



# Proven success

Employee benefit plans audit  
certificate programs in action

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— Calvin Martin, CPA  
Managing Partner  
Calvin Martin & Company P.L.L.C.  
Houston, TX



## Big impact for a small firm

Texas is known for its size — from its sprawling geography to its large-brimmed hats. But in a land where bigger is said to be better, Calvin Martin & Company P.L.L.C., a four-CPA accounting, tax and auditing firm in Houston, has a competitive advantage: agility.

“Although we are a small firm, we do a lot of audit work, and we are not afraid to launch out and do something that’s out of the box in terms of the services we offer,” says Calvin Martin, CPA, noting the company’s venture into the banking market.

“Unless you’re in a rural area in the panhandle of West Texas, you don’t often find small CPA firms that are auditing banks. We’ve recently added to our portfolio by auditing an insurance carrier, so we’re pretty diverse in what we do.”

This diversity is skillfully balanced with a conservative growth plan that has guided the firm’s expansion strategy for more than 25 years.

“Rather than acquiring other firms, we chose to grow organically at a rate of 5 to 10% annually,” Martin says. “But marketing your firm to bring in new clients is really difficult in the CPA profession.”

This is especially true for a company headquartered in Houston, a top-ranking location for CPA firms, and where the Big Four accounting firms all have offices.

For Calvin Martin & Company, a commitment to professional development and an Advanced Defined Contribution Plans (DCP) Audit Certificate from the AICPA make all the difference in a competitive market.

## Opportunity knocks

In recent years, the Department of Labor (DOL) has been focused on improving the quality of 401(k) auditing. Any business owner sponsoring a 401(k) retirement plan for employees must comply with DOL rules — from providing employees with education about the plan and documenting roles and responsibilities, to monitoring associated fees and ensuring enrollment is promoted.

The Advanced DCP Audit Certificate exam tests a candidate’s ability to plan, direct and report on defined contribution audits. Guided by the *AICPA Competency Framework: Employee Benefit Plan Auditing* and the most-current DOL and IRS requirements, the advanced level is recommended for those with at least seven years of experience conducting these types of audits.

Martin and other team members learned about the certificate while attending AICPA conferences and were well aware of both DOL regulations and the growth potential the AICPA program could provide.

“I saw the certificate as a must for us or any other CPA firm that wants to continue auditing retirement plans,” he says.

Amy Martin Duarte, CPA, agrees: “When we heard about the certificate opportunity, we decided it was something we wanted to pursue, because every year our 401(k) audit practice has been expanding,” she says.

“We knew the certificate would provide us with what we needed to set us apart from our competitors.”

### About Calvin Martin & Company P.L.L.C.

Calvin Martin & Company P.L.L.C. is a one-stop resource for a wide range of accounting, tax and auditing services. With 100+ years of collective accounting experience, Calvin’s team of CPAs provides trusted expertise to both individuals and business clients from its Houston, TX, headquarters.

For more information, contact [713.572.6630](tel:713.572.6630) or [calvincpa@calvinmartin.com](mailto:calvincpa@calvinmartin.com).

## Winning new business

The team chose to start with a brief online assessment, offered by the AICPA to determine if participants are suited to the advanced-level program. They continued with an optional eight-hour training webcast, which summarized content that would be on the exam. The flexibility of an online experience allowed each to participate according to their own schedule. Duarte then took and passed the certificate exam, as did her CPA colleagues Melissa Jefferson and Greg Jimenez.

"Now, I can say all our auditors have the certificate," Martin says. "Auditing is very competitive, and one of the few services clients always want CPAs to bid on. So, the advanced DCP audit certificate is an excellent marketing tool for us."

As an example, Martin cites a referral the firm received for a 401(k) audit. After sending a traditional letter describing their services, he was invited to meet with the prospective client's HR representative, as well as the controller who would decide which CPA firm would conduct the audit.

At the end of a one-hour conversation, the controller presented Martin with two additional letters from other companies vying to win the engagement and asked, "What's the difference between your firm and these firms?"

Knowing Jefferson had begun attaching the certificate, in the form of a digital badge, to her emails, he quickly displayed one of her messages on his mobile phone and explained its significance to the controller.

"He was surprised by it," Martin says. "I could see his face change a bit, as if he had not encountered it before. Two days later, they called and told us we had the job."

Duarte points out, "The investment made for all three of us earning the certificate more than paid for itself with just one audit."

## Keeping a competitive edge

Duarte spoke to the competitive power the advanced DCP training provides. "At the last employee benefit conference I attended, I learned that little more than 200 CPAs in the country have the certificate, which differentiates us now."

Martin agrees, "Now, we can ask: 'Does your current auditor have the certificate?' Chances are they won't. So that gives us a little bit of a leg up for the next couple of years."

Education is key to ensuring the firm's competitive muscle stays in good shape. For Calvin Martin & Company, AICPA events and certificate programs are critical to staying fit in a tough market — and for furthering the knowledge and skills of its employees.

"Whenever I've attended other conferences, I really haven't been challenged," Duarte shares. "I've always come out of an AICPA conference being able to apply my learning experience to a real-life situation back at the office. To me, that's the most important thing. If I can't do that, it's a waste of money," she says.

Martin agrees with the value of AICPA training. "AICPA conferences are well put together, with great speakers, especially on the 401(k) side. I love having the opportunity to hear our peer group discuss their plans for auditing. In addition to the IRS, the DOL also attends. They're at least five years ahead of where auditing practices are heading in the 401(k) world, which helps us in our own practice. We should continue to learn, regardless of age," Martin adds. "There is so much knowledge out there to be had, it can do nothing but improve us as individuals and as CPAs."

**To register your staff for an AICPA employee benefit plans audit certificate, call 800.634.6780, option 1 or email [AICPALearning@aicpa.org](mailto:AICPALearning@aicpa.org).**

Or visit [EBPCert.AICPAStore.com](http://EBPCert.AICPAStore.com) to learn about:

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