dunedin. The lesson learnt – burning the midnight oil can be hazardous to work-life balance.

One concrete reminder of a career in public practice can be found in my shed – the clutter of wooden and perspex nameplates removed from office buildings as my sole-practice shifted premises over the years. 'Hanging out your slate' is a tradition dating back to the guilds of the Middle Ages, and for today's accounting professional the nameplate still has its role in practice identity and branding.

When having a catch up with my profes-

sional colleagues, the conversation invariably turns to the less-liked features of public practice – the long hours, the relentless workload, IRD deadlines and difficult clients – negatives that the experts tell us can often be fixed by better time management and strategic planning.

But on a more personal note, I think that the most enduring memories in an accountant's working life flow from the people who have been our clients. Each practice has its own unique mix of clients. Some individuals more easily spring to mind because of their noteworthy achievements – the professional athlete, the TV personality, the highly collectible artist or the politician. Other clients are remembered most vividly because of some personal tragedy that cut short their lives. And when client couples end a relationship through a bitter matrimonial separation, the accountant is invariably involved in the emotion and complexities of untangling their business affairs.

If an underlying theme were to be iden-

On one occasion, I reversed his XJ6 Jaguar into a parking sign

tified in the accountant's scrapbook, it would be one of relationship. For most CAs in public practice, the pattern is similar. Of the hundreds of clients passing through our doors, many have a short-term relationship with us whereas others become life-long friends. Some are part of successive generations of family members, particularly evident in the continuity of the family trust. And if you are in practice long enough, many are loyal clients till the end of their days.

In 2008 the NZ Institute of Chartered Accountants celebrated the history of its first 100 years. Maybe now's a timely moment to reflect on your own work history.

Tony Eyre is a Dunedin chartered accountant in public practice.

Copyright of Chartered Accountants Journal is the property of Institute of Chartered Accountants of New Zealand and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.