

MEMBER PROFILE

GRANT CHRISTENSEN, FCPA, FCGA



CPA

CHARTERED
PROFESSIONAL
ACCOUNTANTS
MANITOBA



Grant Christensen, FCPA, FCGA, then Director of Education for CGA Manitoba, walked down Robson Street in Vancouver with an idea. On his right, his counterpart with CGA Ontario walked in lockstep as they ducked into a restaurant.

“We had been trying to reach national consensus on a new certification model that would better position the CGA designation and I had just called a break to our meetings to get some air and to regroup—we were stonewalled,” explained Christensen. “Fortunately, I had an idea I thought might work, so I scratched it out on a bar napkin with my colleague and sure enough, CGA’s Pace Program was born.”

That was a eureka moment. When the meeting resumed after lunch the hybrid model was agreed upon by all and remained in place until the merger of designations, years later.

“I don’t accept or believe in the word ‘can’t’. There’s always a way if you’re creative and bold enough. It’s got me in trouble a few times,” admits Christensen with a laugh, while reflecting on that impromptu meeting in Vancouver. Over his 29-year career dedicated to the accounting profession, there would be many more insightful moments like that.

Christensen was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and moved with his family to Winnipeg when he was six months old. He grew up in East Kildonan and graduated from Miles Macdonell Collegiate high school.

“Initially I thought I might pursue a veterinarian career, but after enrolling at the University of Winnipeg and taking the required physics class, I reconsidered quickly,” Christensen explained.

He went on to major in economics and obtain a Bachelor of Arts Degree.

“When I graduated I thought I would find something I really liked doing. I remember thinking I was ready for the world, but found there weren’t many people knocking down my door for my services.”

While working for Goodyear Tire as a Management Trainee, his

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father suggested he look into a career in accounting.

“After some deliberation I enrolled into the University of Manitoba’s commerce degree program and majored in accounting. Along the way I took a tax course and really enjoyed it,” Christensen explains.

After completing his university studies, he enrolled in the CGA program because of its tax program reputation.

“I thought I’d begin my career working for the Canada Revenue Agency and then start up my own tax practice, one day becoming the tax planning guru of the world. That was my plan!”

As he learned, plans often change.

“Shortly into the plan, I was encouraged to apply for the job at CGA Manitoba as the Director of Education. Eventually I was offered the position, and accepted. It was a career path I had never considered. Some good advice for those at any stage of their career is to keep the blinders off and be open to every opportunity. It certainly paid off for me.”

Christensen started at CGA in 1988.

“It was a small organization with a staff of five when I started. I got a lot of free rein and together with the team we built a very successful and highly regarded professional association,” he explained.

“ We really changed the educational landscape and that remains to this day. ”

Over the next 20 years Christensen was influential in turning CGA Manitoba into the fastest growing accounting designation in Manitoba. The organization climbed from a staff of 5 to 22 fulltime employees.

“When CGA Canada decided they were going to implement a degree requirement; we came up with an innovative solution that met the requirement while maintaining a competitive advantage. We wanted to partner with a post-secondary institution to set up a program that would allow students to work on their CGA designation and degree at the same time.”

The problem? There were very few universities interested in partnering with a private not-for-profit entity at the time.

“Eventually we convinced the University of Calgary to partner with us. A few years later we went to market again looking for partners. With the success of the University of Calgary partnership, we received an avalanche of interest from schools wanting to work with CGA. We really changed the educational landscape and that remains to this day.”

Christensen also played a key role in changing the Education Tax Credit within the Income Tax Act.

“CRA’s interpretation of the tax credit at the time was that if you worked in a position that was related to your education, you didn’t qualify for it. I didn’t think that made sense.”

He went to Ottawa on behalf of CGA Canada and met with the Minister of Finance’s Office to explain his concerns. They agreed with him and in a subsequent budget they reworded the Education Tax Credit to make it clear that a person would still qualify even if their education was related to their current position. That simple revision would help many people pursue the careers of their choice across Canada.

In addition to his dedication to the accounting profession in Canada, Christensen also had the opportunity to work internationally.

“I traveled to the United Nations building in Geneva, Switzerland to participate in a subcommittee of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC).”

It was there he helped design an international standard for accounting education.

By 2008, CGA Manitoba was looking for a new Chief Executive Officer and after a search, they chose Christensen for the job.

“One of my proudest achievements as CEO was initiating the support of the Province of Manitoba to provide CGA public practitioners with full mobility across the country. At the time, CGAs were unfairly excluded from practicing in the Province of Ontario. Gathering the support of CGA Canada and other provincial Associations and governments, we argued not allowing CGAs to provide public accounting in Ontario violated the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT). We won, righting a wrong, and serving the interests of both our membership and the public,” says Christensen.

By 2015, the work to merge the three accounting bodies was nearing its conclusion. At that point, Christensen was ready to look for a different career path and a new challenge.

“And that’s when I was offered the Chief Operating Officer role at

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CPA Manitoba,” laughs Christensen.

He saw the role as a way to continue to build on his contributions to the accounting profession in Manitoba, something his career has been dedicated to from the beginning.

“My time as COO has been a fantastic experience. We’ve had the opportunity to bring three very different organizations together and create the best possible programs for members, candidates, students and future students. I can’t believe how fortunate I was to take part in this challenging process. I’m proud we are now operating smoothly, with a new CPA culture and our first surplus.”

As for what he’s going to do next?

“People keep asking me that. I’m planning on spending the next two months at the cottage, sitting in my canoe, fishing, and trying to be a golfer. I’m a brutal golfer, to be honest, but if I play a bit more maybe I can be mediocre,” he jokes. “And beyond that, I have no idea, but I’m looking forward to it.”