ASDA has over 300 stores across the UK and employs 145,000 staff (or ‘colleagues’) across the country. Since 1999 it has been part of Wal-Mart, the largest company in the world. For the fifth year running ASDA has been voted one of the UK’s top employers in the Sunday Times Best Companies 2005 List. ASDA is a CIMA Training Quality Partner.

‘The CIMA qualification is pivotal to both the personal and professional development of finance colleagues at ASDA. We share common values and attach great importance to how objectives are achieved by promoting integrity, ethics and continuous development.’

Steve Makin ACMA, Commercial Finance Director, ASDA

ASDA House sits on the bank of the River Aire in the heart of Leeds. From the outside it looks like your average office block, but from the moment you walk through the door you realise that ASDA House bears very little resemblance to other major retail headquarters. The central atrium makes it feel – well, like an ASDA store. Plasma screens, polite ‘colleagues’ (that’s ASDA speak for ‘staff’) and lots of ‘hellos’ and ‘welcomes’ gives the impression that you could be arriving to do your weekly shop - but not on this visit.

CIMA members and students work in business and Emma Cawthorn, Lynne Grandison and Neil Applebee are no different. Here they tell their stories.

Lynne Grandison
CIMA student

I grew up near Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria. I did A-level Accounting but I didn’t want to do a specific financial degree at university so I chose to study Management at near-by Lancaster. During my sandwich year I worked for the NHS in Halifax where they were building a new hospital. Although I didn’t undertake any finance work, I got some unique experience in project management; buying equipment, conducting tours for health staff and negotiating with construction teams among other things.

I graduated in 2002 and knew I wanted to stay in Northern England so I visited my careers office to assess my options. ASDA’s graduate scheme was the first application form I completed and it seemed exactly the type of company I wanted to work for. The thing for me about ASDA is that you can understand what the company does; everyone goes food shopping and you already know the competitors. It’s important for me to work for a company that I can get my head round.

Finance at ASDA is a fully integrated part of the business with finance colleagues working alongside buyers, store managers, marketers, store developers, HR and logistics people. Finance colleagues are involved in day-to-day decisions as well as formulating longer term strategies which is why they’re looking for good communicators who can easily talk to non-finance colleagues.

ASDA’s Finance Graduate Programme lasts for three years and incorporates gaining practical experience across several different finance functions to support CIMA studies. Owing to my degree I was already exempt from the Certificate level and one Managerial level paper. That left me with ten exams and Paper P10 (TOPCIMA) to pass before I could submit my logbook and apply for membership.

I knew quite a few people who had done other accountancy qualifications but had left after they got their letters. Most of them moved out into positions which, if they had joined as graduates, would be CIMA-sponsored roles! I knew that CIMA was the right route for me: it remains a lot more practical and rounded, rather than being theoretical and specific. The type of organisations I could work for with CIMA was impressive too.

The roles at ASDA that I’ve undertaken are aligned to the different levels that we have been studying at CIMA. The first year role was number-heavy, producing lots of profit and loss accounts. At the same time, I was studying management accounting papers, doing debits and credits and financial accounting papers.

Neil Applebee
CIMA student

I grew up near Dudley in the West Midlands. I studied Business Studies at college and then went on to do a Business degree at Birmingham University. At the end of my degree I worked for Safeway in Newport. Although it was a different industry, I really enjoyed it so decided to join ASDA after my graduation.

I was lucky enough to be put on the ASDA Graduate Scheme. It was a three-year programme which had me working in various departments. The programme was really good for getting a feel for the business, giving me the chance to see how the company worked from the inside out. I was lucky to get the opportunity to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers. The technical side of CIMA is very different to what I was used to, it was nice to have another angle on things.

I think CIMA is a great option for those who want to pursue a career in finance. The extra time it takes to complete it means you are more rounded and ready for the workplace.

Emma Cawthorn
CIMA student

I grew up in the town of Swinton in South Yorkshire. I trained as an accountant with the NHS in Sheffield. I found that I had a real affinity with numbers and decided to go into finance. I did a degree in Business Studies at Sheffield Hallam University.

I worked for PricewaterhouseCoopers in Sheffield after gaining my ACCA. I then started working as a senior financial accountant for the Yorkshire Ambulance Service. I was given the opportunity to work on the Health Care Practice Group for PwC, as well as getting a broader range of experiences within finance and accounting. I knew I wanted to pursue a career in finance with a high level of professional recognition, so I started working towards CIMA.

I think it’s a bit daunting getting your head round all the qualifications, but they are all interrelated and the idea is that once you’ve completed your exams you can then apply for membership. I think the biggest challenge is the time it takes to work through all the exams. In my experience, you have to be very rigorous about your time management. I took all of my exams in my spare time, so that it didn’t impact on my job or family life.

Steve Makin ACMA, Commercial Finance Director, ASDA
### Lynne Grandison

**Emma Cawthorn**

At the moment, I’m a Business Development Analyst supporting the promotional and pricing team. Although I can obviously do the raw number-crunching, my current role is much more about analysing those figures and doing something with them. Most of my customers are non-finance people so it’s important for me to understand the technical aspects but even more important to be able to talk in layman’s terms too. Studying CIMA has been pivotal in learning new communication skills; highlighting in every day language what the risks and opportunities are, and then guiding them towards the best course of action.

**Neil Applebee**

I’m not a real Northerner! I grew up in Berkshire and moved to study at Aston Business School where I completed my degree in Managerial and Administrative Studies majoring in HR. I graduated in 1994 after the four year course which included a placement year working for Marks and Spencer. I knew retail was where I wanted to be so when I graduated I accepted an offer from M&S as a graduate management trainee. I had always wanted to go back-packing around the world and was fortunate enough that M&S allowed me to defer for a year.

I ended up spending seven years with M&S and in that time self-funded my way through CIMA, changing my focus away from HR to financial management. When the time came for me to move on my career from M&S, I had family commitments in Yorkshire but I definitely wanted to stay in retail. For me, a CIMA accountant, retail plus Yorkshire meant ASDA.

In my 3 years here, I have had three different roles. When I first arrived, I took up the position as Retail Commercial Analyst and then 18 months later, I was promoted to Regional Commercial Manager responsible for 63 stores. Six months ago, I moved to head up the Retail and Distribution Accounts teams within Business Accounting.

My department is the hub where all financial information gets processed and produced. We focus on strong financial control that is executed through first class customer service. Our key role is in providing accurate and timely information to the business on our operating performance. Supporting our commercial teams who make the nuts and bolts decisions about operational matters.

From being in a fast-paced commercially-focused business, the CIMA syllabus actively supports what goes on in terms of real-life decision-support. When you get to strategic level, you can clearly see how a lot of the business models and financial strategy concepts of structuring organisations financially are applied at ASDA. The studies, the tools, and the techniques that you are learning are so closely linked with what goes on in the real world. That is why we train our finance colleagues through the CIMA route.

I particularly enjoy the people part of my job. I get to spend time coaching finance colleagues who, with their CIMA qualification under their belt, are able to grow through the ASDA structure into different roles. The culture and how the business pulls together are important. We are in a very competitive market here and only through internal synergy can we achieve external success.

### Case study

**ASDA**

As I moved into commercial roles, the studies at CIMA became more strategic. I now work in Logistics Finance so I’m primarily focused on distribution costs and planning. I work alongside depots to ensure they have a plan which is financially robust and properly challenged. Lately I’ve also been carrying out a lot of work on the cost of shipping around the network, how this changes over time, and studying any trends.

**Emma Cawthorn**

CIMA student

I’m a Business Studies graduate from Sheffield Hallam University where in my final year I specialised in finance. During my placement year I worked in retail, on the store management side, and after I graduated I worked for the same company for a further 12 months. I got some great experience on shop re-fits and staffing issues but I wasn’t using my financial skills very much.

When I applied to ASDA’s Graduate Programme it seemed the obvious choice to pick a financial route into the company, as numbers and finance seemed to come easily to me – I’ve certainly got no regrets so far.

I have all areas of the business open to me now, but I’m also even more convinced of the importance of a supportive and effective finance function of which I play a key part.

Audit never appealed to me as a career choice. I knew I wanted to do something commercial, in finance, working for a retailer, in the North of England. ASDA was the obvious choice. If I had to pick a professional qualification now it would still be CIMA. It’s a perfect fit for me and my career.

**Neil Applebee**

CIMA member

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Lynne Grandison, Emma Cawthorn

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Neil Applebee

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Emma Cawthorn