ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES

ICAS EPA2 ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES

Example Candidate Number: 12345

Introduction

- The following pages contain four example answers taken from previous ICAS EPA2 submissions.

- These examples are to be used as a guide only to give you an understanding of the structure expected and the requirements to describe, explain and evaluate.

- Please refer to the ICAS EPA2 guidance for details on how to complete your EPA2 assessment.

- The example answers contain subheadings, which are recommended but not mandatory.

Question 1

Continuous improvement.

Taking responsibility for your own professional development by seeking out opportunities that enhance your knowledge, skills and experience.

Using a workplace scenario from the final 12 months of your apprenticeship:

- Describe the situation and your role / responsibilities (one example only)
- Explain the actions you carried out, and how you demonstrated continuous improvement
- Evaluate how effective you were
- Describe the lessons you learnt (that could be applied in the future)

Brief description

During my time on a long-term Sellside engagement, I was responsible for two value areas of work – Items Below EBITDA (which stands for an organisation's Earnings Before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortisation) and Balance Sheet (which is a summary of the financial assets and liabilities of an organisation). These required the processing of extensive monthly datasets, to create numerous flat files from – without this processing, the data would not be usable. Once the flat files were created, I decided the data was most usefully presented in a format that would allow it to be split by legal entity, which was most efficiently done using the dynamic databook tool.

At this time, I had limited experience with dynamic databooks, so reached out to someone in analytics who was more familiar and asked them for a walk-through of how to set up a dynamic databook, and update it for future iterations of data. Developing proficiency in these tools meant I was able to take ownership of both the databooks I created for the two project areas, without any of the delays or inefficiencies caused by needing multiple team members to be involved every time I received new iterations of data.

Explanation

I reached out to a more experienced colleague in the analytics team, to develop my own skills in a certain area of expertise, because the project timeframes allowed for this chance at continuous improvement. I knew that certain analytics capabilities – Power Pivot and dynamic databooks – would be the best solution for the problem I was encountering. I needed to create an interactive data visualisation that allowed for a legal entity view to be toggled and changed by a user, but I had very limited experience in the analytics tools necessary myself.

I chose to upskill myself in this area, so I could work on this specific engagement more efficiently, but also because I had the time to learn something new, which I could take forward on other engagements. This was instead of asking another team member, who would have been juggling other responsibilities on the project, to take on the responsibility for this part of my two project areas as well, thus requiring their time and energy every time we needed to update the databooks for new datasets.

As a by-product of this, I would also lose some of the autonomy and responsibility I had gained on this engagement.

After the walk-through with my analytics colleague, I was able to spend some time practising with the tools and ask questions until I was confident to run the updates myself.

I was lucky that someone was available to help me, so had this not been the case, I would have spent the time doing self-learning via online courses, following the demonstrations to get that same practice. I had attended a training call on dynamic databooks previously, facilitated by analytics tool ‘champions’, but a lot of time had passed since this – I know in future if I need help troubleshooting or upskilling in a new tool, there are people available to provide that support, as well as future training calls offered.

Evaluation of efficacy
I was effective in demonstrating continuous improvement as I was able to upskill my knowledge of a certain area of analytics, in order to continue to take responsibility for my areas of the client engagement. By utilising a less deadline-heavy week of the project and reaching out to my colleague for help when I needed practice with the necessary analytics tools, I was comfortable and confident enough to set up the client deliverables (databooks) myself, and then take control of all subsequent data updates sent by the client. This was because I invested the time in acquiring a new skill, rather than deferring to someone I knew could do it already.

Choosing to improve my skillset meant I was able to retain the same level of responsibility on this client engagement, which had already afforded me opportunities for professional development, and I will now take this skill forward on future engagements, confident in my ability after having been able to practise it so much in a live engagement setting.

However, there were challenges – after the initial setting up of the deliverables, further dataset iterations were received which we had to update the databooks for. As these datasets changed, there was a greater need for thorough checking back to source files. This was not something I was familiar with doing in a dynamic setting, as the size of the dataset is what necessitates the dynamic nature, and it can be complex to create a way to check back to static source files. I realised that when some combinations of filters were selected in the deliverables, there were variances to the source files, so I reached out to another team-member to discuss an approach to resolving this and efficiently checking for these types of errors in future, in an easy-to-understand format. When working on future databooks, I will keep in mind creating thorough source checks that work dynamically from the beginning of the work, to avoid situations like this.

Evaluate lessons
From this experience, I have learnt the value of putting time and effort into improving your skillset, especially on live client engagements.

Having identified that knowledge gap on this engagement, I was able to continue taking responsibility for my project areas, which I had so far been hugely benefiting from. If I had had to hand over the work to someone with necessary expertise, I would have lost this stretch opportunity. Consequently, I will be able to take on more stretch roles, and contribute more to future teams.

In future, I will look for further opportunities to develop my analytics capabilities, knowing there are other tools that could be leveraged when handling large datasets, and I will prioritise thoroughly checking back to source files when dealing with such extensive data, due to the higher risk of errors.
Word count: 989

Question 2

Building relationships.

Building trusted and sustainable relationships with individuals and organisations. Consistently supporting individuals and collaborating to achieve results as part of a team.

Using a workplace scenario from the final 12 months of your apprenticeship:

- Describe the situation and your role / responsibilities (one example only)
- Explain the actions you carried out, and how you demonstrated building relationships
- Evaluate how effective you were
- Describe the lessons you learnt (that could be applied in the future)

Description of the background and context

One of my clients, 'Client D', is a sports organisation which organises competitive international sports events. I have been a member of the engagement team since 2019 when I first joined the firm. My team assists Client D with a number of projects, ranging from annual corporation tax compliance to ad hoc advice.

During 2021, the client was experiencing a couple of issues. They were under-resourced and also faced tight budget constraints which meant they were unhappy with the level of fees that my firm was charging them for our services. As a result, they announced that they planned to put the work out to other accountancy firms in a tender process for the following year.

Before the tender process started, I joined Client D's team in-house for a five month secondment in their tax department in order to help them with their resource problems. The secondment enabled me to build a strong relationship with the client by supporting the individuals in the tax team to help them achieve their results. In turn, I helped my firm to form a closer connection with the client by understanding their needs better.

Description of my role, responsibilities and actions

During my secondment, my role was to assist the Tax Manager and individuals in the wider finance team with a number of ongoing tax and finance projects. Specifically, this involved assisting with the company's withholding tax obligations in approximately 30 countries, coordinating a transfer pricing analysis, understanding the tax requirements to run a sports tournament in three new jurisdictions and coordinating the annual tax compliance obligations in the different territories they had a presence in.

I also set up weekly check-in calls with the Partner at my firm to inform him on how the secondment was going. This was an opportunity to highlight problem areas and suggest solutions for the benefit of both internal and external stakeholders.

During the secondment, it was apparent that management at Client D were short of time. They needed someone they could trust who could progress the ongoing work streams and give them a regular status update. In response to this need, I kept a detailed project tracker. This enabled me to ensure that all the work streams were moving along in accordance with agreed timelines, therefore helping Client D to achieve their results. It also meant that I could easily give progress updates to the Senior Tax Manager and the Head of Tax at Client D when required, making them feel consistently supported.

While on secondment, I also took the opportunity to learn as much about the business as possible to give me greater perspective about the business's operations. I worked closely with the three members of the in-house tax team and had regular check-ins with the wider finance team to understand what they were working on.

Evaluation of the professional skill used and developed
Through setting up meetings with the wider finance team, I gained a more holistic overview of the business's key aims and ambitions. In turn, this allowed me to communicate with the managers in the tax team at Client D more meaningfully and hence build a stronger relationship with them.

Furthermore, this meant I could influence outcomes of certain projects due to the trust I had built with the Head of Tax at Client D. For example, she regularly used me as a sounding board to voice any issues or concerns before voicing them to the rest of the senior members of the engagement team at my firm. This made sure that everyone in the team was supported and therefore helped to achieve results.

One thing I found particularly challenging during the development of this skill was learning how to balance my communication between Client D and my firm. Particularly at the beginning of my secondment, the managers at my firm wanted me to share information that could help them win the tender process. To deal with this, I made it clear to both parties that I should not be involved in any conversations in relation to the tender proposals of the other competing firms. I took this action to ensure that I did not breach any confidentiality or cause distrust on the side of Client D which could damage my relationships. Although this action was not so beneficial for the team at my firm, it was respected by the client and ultimately made them feel more supported.

Evaluation of the lessons learned
Overall, I received very good feedback from the Senior Tax Manager and Head of Tax at Client D after my secondment ended. Client D came to trust and form a more meaningful working relationship with not only me, but also my firm.

As a final outcome, my firm won the tender process with Client D, meaning we secured an agreement to provide services to the client for a further three years. This demonstrates how internal and external stakeholders benefitted from this scenario.
One of the requests from the client when they confirmed my firm's success of the tender was that I stayed on the central engagement team when I returned to my usual role at my accountancy firm. This further demonstrates the strong relationship that I formed with the Finance team at the client and shows how this had a positive knock-on effect for my firm as well.
Word count 894

Question 3

Leadership.

Taking ownership of allocated projects and effectively managing your own time and the time of others. Demonstrating good project management skills to deliver high quality work within the appropriate timeline. Acting as a role model and motivating others to deliver results.

Using a workplace scenario from the final 12 months of your apprenticeship:

- Describe the situation and your role / responsibilities (one example only)
- Explain the actions you carried out, and how you demonstrated leadership skills
- Evaluate how effective you were
- Describe the lessons you learnt (that could be applied in the future)

Situation
During the second year of my training contract, I was performing the year-end testing for one of my clients. I was overseeing the testing of three of the entities within the group. There were three offshore staff within the team who were helping me to complete the testing. My responsibilities included allocating the work between us, coaching my three colleagues as well as reviewing their work.

My colleagues had a range of audit experience and knowledge. Colleague A had very little experience as they had only recently joined the firm. In comparison, colleagues B and C had more experience. My colleagues were also based abroad in India, so all communication was done in a virtual environment. There was also a time difference which I had to consider. I had overseen individuals before, but this was the first time had led a whole small team.

Actions
I started by organising a meeting with my three colleagues to introduce myself and to gain an understanding of their current capabilities. I then allocated the work between my colleagues and myself. I aimed to allocate work out so that the workload was equal as well as ensuring that the most important work was prioritised. I also tried to allocate work based on their current knowledge levels. I wanted to provide them with development opportunities but also not find the tasks too challenging that they would not complete it efficiently or to a high quality.

I also created a shared work tracker which we could all access and update. The tracker detailed the work allocation, status of tasks and had a section for comments. Due to the time difference, this was a key tool as it enabled us to communicate when the others were not at work by leaving comments. I also set up a daily team call for a time when our working hours overlapped. Within this call I invited all three of my colleagues to discuss their areas which provided me with a better understanding. It was also an opportunity for me to answer any queries they had.

Throughout the audit, I frequently amended the work allocation to incorporate new tasks based on current workload. This ensured that the most important tasks were prioritised. I believe I showed good leadership by remaining flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. I ensured that workload was fair.

Evaluation
Overall, I believe I successfully managed the team and workload. As a result, we were able to complete all tasks to a high standard within the deadlines. I believe a key to my success was always maintaining a strong awareness of the status of tasks. I achieved this through the regular and open communication which I established via the tracker and daily catch-up calls. These actions ensured that I was able to allocate new tasks and re-shuffle existing tasks to make the workload equal and to prioritise the most important tasks.

Although I had coached individuals before, this was the first time I had led a small team. Therefore, upon reflection there were aspects which I could have done better. At the start, I followed the same approach to leading and coaching all three of my colleagues despite the difference in understanding and knowledge. This contributed to the colleague A struggling at the start as I did not provide enough guidance for them. However, once I realised this, I did adapt my approach.

Lessons Learnt
Going forward, I will ensure that I have a strong understanding of everyone's current experience and knowledge at the start. I will then be able develop a tailored approach to coaching. I believe this will make me a more effective leader as everyone has different requirements and learning styles. It will also ensure that the team delivers high quality work as I will know the areas to focus my coaching on.

Another aspect I struggled with was moving away from a "doing" mindset where I would complete the work myself to a more leading mindset where I allocated and oversaw others. I understand that to be an effective leader, it is important to be able to delegate work even if you know that it may take longer or there may be mistakes as start. Being a good leader is being able to coach these individuals to learn from the errors. Although I did delegate a lot of the tasks, I did still complete a lot myself. This meant that I did not have as much time to help the others. Next time, I will make sure to assign less work to myself so that I am able to sufficiently oversee work and coach individuals.

A key lesson I learnt from this experience is the importance of having a good understanding of the status of all work as well as how your colleagues are feeling. Without this, regardless of knowledge, you will not be an effective leader. This engagement taught me the importance of using a range of techniques (calls, tracker etc.) to achieve this. As a result, next time I lead a team, I will be more confident and have a more effective and refined approach.

I also learnt that it is important to take the time at the start of an engagement to understand each of my colleagues' abilities. By doing so, I won't allocate work to individuals that is too challenging. This will ensure high quality and timely work. Therefore, in future situations, I will ensure to organise a call with my colleagues that I am overseeing to gain this understanding.

Word count: 921

Question 4

Flexibility.

Adapting your approach to assist organisations and individuals to manage their conflicting priorities as circumstances change.

Using a workplace scenario from the final 12 months of your apprenticeship:

- Describe the situation and your role / responsibilities (one example only)
- Explain the actions you carried out, and how you demonstrated flexibility
- Evaluate how effective you were
- Describe the lessons you learnt (that could be applied in the future)

Background and context

At the end of last year, I was asked to join the engagement team for a new client. I was the most junior member of the team, reporting directly to the engagement Director. My firm was originally engaged to prepare their corporation tax returns for the financial year 2020 (FY20) however a very last minute change in scope meant that we also had to amend the financial year 2019 return (FY19) which had been submitted by the client's previous advisor.

The client had separately engaged the Research and Development ('R&D') team at my firm to calculate their Research and Development Expenditure Credit (RDEC) claim for FY19. The R&D team emailed me two weeks before the deadline to file an amended corporation tax return for FY19, informing me that the RDEC claim needed to be included in Client B's tax return in order for it to be claimed. As such, I had to be flexible and adapt my approach in order to assist Client B's priorities and also those of individuals in my firm.

Description of my role and actions

My role was to coordinate the engagement for Client B. This included liaising with the client and my firm's offshore team who prepare the corporation tax returns to ensure the deliverables were provided to the client on time and to a high quality.

When I was alerted to the need to amend the prior year tax return, I firstly set up a call with the client to explain the situation. I explained that I would need to adapt the approach originally agreed in order to meet the priorities of their organisation. The client was not aware that in order to make the claim it had to be included in the prior year return which had to be resubmitted to HMRC. Since this work was outside of our agreed scope of work, I also had to explain to Client B that we would need additional fees for our service. The client was understanding, however they were clear that they needed the deadline to be met to accommodate the claim they were making.

Secondly, I contacted the offshore team to ask if they had capacity to carry out the additional scope of work. Fortunately, I was able to find someone that was able to process the updates in our tax computation preparation software.

Evaluation of the behaviour
The work that needed to be carried out was very time sensitive, therefore I acted quickly and was able to be flexible in my approach by reorganising my other client commitments at that time. This enabled me to ensure that I met the more pressing and time sensitive requirements for Client B, while not foregoing any of my other commitments those two weeks.

Due to some complications with the software we used to prepare tax computations, I ended up having to make some adjustments in the computation myself. This is typically done by our offshore team, however the deadline was approaching and the available time was running low. This is a new skill I had to learn in the time by being flexible and reaching out to another manager in my team for guidance.

In the end, I was able to facilitate and also make the required amendments in sufficient time before the filing deadline so that both the Director in my team and also the R&D manager had time to perform a proper review of the amendments. Both individuals were satisfied with the changes and we were able to send the amended tax return to the client before the filing deadline and get their approval so it could be filed to HMRC in time.

Evaluation of the lessons learned
Overall, the computation and return were amended in advance of the filing deadline. Ultimately, the client was satisfied with the work delivered to the standard expected and within the relevant timeframe.

The reason that the short notice for the amendments happened in the first place was due to a lack of coordination with the other teams. In future engagements, I will make sure to ask more questions in the planning phase to make sure that I am aware of the other work being carried out by other teams in the firm. Where this is the case, I will take steps to understand if this will impact the work my team need to carry out. Doing this in future will also relieve pressure on other teams to take on more work at short notice, such as the offshore team.

This experience also taught me the importance of liaising closely with the different teams involved in pulling together the work at short notice. I resolved some of the queries over direct calls to ensure that the problem was resolved in a timely manner and that all parties understood how to proceed from that point. I will take this approach forward to work on future clients as it greatly improves efficiency and minimises matters getting lost in translation over emails.

Word count: 834

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