



TIMING THE TRANSITION:

When to Leave Public Accounting for an Industry Role

White Paper: The Strategic Exit—When
To Transition Out of Public Accounting

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This white paper draws on insights from over 300 successful placements across Southern California and thousands of candidate interviews conducted over the past year. A clear trend has emerged: **demand for CPAs transitioning out of public accounting is at an all-time high, while the supply of experienced professionals continues to shrink.**

Across industries, especially in technology, real estate, and life sciences, PEG portfolio companies and public companies – employers are aggressively seeking individuals with public accounting experience, with a strong preference for those holding the CPA designation.

At the same time, burnout, long hours, and mental fatigue remain pervasive within public accounting, exacerbated by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 era. While the foundational experience gained in public accounting remains invaluable, its **long-term career ROI begins to diminish beyond a certain point**, particularly if you're not on a clear partner track.

Adding to this dynamic is the rapid transformation of the CPA firm landscape. With a surge in **private equity (PE) investments and ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan) transactions** over the past 24 months, the traditional public accounting career model has shifted dramatically.

The **CPA license continues to be the gold standard** in accounting and finance. But more professionals are opting to **leverage their credentials earlier**—transitioning into roles in industry that offer higher compensation, better work-life balance, and more strategic or operational responsibilities.

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Choosing when to make the move is a deeply personal decision, shaped by your career goals, risk tolerance, and life stage. That said, clear patterns have emerged from real-time market data that can serve as an **analytical framework** to guide your thinking.

The following breakdown outlines the **optimal exit timing** from public accounting by career stage. It includes **key trade-offs, compensation expectations**, and market demand insights.

Over 80% of the candidates we place in direct hire roles—and the more than 200 working with us currently in interim, consulting, or advisory capacities—hold the CPA designation. Their experiences form the basis for the practical guidance that follows.

1. Senior Auditor Level (2–4 years' experience)

Best for: Career switchers who value work-life balance, quicker specialization, or faster promotion paths

Pros of Leaving Now:

- ✓ **More job flexibility:** Industry roles (FP&A, Accounting Manager through Controller at smaller companies etc.) often offer better work-life balance.
- ✓ **Earlier career reset:** You can "grow up" in industry and start climbing that ladder sooner.
- ✓ **Attractive to recruiters:** Companies love hiring seniors — you're trained, adaptable, and not too expensive.

Cons of Leaving Now:

- ✓ **Missed leadership exposure:** You might need more time managing full audits or complex engagements to build leadership skills.
- ✓ **Limited negotiating power:** Without prior management experience, comp bumps are more modest

→ Compensation Jump:

- ✓ **Typical increase:** ~15–25%
- ✓ **Example:** Base Comp. From ~\$90k–\$125k in public → ~\$100k–\$140k in industry
- ✓ **Note:** Does not include bonus or potential equity

2. Manager Level (5–7 years' experience)

Best for: Professionals who want leadership experience, better comp leverage, and improved quality of life

Pros of Leaving Now:

- ✓ **Valuable leadership exposure:** Likely experience managing teams, client relationships, and full engagements.
- ✓ **Increased marketability:** Industry employers value your leadership and technical depth.
- ✓ **Strong comp leverage:** Opens doors to Assistant Controller, Finance Manager, or Controller-track roles with larger companies.

Cons of Leaving Now:

- ✓ Public accounting provides exposure to multiple clients, industries, and challenges
- ✓ Moving to industry may limit the visibility and reach of your professional network unless you're proactive.

→ Compensation Jump:

- ✓ **Typical increase:** ~10–20%
- ✓ **Example:** From ~\$130k–\$160k in public → ~\$145k–\$185k+ in industry
- ✓ **Note:** Salary increases are often not as high for Managers, as they are often competing against candidates who have a combination of public accounting and industry experience, and most companies will pay a higher premium for candidates with the blended experience

3. Senior Manager Level (8–12+ years' experience)

Best for: Professionals aiming for VP/Controller public company roles or positioning for a CFO track

Pros of Leaving Now:

- ✓ **Executive-level experience:** Senior managers have led teams, handled complex technical matters, and advised at a high level.
- ✓ **High comp leverage:** You're eligible for strategic roles like Director of Accounting, CAO, or Technical Accounting lead.
- ✓ **Immediate ROI:** Public companies especially value technical skills and SOX experience.

Cons of Leaving Now:

- ✓ **Harder pivot:** Transitioning to FP&A or business ops roles is more difficult at this stage due to specialization.
- ✓ **Competitive market:** You're competing against peers with both public and private experience; some companies prefer candidates who have already been in-house.
- ✓ **Diminishing returns:** Staying too long in public can limit perceived adaptability and value-add in industry.

→ Compensation Jump:

- ✓ **Typical increase:** ~5–15% (varies by role and company type)
- ✓ **Example:** From ~\$150k–\$180k in public → ~\$180k–\$230k+ in industry
- ✓ **Note:** Equity, performance bonuses, and LTIPs are common at this level.

General Guidance Overview

Level	Best Time to Leave?	Ideal Roles in Industry	Compensation Jump
Senior Auditor	2-4 years	Accounting Manager through Controller (companies under \$50M in revenue)	15-25%
Manager	5-7 years	Assistant Controller–Controller/Director of Accounting/Reporting (companies \$50 million in revenue and above)	10-20%
Senior Manager	8-12+ years	Controller – CAO or Director through VP of Accounting/Reporting (companies over \$100 million in revenue or public companies)	5-15%+

Final Considerations

- **Industry matters:** Tech, real estate, and biotech firms typically offer higher compensation (often with equity); retail, healthcare and manufacturing tend to be more modest.
- **Certifications make a difference:** CPA is a must-have, but CMA or MBA can boost transitions into FP&A, finance, or ops.
- **Burnout is real:** Many professionals leave not just for pay—but for a more sustainable pace and meaningful career growth.

If you'd like help assessing where you fall on this path—or want advice tailored to your industry or background—I'm happy to provide a personalized roadmap.



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