



GE Corporate Audit Staff 3T12 ... aka "The Wolfpack"

# GE Corporate Audit Staff ... My Take.



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A couple of months ago, GE decided to disband its legendary Corporate Audit Staff; a program that existed since the beginning of the 20th century. The news shocked the world (OK, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, but it did surprise a lot of people).

This program was considered "la crème de la crème", not just in GE, but in all of the corporate world. At its peak, approximately 80% of GE's CFOs were graduates of the program, and many of them went on to lead finance organizations in many Fortune 500 companies. You could say that it was the closest thing to a "cradle of leadership".

## So, what made it so special?

That probably depends on who you ask ... but for me, it was the amalgamation of life experiences and the personal growth that came with those: meeting my wife and having a long-distance relationship for three years, making friends


from around the world, managing a team for the first time, experiencing failure on a frequent basis, traveling to new places, feeling lonely and homesick, among many many more.

 For me, it all started with an invitation to go to the famous CAS Conference in 2012, held in Philadelphia, PA. It was my second year in GE (at the time I was based in Mexico City) and every trimester a few people got invited to experience this gigantic event with all expenses paid for. The conference was like a red carpet event. Top corporate officers in the company came to talk to a group of ~400 auditors about the latest industry developments, where the company was headed, and how we could help them accomplish that vision. It was impossible not to feel automatically important when you listened to Jeff Immelt say that this group of people played an important role in making the company successful. My favorite part of the event was that at the end of each presentation, these leaders would take questions from the audience and answer them in detail.

Actually, that's a lie ... my favorite part was the BIG party that happened after that. But, we'll get to that in a minute ...

So, there I am ... a wide-eyed 23 year old, taking it all in. I immediately fell in love with the organization and wanted to be a part of it. But, before going through all of the application process, I decided to take advantage of the free trip and visited the Rocky Steps (yes, I did sing Eye of the Tiger while climbing up those stairs) and ate a famous Philly Cheesteak.

Back in Mexico City, I went ahead and applied to the program. The process was a serious thing. Applicants had to get sponsorship from a CFO; otherwise, the applications wouldn't even go through. I was fortunate enough to have worked for a CFO that was an alumni and he recommended me. For that, I will always be grateful. I remember so vividly the moment I read the email from Human Resources saying that I was accepted to "the pilot".

A CAS pilot was basically a  stress-test of a candidate to determine whether he or she


was a good fit or not. In a span of four weeks, pilots (this was how we were called) had to risk assess an area, develop an audit plan, perform testwork, and close out any issues that came out of the audit. Never had I been so intimately involved with Red Bull, Starbucks, and 5-Hour Energy drinks than during those four weeks. That was probably one of the most grueling experiences I've had to go through in my professional life. But, it wasn't all bad. I had a great partner who helped me see this through. A loud, charismatic Italian who always managed to find the time to party even when we were exhausted (Thanks, Martino!). I will never forget those four weeks because it was one of those times when I **found out what I was capable of**. I could push past exhaustion to deliver on something important.

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And so, I made it. I was accepted in this prestigious program. Now what? I took a flight to New York and then made it to Stamford, CT for training. I got to spend two weeks balancing the difficult art of learning auditing concepts by day, while partying in New York by night. I met some of the most interesting and motivated people from around the world, but most importantly, I met the one who would become my wife. This was a common thing in this program. Very few people understand the nomad lifestyle of someone who changes countries every four months and works 80-hour weeks; which is why the ones that end up being your significant other are the ones that have the same priorities as you. In fact, the CAS acronym was also known as "Catch A Spouse".

With all of that behind me, it was time to find out where I would be spending the next four months of my life. Every trimester there was this period of anxiety that happened a few weeks before closing an audit or project. The period where the dreaded audit location list came out. It was a huge excel file with everyone's name on it and the location where they would be sent to next. Why the anxiety? You may ask. Well, it turns out that you could be spending the next four months of your life in Florence sipping a hot espresso or shoveling snow in the equivalent of Winterfell ... Erie, Pennsylvania (if you don't know where that is, don't

worry, most people don't). I got lucky. My first assignment was in Rio de Janeiro.

 Well, that's cool, Antonio!

You may say ... Well, yes and no. I was sent by myself to audit Dresser Wayne, an acquisition GE made in 2010, located ten minutes away from a favela known as Complexo do Alemão. Google that name and you'll find out that it was home to drug trafficking gangs (Fast & Furious style). I remember vividly my conversation with the taxi driver telling me "hey, don't go there, because the cops sometimes don't even go there". His jaw dropped when I told him that the office was just a few blocks away. On the other hand, I did get to live in the best beaches in Rio de Janeiro (photo above is the view from my hotel). Not too bad, all things considered.

After Rio, the number of unique experiences I got to live did not stop. They just kept getting better and better. I drove countless kilometers in the continental United States, from San Francisco to Oklahoma to New York. Airports became like my second home. I danced tirelessly in Angola's carnival, climbed up Angel Falls in Venezuela, and strolled countless times around the London Bridge. And always in the company of amazing people who became my family for a few months. And even when we moved on to the next assignment, we would always be a "ping" away to give each other words of encouragement. **The "people" aspect of this program was a critical differentiator.** A lot of these people became more than my colleagues; they became my friends. Friends who went to my wedding and who I now share baby pictures with. Priceless.



**The other critical component of this program was the "career development and acceleration".** The program was built in a way that would allow you to reinvent yourself every trimester. Every audit, we would be given two appraisals. A mid-term one and a final one. You could receive an appraisal that stated you exceeded expectations, met expectations, or needed improvement in a particular area of importance. I, for example, received a dreaded "NI" in execution on my mid-term appraisal during my second

trimester. It was a tough message, but one that needed to be heard. Listening to your manager say that you were not delivering the work as per expectations is not an easy pill to swallow. And just like in The Matrix, you could either take the red pill and improve based on your managers and mentors feedback or take the blue pill and stay at the same level of skill you were before (and eventually get kicked out of the program). I was fortunate enough to have great mentors that helped me improve and stay in the program for three years. **The skills I learned over the course of this program — how to think critically, how to execute fast and with a sense of urgency, how to become an expert in an area in a limited amount of time, how to communicate effectively at all levels of the organization, and how to lead people through ambiguity — will always be a foundational piece of my business education.**

And just like that, three years flew by and I became a graduate. The celebration of this milestone was held in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. I couldn't have asked for a better ending. I got a handshake from the VP, a plaque, tons of applause from my peers, and a job lined up in Paris a few months later. In that moment, I felt like the world was my oyster. And I guess it was.

And let's not forget my favorite part. Dinner Dance. The huge party that came with Conference. Imagine re-living your high-school prom dance ... only ten times better. Big venue (one time it was in the Sheraton Times Square in New York City), great music, men in tuxedos and women in beautiful dresses. And on top of that, a fully paid trip for a guest of your choice. Talk about a job perk. I flew my best friend from Mexico City, who probably up until this day can't believe the company would spend that kind of cash to keep auditors' morale up. Needless to say, we had a great time.

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Anyway, if you're still reading this long article, I hope you got a little glimpse or a flashback (for those that went through it) of how special this program was and how much it helped me and others grow. Was it perfect? No. But nothing ever is. I wanted to write about it because I think it



deserves a more personal narrative than just an article in the newspaper saying it's gone. A narrative from someone who actually went through it and can describe all the great life experiences that it offered.

To all the people that were part of this journey with me, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

-A

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Holidays are a time for reflection (so, they say). These holidays, I took a trip down memory lane to a time where I was living out of a suitcase and accumulating frequent flyer miles.

I was fortunate enough to be part of this program called Corporate Audit Staff during my time at GE. A program that dates back to early 20th century. Recently, it was announced that it would be disbanded. This is my reflection on what it meant for me.

Hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. 😊

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