3 Questions with Michael Blackman, Chief Corporate Development Officer, Kforce Inc.

An economy creeping toward recovery coupled with a more complex regulatory environment will likely create new opportunities for finance and accounting professionals in 2013. Michael Blackman, chief corporate development officer of Kforce Inc. (NASDAQ: KFRC) shares his insights into the specific trends that will most significantly impact staffing levels in the coming year, what it means for finance and accounting professionals and what skill sets they’ll need to capitalize on the demand.

1. What are market expectations for finance and accounting staffing in 2013?

Domestically, expectations are that finance and accounting staffing levels will see seven percent year-over-year growth in 2013. This is supported in part by October 2012 figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that showed employment among college-educated professionals at 3.8 percent, about one half of the “headline” unemployment number. Practically speaking, that is very close to historical full employment. It’s a trend we are also seeing among the highly skilled sub-niches served by Kforce Finance & Accounting, which continue to enjoy robust demand, particularly for those with Big Four experience.

Tempering anticipated growth are several macroeconomic concerns. A big one is the looming “fiscal cliff” and uncertainly over what will transpire. Those unknowns could ultimately slow the pace of what has already been a muddled recovery. I would add, though, that the sluggish recovery has been overall a net positive for flexible staffing. It has proven to be one of the best ways for companies—many of which continue struggling to project long-term performance – to access the highly skilled finance professionals they need to guide them through an uncertain recovery.

2. What factors are driving these expectations?

While continued economic growth is one factor, a bigger issue that is shaping demand is the increasingly complex regulatory environment. Managing requirements under Dodd-Frank and other finance reform laws is driving increased demand for professionals with the specific skills necessary to help companies navigate murky regulatory waters. Tax laws are also becoming more complex, creating greater need for professionals with the skills necessary to plan, prepare and review tax returns, as well as internal and external auditors.

Also of note is the accelerated rate of retirement within the baby boomers population. As these professionals exit the workforce, they leave significant skill gaps in their wake. Because baby boomers make up a large proportion of the highly skilled finance and accounting workforce, their departure is creating great opportunities for younger professionals who have developed the skills necessary to step into those roles.

Finally, even when unemployment was at its peak, there were critical shortages in key skill areas. That hasn’t changed. Senior accountants and financial analysts are in high demand but short supply. Also in short supply are finance professionals with the technology acumen necessary to manage the increasingly tight connection between the two fields, which are frequently joined at the hip. It’s become such a seamless integration that it is nearly impossible for finance to function without IT and vice versa.
3. What does all this mean for job seekers and recent graduates?

For new and recent graduates, it means demand is healthier than the past few years. This is especially true for those with accounting degrees who intend to pursue CPA licensure.

For professionals already in the marketplace, the impact of these trends on career opportunities will depend upon experience. For example, tax professionals capable of preparing or reviewing complex tax returns are in high demand, as are those who can guide corporations through the complex tax laws that feed critical finance decisions.

Internal and public accounting, particularly internal auditors and public accountants on a CPA track, are also hot positions. This is driven by the growing number of companies that must conduct assurance and performance audits to ensure compliance with Sarbanes-Oxley, Dodd-Frank and other complex finance regulations.

What is interesting about this is that while these positions have always been in high demand, there were few opportunities. Professionals tended to stay put so there was little voluntary turnover. However, in the past year or so, we’re seeing more movement, either through retirement or moving to new companies. This has created opportunities that didn’t exist in 2008 for those seeking to advance their careers or switch employers.

A third area that is starting to pick up after a period of dormancy is corporate financial planning and analysis (FP&A). During recessions, companies tend to focus their energies on paying bills, collecting receivables and reducing head count. They aren’t undertaking the sophisticated five-year planning and analysis at which FP&A professionals excel. These positions may have been on the organizational chart, but they were largely unfilled. That is changing as the economy rebounds, creating opportunities for professionals with a finance degree and an MBA or who are pursuing an MBA.

To take advantage of new opportunities, finance and accounting professionals need to keep their skills current. Things are changing rapidly, as demonstrated by the blurring of the line between finance and IT. Earning professional designations, such as the Certified Management Accountant credential or the FP&A certification, currently under development by the Association for Financial Professionals, is also a good way to differentiate yourself from your competition.