



INTERVIEW

Building a Career in Public Finance

BY ADAM POWELL



GFOA's Adam Powell interviews Abbey Chapman, a financial analyst for the City of Rock Hill, South Carolina.

While Abbey Chapman currently serves as a financial analyst for the City of Rock Hill, South Carolina, she began her professional journey pursuing a degree in marketing at Limestone University—until a marketing internship changed her mind. “I had a marketing internship that made me realize that wasn’t the career path for me,” she recalled. Not knowing what her next step should be, Chapman continued exploring the options a business major could provide, which led her to finance. “I had to take general finance courses, including one called Corporate Financial Management. I enjoyed that class and, after speaking with my professor about it, I added a finance concentration alongside marketing.”

Chapman's pivotal moment came during a summer internship with the City of Rock Hill, which opened her eyes to the possibilities within government finance. “I realized I didn’t know this was a career option. It might sound silly, but I thought that if you wanted a career where you give back, you had to work for a nonprofit, be a teacher, or be a nurse. It struck me that with this job, you could work in finance or a business-like role within the government and have a rewarding career that gives back to the community.”

Chapman's connection to Rock Hill is deeply personal. Growing up in a nearby town and participating in community activities, she has witnessed its transformation firsthand. Once dominated by textile mills, Rock Hill pivoted to sports tourism as its primary industry after the decline of local manufacturing.

This shift, facilitated by tax increment financing (TIF) districts, repurposed old textile mills into sports complexes, office spaces, and residential areas.

The city's innovative approach has yielded significant economic benefits, hosting high-profile events such as the Adidas AAU basketball tournament and the American Cornhole League national championship. "The revitalization of these areas through TIF districts has made sports tourism the focus of Rock Hill's economy, in addition to distribution centers and manufacturing," Chapman said.

Despite the rewarding nature of her work, Chapman acknowledged the high-pressure environment she operates in. Accuracy and timely responses are critical, especially in budget-related matters. She emphasized the importance of taking the necessary time to provide correct answers, a principle reinforced by her chief financial officer (CFO) and mentor, Anne Harty. As Chapman observed, "It's better to take two hours to provide the correct answer than to give the wrong one in ten minutes and have to correct it later."

Professionally, Chapman aspires to be Rock Hill's CFO, but knows she has a lot of hard work ahead of her to get there. Her dedication to the city and her passion for making a tangible impact on the community drive her forward. "I love the City of Rock Hill, and I'm passionate about it."

Chapman's journey in public finance has been marked by a number of notable accomplishments, one of which was a significant project comparing insurance providers for the city's employees. Her detailed analysis, which showcased her analytical skills and commitment to cost-effective solutions, led to the city's decision to remain self-insured. "It was a significant project for me at the city, and I was very proud of it," she recalled.

Challenges and opportunities for young professionals

One of the significant challenges facing public finance is the recruitment and retention of young professionals. Chapman's experience highlights the



Chapman explains how tax increment financing facilitated the repurposing of old textile mills into facilities that have yielded significant economic benefits for the City of Rock Hill's economy.

"It struck me that with this job, you could work in finance or a business-like role within the government and have a rewarding career that gives back to the community."

broader issues that many young professionals encounter when transitioning from higher education to the workforce. Chapman believes that many students aren't aware of the career opportunities within government finance. "For me, government wasn't on my radar. I had no idea it was even an option," she explained, until she found her internship through a university job board.

Chapman believes that increasing visibility and recruitment efforts at colleges and high schools is crucial. Highlighting the benefits of government jobs, such as excellent insurance plans, retirement benefits, and work-life balance, can make these roles more appealing.

Additionally, programs like Rock Hill's tuition reimbursement program provide significant support for ongoing education and professional development. This initiative helped Chapman pursue her master's degree and continue her education toward becoming a certified public accountant (CPA).

Emphasizing the importance of professional development, Chapman said, "Professional development enables you to demonstrate why you deserve to advance within your organization." Achieving certifications like the CPFO (Certified Public Finance Officer), an MBA (Master of Business Administration), or a CPA, establishes qualifications and shows



The City of Rock Hill is known as a sports destination, with sports tourism as its primary industry. The city regularly hosts high profile events like the Adidas AAU basketball tournament, pictured above.

“When your organization invests in you and you’re invested in it, that creates a strong bond.”

initiative. It provides an opportunity for those who are motivated to move up and gain expertise.

Her involvement in the Young Professionals Network (YPN) and the Women’s Public Finance Network (WPFN) has been instrumental in her professional growth, Chapman said. She highlights the value of having a mentor and the benefits of networking events. “It’s nice to have someone outside of your organization, but who is still in the same field, to ask questions to and who understands the language we use at work. The networking events with YPN have also been very successful.”

Mentorship and professional development opportunities are vital for retaining newcomers in the public finance sector. They demonstrate that the organization cares about their employees’ growth and development. “When your organization invests in you and you’re invested in it, that creates a strong bond,” Chapman notes. Having a mentor and opportunities for professional development ensures that young professionals feel supported and have a clear path for career advancement.

One of Chapman’s key pieces of advice for young professionals is to ask questions. Her curiosity and eagerness to understand the broader picture have been crucial to her success.

“Asking questions about your tasks, the bigger picture, and opportunities for advancement within the organization is invaluable. It’s a piece of advice I would always give.”

She also recognizes the need for public entities to engage more effectively with educational institutions to attract young talent. Partnerships with colleges to offer scholarships or other initiatives can raise awareness of the diverse career opportunities in public finance. Chapman imagined some possibilities such as increased outreach to local universities and high schools, as well as increased collaboration between GFOA and local universities on scholarships for individuals who have a passion for public service.

Chapman also suggests leveraging social media and other digital platforms to reach a broader audience of potential recruits. “We need to be where the young people are, and that means having

a strong online presence and using platforms that they engage with daily.”

Another significant aspect that can attract young professionals is the culture and environment of the workplace. Chapman advocates for a teamwork-driven work culture that invests in its members, particularly the younger generation. “Young professionals want to work in places where they feel valued and where their ideas can contribute to meaningful change. Creating a positive work environment is crucial for retention.”

Flexible work arrangements and a focus on work-life balance are also important factors. Chapman notes that the younger generation values flexibility in their work schedules and the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. “Offering options like wellness programs or credits, flexible hours, and ensuring that employees have time for their personal lives can make a huge difference in job satisfaction and retention.”

Abbey Chapman’s journey underscores the potential for a fulfilling career in public finance. Her experience highlights the importance of mentorship, professional development, proactive recruitment efforts, and creating a supportive work environment to attract and retain young professionals. As Chapman continues to make a positive impact in Rock Hill, her story serves as an inspiration for young professionals seeking meaningful and rewarding roles in business environments. By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities, public finance can continue to thrive with a new generation of dedicated and talented professionals. **■**



Adam Powell is a consultant with GFOA’s Research and Consulting Center.