What Does It Take to Work in Government Accounting?

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Working in government accounting means managing complex responsibilities such as consolidating financial statements across multiple funds, reconciling trial balances, and performing audits under strict federal guidelines.

While a bachelor's degree in accounting is often the starting point for a government accounting career, earning a Master of Accounting degree equips students with the expertise to work in government agencies or advisory firms and pursue a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) license.

What Is Government Accounting?

Government accounting focuses on financial reporting and ensuring compliance with regulations. It involves managing and auditing public funds, including implementing

internal controls, performance measurement, financial reporting, and budgeting. The goal of government accounting is to ensure responsible use of public funds and compliance with laws.

As government programs require meeting legal and fiscal requirements, accountants use knowledge from different fields, including finance and auditing. Transparency is core to effective government accounting, so individuals in these roles ensure that public resources are managed transparently, helping communities trust government financial practices.

5 Government Accounting Careers

Government accountants and auditors interpret financial rules, monitor resource use, and hold public entities accountable. Their work covers various areas — from ensuring that schools meet financial requirements to providing guidance to nonprofits on grant requirements.

Compensation for government accounting roles can vary based on factors such as job title, organization, and location. However, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the median annual salary for government accounting and auditing roles, excluding those in education and hospitals, was $81,120 as of May 2024.

Below are some different government accounting careers that individuals with the right background can pursue.

1. Government Accountant

Transparency and accountability are top responsibilities for government accountants who help ensure that public money is collected and spent legally and efficiently. In addition to managing public funds for government agencies, government accountants review financial records, monitor costs, suggest ways to improve resource allocation, and ensure that businesses and individuals comply with regulations or pay taxes.

2. Government Auditor

Auditors help the government reduce waste and financial risk by checking internal controls, identifying fraud, analyzing accounting methods, and evaluating risks. At

the federal level, auditors oversee public funds, investigate financial misconduct, audit agency statements, and address new accounting issues. At the state and local levels, they manage revenues, investigate fraud, conduct performance audits, and recommend improvements.

3. Forensic Accountant and Auditor

Forensic accountants and auditors are key to keeping government financial systems secure. They use auditing and investigative skills to uncover issues such as money laundering, fraud, and financial misconduct.

At the federal level, they work with agencies such as the FBI, IRS, U.S. Department of the Treasury, U.S. Government Accountability Office, and U.S. General Services Administration. Their tasks include auditing, investigating white-collar crime, and giving expert testimony on audits or tax laws. At the state and local levels, forensic accountants help manage revenues and investigate financial crimes.

4. Budget Analyst

Budget analysts oversee government spending by examining financial data, determining resource needs, and ensuring that budgets are followed. They collaborate with project and program managers to create budgets, review proposals, analyze funding requests, and track spending. They also keep managers up to date on available funds and predict future budget needs.

5. Comptroller

The roles of comptroller and controller are often confused. While the former works mainly in the government and nonprofit sectors, the latter typically works in the for-profit sector. Comptrollers play much the same role as chief financial officers do in the private sector — they oversee accounting operations and financial reports for government agencies and nonprofits. Comptrollers also lead accounting teams, ensure strong internal controls, oversee budget and loans processes, and manage funds.

Requirements to Work in Government Accounting

While most government accounting positions require only a bachelor's degree in accounting, finance, or a related field, an advanced degree can strengthen an individual's qualifications and skills in financial reporting, auditing, internal controls, data analysis, and regulatory compliance.

An advanced degree can also prepare individuals for certifications that government agencies and advisory firms value, including the CPA credential, which is required for auditors in public accounting firms and often preferred by government agencies.

The CPA, awarded by AICPA & CIMA and licensed by states, is the most widely recognized accounting credential.

Other certifications include Certified Fraud Examiner, Chartered Accountant, Certified Internal Auditor, Certified Government Auditing Professional, and Certified Government Financial Manager.

Stand Out in the Government Accounting Job Market

The scale of government employment underscores the demand for government accounting and related roles. The federal government is the nation's largest employer, with about 2.25 million civilian personnel, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Within this workforce, the Pew Research Center reports over 120,000 professionals in accounting and budget occupations.

At the state government level, the BLS reported 47,580 employees in accounting roles, not including those in schools and hospitals, as of May 2023. There are also numerous opportunities for individuals with CPA licensure at firms that provide advisory services to government agencies in the United States and abroad.

For individuals seeking careers with federal or state governments, advisory firms, or top accounting firms, earning the CPA certification can provide a competitive advantage. The Master of Accounting degree at the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University equips students with the knowledge and skills needed for these roles while helping set the stage for becoming a CPA, including preparing for the exam.

Find out how Tulane can help you take charge of your accounting career.

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