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“Construction experience a must” used to be among the verbiage on Armao, Costa & Ricciardi’s help wanted ads. But the boutique Garden City accounting firm has since learned to be more inclusive.

“First we changed the wording from a ‘must’ to a ‘plus,’ and then we dropped ‘construction experience’ altogether,” said Michael Costa, a partner, noting the firm recognized there were too few certified public accountants with construction experience in the marketplace.

“Mentioning construction would exclude too many good candidates,” he said. “We decided instead to hire smart people and train them in construction.”

In the recent fourth-quarter hiring season – when many firms beef up in anticipation of tax season – Long Island firms found that while there is a decent availability of talent in the marketplace, filling certain specific requirements can be a challenge.

The Melville office of Marcum finds its niche financial services practice particularly onerous to staff.

“We work with a lot of hedge funds and private equity companies, and it’s difficult to find tax people with experience in that area,” said Carolyn Mazzenga, managing partner of the firm’s Melville office. Battle for the best and brightest Before the 2008 market crash, “most midsized accounting firms had an open order to hire,” said Andrew Cohen, partner in charge of the Woodbury office of WeiserMazars. “But over the next couple of years, firms found themselves in an over-hired position and reduced staff, so there were accountants out of work. It is leveling off now, but you still have some people on the street.”

However, there's not a gaggle of A players on the unemployment lines.

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“CPAs usually choose to go to larger public firms or private companies” where they can expect better pay, a better benefits package and, in the latter case, no tax season, said James Diapoules, a partner in the boutique firm Diapoules & Feinstein of South Huntington.

Diapoules & Feinstein sought to grow its own CPAs by offering to send two of its employees, who have associate's degrees, to school to complete the five years of education required to earn a license.

Tax professionals are particularly challenging to hunt down, said Cohen, noting that in WeiserMazars' recent round of hiring it was much easier to land auditors.

“There are fewer tax candidates across the board,” concurred Lisa Enella, manager of the Jericho office of the accounting firm Berdon. To succeed in tax accounting, an advanced degree in taxation is strongly encouraged, Enella said, noting this may serve as a barrier to some candidates.

David McKelvey, the partner in charge of the tax practice at Friedman in Uniondale, singled out the tax manager level as his office's biggest recruitment challenge.

Qualified candidates are easier to come by in Berdon's Long Island office than at its Manhattan location, said Human Resources Director Karen Froewiss, who said the shortage of certified public accountants in the city has returned to pre-2008 levels.

With the economy slow to rebound, “people are concerned about leaving their current jobs,” which translates to fewer candidates on the market, Froewiss said.

“It's the devil you know,” McKelvey said, in explaining why many choose to stick it out with their current employer.

Senior movement “The general consensus,” Costa said, “is that we’re all battling for

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Further, “in 2008 and 2009, when things went haywire, a lot of firms didn’t make offers, or rescinded offers, so the profession lost a group of people who didn’t come in and would be seniors now,” said Roberto Viceconte, a partner at Raich Ende Malter & Co., which has an office in East Meadow.

Like many firms, PricewaterhouseCoopers is mindful of higher marketplace demands for staff with four to seven years of experience and, therefore, focuses considerable resources on campus recruiting and retention strategies.

As a result, “we currently do not have a shortage of staff at any level,” said Paul Salerno, managing partner of PwC’s Melville office.

Demand for senior accountants modestly pushed up the starting salary in the last year, by about 4.2 percent, according to the Robert Half 2013 Salary Guide. Salaries on Long Island run \$54,000 to \$60,000 for new staff accountants and about \$70,000 to \$100,000 for seniors, according to an informal survey of small and midsized firms.

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