

Careers in Credit: Beginning the Journey

By: Toni Nuernberg

Few young people dream of pursuing a job in the credit profession when they're going through school. Most credit practitioners fall into the profession when trying to gain an entry-level position in accounting or finance, and unexpectedly find a viable, rewarding career path they hadn't even realized existed.

The credit career journey often begins with a credit assistant role. In addition to contacting business customers seeking to help expedite payments, credit assistants pull credit reports, payment histories and other information so credit analysts have a complete snapshot of a company when setting credit limits. People with backgrounds as accounts receivable clerks or collectors, or starting their careers after getting an associate's degree are often well suited for credit assistant positions. Because assistants frequently work with both customers and their company's internal departments, customer service experience is essential.

"You have to be a good listener. Customer service skills are very important in those entry level positions," said Leslie Harrison, SPHR, CGA, director of membership, staffing and HR for NACM Connect and its subsidiary, Midwest Business Staffing, which assists NACM members throughout Illinois and St. Louis with staffing needs.

Michelle Drinka, credit administrator for Butler Machinery Company in Fargo, N.D., concurs. "A lot of this job requires patience," she said. "When we contact customers, we're really nice. We check to see if they need an invoice and make sure they understand everything. We're there to help the customers."

According to staffing agency Robert Half's 2015 Salary Guide, average salaries for credit assistants/clerks in the North Central region range from \$25,870 to \$51,410, depending on the company's size and location.

Credit assistants often find the position they initially accepted to gain

experience leads them down an unexpected career path. Honing their skills through on-the-job experience and continuing education prepares credit assistants with advancement aspirations for a credit analyst role.

Drinka is pursuing the [NACM Credit Business Associate designation](#) and believes it will be key to her career development.

“NACM designations are national, so they are widely recognized,” she said. “If you have that sort of accreditation behind your name, it speaks volumes,” she said.

Paul Burton, a credit analyst with Interstate Companies, based in Bloomington, Minn., agrees. “I would tell someone starting out in credit that NACM certification is essential. When you get your Credit Business Fellow designation, you have a really strong understanding of accounting. I’m much more confident in my job as a result of my NACM training.”

Credit assistants beginning their careers quickly learn their departments don’t often operate in the spotlight. However, many credit professionals are content to contribute to their companies’ success behind the scenes.

“We’re the first people customers go to when they have a question and often the last ones to be thanked,” Drinka said. “But as long as everybody is taken care of and the accounts are cleaned up, that’s totally fine. Credit isn’t exactly a glamorous job, but it’s fun. Nothing ever stays the same. That’s the exciting part. No two customers are handled the same because they’re all unique.”

Toni Nuernberg is president and chief operating officer of Forius/NACM North Central.