

## **Internship soars pilot even higher**

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OK, let's dispense straight away with the pun by noting that pilot Dave Finklang has landed an internship.

There, done.

Now we can get to the part about the second leg of the nontraditional intern's career path taking flight at Brown Smith Wallace, the St. Louis-based accounting firm.

Sorry.

Better to let Finklang explain how his new profession differs from the old.

"The big difference is the view," said the former commuter airline pilot. "I'm used to seeing the world from 37,000 feet."

It may seem like only yesterday that a reference to an internship triggered an automatic and involuntary mechanism that screamed "stained blue dress."

In fact, the unpleasantness over a White House intern and a certain public official occurred in the distant past when the unemployment rate stood barely above 4 percent.

Today, with joblessness holding steady near 10 percent, a notable if not large number of internships are being served by workers who are neither college students providing free summer labor nor recent graduates hoping the apprenticeship will bring a full-time job.

In a midsummer 2009 CareerBuilder survey, the online job search engine found 7 percent of internship applications came from "mature workers" — unemployed professionals 55 or older looking to launch a new career.

Of the employers responding to the survey, 4 percent acknowledged taking a chance on nontraditional interns. Another 55 percent told the researchers they wouldn't rule out doing the same.

"It's a reflection of the job market," said Harvey Wallace, founding partner of Brown Smith Wallace. "We've always entertained résumés from college graduates seeking accounting experience. But now we're seeing more résumés from older applicants hoping to get their foot in the door."

Though he flew commercial flights for commuter airlines — a sector of the aviation industry that pays notoriously low wages, while providing little job security — Finklang arrived at BSW by plan, not duress.

As Finklang tells it, the accounting bug bit him when he began keeping the books for his father's optometry practice as a teenager.

As an undergraduate at Central Missouri State University, he "kind of fell" into a curriculum that prepares students for careers in aviation.

Continuing along the same path, he landed a job out of college with Chautauqua Airlines, flying commuter flights out of St. Louis for US Airways, American and other carriers.

As Finklang's career soared, his heart remained grounded in accounting.

"I had a passion for flying but not to be in the aviation industry," he said.

Piloting thus became a means to an end — the source of the income that supported his graduate work in accounting at Webster University.

Pursuing his master's degree, he served short terms as an intern at two other firms. Then, with graduation approaching last year, he decided to submit an application with Brown Smith Wallace.

As it happened, the area's second-largest locally owned accounting firm was open to taking a chance on an airline pilot embarking on a career change at the

age of 26.

"I think we always take a measured risk in any business situation," said Catherine Hentges, director of human resources at BSW. "And now we're able to leverage the (downturn in the economy) to cast a bigger net."

BSW has a particular purpose in broadening its reach beyond the usual pool of internship applicants.

Like many companies, the firm views internships as an audition and not an opportunity to relegate temporary employees to menial tasks.

"It is the first step toward a career at BSW," said Hentges.

And indeed, since moving from the cockpit to an office in January, Finklang has yet to make coffee, replenish the paper supply in the office copy machine or operate the PowerPoint during executive presentations.

"I've been here two months, and I've already worked next to the founding partner of the firm," he said, with a nod to Wallace sitting nearby.

The chances are fair to middling that opportunity will continue to present itself after Finklang's internship officially draws to an end in mid-April.

Of the 36 interns the firm has brought in since starting its internship program in 2006, half are now employed by the company full time.

Finklang may not be "a title guy." After acting on a calculated risk that is already paying beyond expected dividends, however, he'd be more than happy to leave the word "intern" behind come April.

Though the view from 37,000 feet is grand, for Finklang the one he has now is better.

"The lifestyle is a lot different," he acknowledged. "But at the end of the day I can go home — home to a home-cooked meal and not to a dingy motel room in Des Moines, Iowa."