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Workplace context and earnings management perceptions: Insights from Polish professional accountants

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Abstract

This study investigates how accounting professionals' workplace influences their ethical perceptions of earnings management practices. Using a sample of 100 participants from five workplace categories - accounting offices, private companies, public companies, audit firms, and self-employed accountants - we assessed responses to 13 scenarios based on the Bruns and Merchant (1989) questionnaire. Results from ANOVA and repeated measures ANOVA revealed that workplace significantly affected overall ethical perceptions, accrual-based earnings management, and single-year earnings management, whereas real earnings management and multi-year earnings management showed no significant differences. Post-hoc tests indicated that auditors adopt the strictest ethical stance, while self-employed practitioners are the most permissive. These findings extend previous research by examining a broader set of professional groups and confirm that workplace-related differences persist at the scenario level. The results have practical implications for regulatory bodies and professional associations in designing targeted ethics training and policies to improve transparency and quality in financial reporting.

Keywords: earnings management, ethical perceptions, accounting professionals, workplace differences

1. Introduction

Earnings management occurs when managers choose not to report the level of bottom line known to insiders, which under normal circumstances would be presented in the issuer's financial statements (Healy & Wahlen, 1999). These practices encompass a variety of operational and accounting actions aimed at shifting reported earnings either upward or downward. They may concern a single reporting period or a sequence of consecutive periods (Espahbodi et al., 2022). Although their implementation did not necessarily involve exceeding the boundaries of law, their ethical perception remained ambiguous. Traditionally, earnings management was seen mainly as a deceptive practice intended to mislead stakeholders. More recently, however, researchers have acknowledged that certain earnings management activities can have positive effects, such as increasing the clarity of financial reporting or strengthening a company's reputation with investors (Dechow et al., 1995; Fields et al., 2001; Arya et al., 1998).

Prior studies indicated several factors influencing how company's stakeholders perceived earnings management within organizations. Sunder (2005) and Habbash and Alghamdi (2015) argued that such perceptions were shaped by national culture, organizational objectives, applied techniques, and individual traits. Other researchers (Lewellyn & Bao, 2017; Geiger et al., 2006) gathered evidence that the perception and general willingness to tolerate earnings management practices depended on more specific environmental factors such as the level of corruption and the extent of hierarchical structures. Chen et al. (2021), on the other hand, revealed that managers are less likely to engage in earnings manipulations, and stakeholders tend to evaluate such practices more critically, when strong media coverage was present. In a different tone, Comporek (2024) pointed out that the perception of earnings manipulation depends on individuals' personal and professional experience. The findings he delivered showed that employees from firms openly admitting to applying accrual-based or real earnings-altering practices are generally more willing to accept them. At the same time, these respondents still recognize that earnings management may mislead users of financial statements. Some studies emphasize that the perception of earnings management is closely linked to its alignment with organizational objectives. In this context, some company stakeholders interpret earnings management as a strategic instrument, and, as a result,

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tended to view it quite favorably. Others regarded it as deliberate distortion, and these contrasting views shaped their responses (Baskaran et al., 2020). The ethical evaluation of earnings-altering practices also depends on the type of stakeholder. Kaplan (2001) and Ismail and Atik (2011) show that managers, shareholders, and analysts differ significantly in their ethical judgments, particularly when comparing real versus accrual-based practices. Scenario-based research initiated by Bruns and Merchant (1989) and extended by Merchant and Rockness (1994) consistently indicated that accounting-based manipulations were judged as less acceptable than real earnings management. This was notable, given that real activities directly affected operational cash flows and the firm's future value, often negatively. Finally, individual moral philosophy, as theorized by Forsyth (1980), adds another layer for explaining variation in ethical assessments of earnings management, highlighting the importance of personal beliefs (Barnett et al., 1998; Greenfield Jr et al., 2008; Cygańska & Bartoszewicz, 2024).

As previously noted, although previous research highlights a wide range of determinants influencing earnings management ethical judgments, we observe a clear research gap regarding the influence of workplace on the perception of managerial practices aimed at increasing or decreasing the reported bottom line. Examining these differences is crucial, as each environment exposed employees to distinct pressures and objectives. For example, auditors may prioritize compliance and error detection, whereas accountants in private firms may face pressures to achieve financial targets, potentially normalizing certain earnings management practices. To address this research gap, this study investigates the ethical acceptability of earnings management among professional accountants in Poland, with particular focus on individuals' workplace.

The objective of this study was operationalized through the formulation of the following main hypothesis:

- H1: Ethical perceptions of earnings management practices differ significantly across accounting professionals' workplaces.

Additionally, four subsidiary hypotheses were proposed to examine specific dimensions of earnings management:

- H2: The respondents' workplace shapes their perception of accrual-based earnings management.
- H3: The respondents' workplace shapes their perception of real earnings management.
- H4: The respondents' workplace shapes the perceived ethical acceptability of earnings management practices spanning multiple fiscal years.
- H5: The respondents' workplace shapes the perceived ethical acceptability of earnings management practices affecting only the current fiscal year.

Statistical analyses were conducted using the scenario-based methodology developed by Bruns and Merchant (1989). This included ANOVA with Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons, pairwise comparison procedures, and internal consistency checks such as Cronbach's alpha. The applied research procedure allowed for the assessment of the overall ethical acceptability of earnings management practices from the perspective of accountants' workplace. It also enabled evaluation of their specific forms, including accounting discretion and real activity manipulations, as well as single-period and multi-period accounting and operational practices. This constituted an additional merit of the research.

2. Methodology

Our study was conducted using the CAWI method on behalf of a specialized research agency. The sample consisted of 100 accounting professionals employed in Polish enterprises and working in various workplace settings, such as accounting offices, private companies, public companies, audit firms, and self-employed accounting services. In cases where respondents were employed in more than one workplace, they were asked to indicate the dominant one. The questionnaire survey was distributed electronically via a research panel, which helped reduce the risk of data entry errors.

In this study, we employed scenario-based questionnaires developed by Bruns and Merchant (1989) to assess participants' ethical judgments regarding earnings management practices. This tool comprised 13 scenarios illustrating various earnings management actions, encompassing different types of earnings altering (Table 1). We used a Likert-type scale to measure participants' evaluations of the ethical acceptability of each earnings management scenario. Respondents indicated their level of acceptance for each described action using the following scale: 1 – ethically acceptable; 2 – questionable (I would not report it to those involved, but it causes me discomfort); 3 – minor violation (the individual should be warned to avoid repeating such conduct); 4 – serious violation (the individual should be strongly reprimanded); and 5 – unethical (the individual should be dismissed). We used the original version of the questionnaire, following rigorous translation and validation procedures to ensure accuracy and reliability.

In the next stage, we calculated the average responses of each participant and, using the ANOVA test, examined the null hypothesis stating that the distribution of average ethicality of earnings management was the same across all tested workplace settings. We also conducted additional tests to meet the assumptions required for ANOVA. These included checks for normality with the Shapiro–Wilk test and homogeneity of variances with Levene's test. Post-hoc comparisons were performed using Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise tests to identify specific differences between groups.

Table 1. Earnings Management Scenarios Used in the Study

| No. | Scenarios |
|-----|---|
| 1 | The division's headquarters building was scheduled to be painted in 2025. But since profit performance was well ahead of budget in 2024, the general manager decided to have the work done in 2024. Amount: 150,000 \$. |
| | This information applies to the following two questions. The general manager instructed division employees to defer all discretionary expenditures (e.g., employee travel, advertising, maintenance) into the next accounting period so that the division could meet its expected profit targets. Expected amount of deferrals: 150,000 \$. |
| 2 | The expenditures were postponed from February and March 2024 until April 2024 to achieve the first quarter target. |
| 3 | The expenditures were postponed from November and December 2024 until January 2025 to achieve the annual target for the 2024 fiscal year. |
| 4 | On December 15, 2024, a clerk ordered office supplies worth 3,000 \$. The supplies were delivered on December 29. This order was a mistake, as the general manager had previously instructed that no further discretionary expenses were to be incurred for the remainder of the fiscal year. According to the company's accounting manual, office supplies should be recorded as an expense when delivered. When the general manager learned about the situation, he instructed the accounting department not to record the invoice until February 2025. |
| | This information applies to the following three questions. In September 2024, the general manager realized that the division would need strong performance in the fourth quarter to meet its budget targets. |
| 5 | Therefore: He decided to implement a sales program offering very liberal payment terms to accelerate revenue recognition by pulling forward sales that would normally occur in the first quarter of 2025. Customers accepting delivery in the fourth quarter of 2024 would not be required to pay the invoice for 120 days. |
| 6 | He instructed the production staff to work overtime in December 2024 so that as many orders as possible could be completed and shipped by year-end. |
| 7 | He decided to sell certain unused assets, generating an additional income of 40,000 \$. |
| | This information applies to the following two questions. At the beginning of December 2024, the general manager realized that the division would exceed its budgeted profit targets for the year. Therefore: |
| 8 | He instructed the division controller to prepay certain expenses (e.g., hotel accommodations and exhibition costs) related to a trade fare scheduled for March 2025 and to record the payment as an expense in the 2024 fiscal year. The total amount was 60,000 \$. |
| 9 | He ordered the controller to increase the inventory write-down due to obsolescence. By taking a pessimistic view of future market conditions, the controller identified 700,000 \$ worth of finished goods that, according to conservative accounting principles, should be written off. However, the GM remained confident that the inventory would still be sold at close to its full value. |
| | This information applies to the following two questions. In 2025, the division sold 70% of the inventory that had previously been written down due to obsolescence and a customer had indicated some interest in purchasing the remaining inventory the following year. The GM ordered the division controller to write the inventory back up to full cost. This involved a 210,000 increase in the inventory asset value and a corresponding increase in net income. The GM's motivation for recapturing the profit was: |
| 10 | To be able to continue working on some important product development projects that might have been delayed due to budget constraints. |
| 11 | To make budgeted profit targets. |
| | This information applies to the following two questions. In November 2025, the division was struggling to meet its budgeted profit targets. The GM contacted the consulting firm that had been doing work for the division and asked them not to send their invoice until the next year. The firm agreed. The estimated value of the work completed but not invoiced was: |
| 12 | 30,000 \$. |
| 13 | 500,000 \$. |

Source: own elaboration based on: Bruns, Merchant (1989)

As previously highlighted, our study focuses on various types and motives of earnings manipulation. Below, we present which scenarios from the Bruns and Merchant (1989) methodology were classified to examine the respective categories of earnings management:

- Overall earnings management practices: Scenarios 1–13;
- Accrual-based earnings management: Scenarios 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13;
- Real earnings management: Scenarios 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7;
- Multi-year earnings management practices: Scenarios 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13;
- Single-year earnings management practices: Scenarios 2, 6, 7, 9.

3. Results

In the first stage of our study, we assessed the reliability of the Bruns questionnaire. The internal consistency was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.835. This indicated good reliability and suggested that the items consistently measured the construct of ethical perceptions of earnings management. Next, we examined the distribution of the analyzed variables within each subgroup to assess whether the assumptions for parametric tests were satisfied.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables included in the study together with the preliminary assumption checks. The results indicate clear differences in the mean evaluations of the ethical acceptability of earnings management practices across workplace groups. Accountants employed in audit firms consistently judged such practices as less

acceptable compared to their peers, whereas respondents providing self-employed accounting services tended to adopt the most lenient views. When considering specific subtypes of earnings manipulation, audit professionals again expressed the strictest stance with regard to accrual-based earnings management. In contrast, self-employed practitioners reported the lowest levels of ethical acceptability for real earnings management. Similar patterns were observed when distinguishing between multi-year and one-year earnings management practices. Our findings suggest that auditors generally perceived these behaviors more critically, whereas other groups - particularly private company employees - offered more moderate evaluations. The assumption tests further confirmed the suitability of the data for ANOVA. Levene's test did not indicate significant violations of homogeneity of variances, and the Shapiro–Wilk test suggested that the normality assumption was broadly satisfied across most subgroups.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and assumption tests for earnings management perceptions across workplace groups

| Type of EM | Workplace | Descriptive Statistics | | | | | Levene | Shapiro-Wilk |
|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|------------|-------|-------|--------|--------------|
| | | Mean | Std. Dev. | Std. Error | Min | Max | Sig. | Sig. |
| Overall EM | accounting office | 2.762 | 0.524 | 0.101 | 1.930 | 3.640 | 0.135 | 0.229 |
| | private company | 2.648 | 0.561 | 0.090 | 1.500 | 3.570 | | 0.189 |
| | public company | 2.755 | 0.683 | 0.171 | 1.640 | 3.860 | | 0.505 |
| | audit firm | 3.310 | 0.285 | 0.116 | 2.860 | 3.570 | | 0.212 |
| | self-employed accounting service | 2.417 | 0.487 | 0.141 | 1.570 | 3.000 | | 0.126 |
| Accrual-based EM | accounting office | 2.762 | 0.567 | 0.109 | 1.570 | 4.140 | 0.393 | 0.886 |
| | private company | 2.703 | 0.511 | 0.082 | 1.290 | 3.570 | | 0.161 |
| | public company | 2.804 | 0.724 | 0.181 | 1.290 | 4.000 | | 0.603 |
| | audit firm | 3.500 | 0.484 | 0.198 | 2.570 | 4.000 | | 0.051 |
| | self-employed accounting service | 2.607 | 0.456 | 0.132 | 2.000 | 3.430 | | 0.520 |
| Real EM | accounting office | 2.710 | 0.723 | 0.139 | 1.500 | 3.830 | 0.367 | 0.203 |
| | private company | 2.470 | 0.768 | 0.123 | 1.000 | 4.000 | | 0.088 |
| | public company | 2.688 | 0.767 | 0.192 | 1.500 | 4.000 | | 0.697 |
| | audit firm | 2.917 | 0.480 | 0.196 | 2.330 | 3.500 | | 0.208 |
| | self-employed accounting service | 2.083 | 0.618 | 0.178 | 1.000 | 3.330 | | 0.242 |
| Multi-year EM | accounting office | 2.646 | 0.609 | 0.117 | 1.670 | 3.890 | 0.189 | 0.354 |
| | private company | 2.550 | 0.558 | 0.089 | 1.330 | 3.560 | | 0.296 |
| | public company | 2.736 | 0.710 | 0.177 | 1.780 | 4.000 | | 0.370 |
| | audit firm | 3.130 | 0.400 | 0.163 | 2.440 | 3.560 | | 0.377 |
| | self-employed accounting service | 2.352 | 0.399 | 0.115 | 1.670 | 2.890 | | 0.563 |
| Single-year EM | accounting office | 2.944 | 0.648 | 0.125 | 2.000 | 4.750 | 0.408 | 0.113 |
| | private company | 2.699 | 0.759 | 0.122 | 1.250 | 4.500 | | 0.170 |
| | public company | 2.781 | 0.724 | 0.181 | 1.500 | 3.750 | | 0.119 |
| | audit firm | 3.458 | 0.621 | 0.253 | 2.500 | 4.250 | | 0.794 |
| | self-employed accounting service | 2.396 | 0.607 | 0.175 | 1.500 | 3.250 | | 0.069 |

Source: own elaboration

The above data did not yet confirm whether the mean values of ethical perceptions of earnings management were statistically significant. To address this issue, we conducted additional tests. Table 3 presents the ANOVA results and Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons (restricted to statistically significant findings at $\alpha = 0.05$). Our analysis showed that workplace significantly influenced perceptions of the ethical acceptability of overall earnings management, accrual-based earnings management, and earnings management practices affecting a single fiscal year. In contrast, we did not find statistically significant differences across workplaces for real earnings management or multi-year earnings management.

Post-hoc tests further clarified these effects. For overall earnings management, we observed that auditors rated such practices as significantly less acceptable than self-employed practitioners. In the case of accrual-based earnings management, auditors again adopted stricter views compared to both accounting office employees and private company professionals. Their assessments were also significantly harsher than those of self-employed accountants. When examining earnings management practices affecting a single fiscal year, we found that auditors once more evaluated these behaviors more critically than self-employed professionals.

Overall, our findings consistently suggested that auditors held the most restrictive ethical stance toward earnings management, while self-employed accountants tended to be the most permissive. Employees of accounting offices and private companies were generally positioned between these two groups.

Table 3. Results of ANOVA and bonferroni post-hoc tests on ethical perceptions of earnings management by workplace

| Type of EM | ANOVA | | | F | Sig. |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|--|-------|-------|
| | Statistics | Sum of Squares | | | |
| Overall EM | Between Groups | 3.441 | | 2.807 | 0.030 |
| | Within Groups | 29.121 | | | |
| | Total | 32.562 | | | |
| Accrual-based EM | Between Groups | 3.709 | | 2.972 | 0.023 |
| | Within Groups | 29.638 | | | |
| | Total | 33.347 | | | |
| Real EM | Between Groups | 4.662 | | 2.206 | 0.074 |
| | Within Groups | 50.199 | | | |
| | Total | 54.861 | | | |
| Multi-year EM | Between Groups | 2.846 | | 2.142 | 0.082 |
| | Within Groups | 31.558 | | | |
| | Total | 34.404 | | | |
| Single-year EM | Between Groups | 5.514 | | 2.807 | 0.030 |
| | Within Groups | 46.658 | | | |
| | Total | 52.172 | | | |

| Multiple Comparisons - Bonferroni (only statistically significant) | | | | |
|--|---|-----------------|------------|-------|
| Type of EM | Comparison | Mean Difference | Std. Error | Sig. |
| Overall EM | audit firm - self-employed accounting service | 0.893 | 0.277 | 0.017 |
| | accounting office - audit firm | -0.738 | 0.252 | 0.043 |
| Accrual-based EM | private company - audit firm | -0.797 | 0.245 | 0.016 |
| | audit firm - self-employed accounting service | 0.893 | 0.279 | 0.019 |
| Single-year EM | audit firm - self-employed accounting service | -1.063 | 0.350 | 0.031 |

Source: own elaboration

The above analyses of mean ratings across the 13 scenarios of Bruns' tasks did not fully show whether differences between workplaces were statistically significant or whether scenario-specific patterns existed. To explore this further, in the final stage of our research, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA, with scenario (13 levels) as a within-subject factor and workplace as a between-subject factor. This allowed us to account for correlations between repeated measurements within participants and to examine potential interactions between scenario type and workplace.

Before running the analysis, we checked the key assumptions. We visually inspected histograms and Q-Q plots for the ratings across scenarios and workplaces, which indicated approximate normality. Sphericity was tested using Mauchly's test, which showed a violation ($W = 0.291$, $p = 0.006$). Therefore, we applied Greenhouse–Geisser and Huynh–Feldt corrections. Homogeneity of variance across workplace groups was met for 12 of the 13 scenarios.

The obtained results, shown in Table 4, revealed a significant effect of scenario: participants rated some scenarios consistently higher or lower than others. Workplace also had a significant effect on overall ratings. The interaction between scenario and workplace was not significant, suggesting that the pattern of ratings across scenarios was similar for all workplaces. Overall, the post-hoc tests clarified that auditors consistently held the strictest stance toward the evaluated tasks, whereas self-employed participants were the most permissive. Employees of accounting offices, private companies, and public companies generally fell in between, showing no significant differences among themselves.

Table 4. Repeated measures ANOVA results for scenario ratings and workplace, with post-hoc comparisons

| Effect | df (GG) / df Between | F | p | Partial η^2 | Post-hoc significant differences (Bonferroni, only statistically significant) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|--------|--------|------------------|---|
| Within-subjects: Scenario | 9.946 | 11.560 | <0.001 | 0.108 | – |
| Scenario \times Workplace | 39.784 | 1.330 | 0.087 | 0.053 | – |
| Between-subjects: Workplace | 4.950 | 2.844 | 0.028 | 0.107 | Auditors < Self-employed, mean diff = 0.962, $p = 0.016$ |

Source: own elaboration

4. Discussion and conclusions

Obtained findings clearly indicated that workplace significantly influenced accounting professionals' ethical perceptions of earnings management. Thus, we positively verified our main research hypothesis (H1). One of the most important insights was that auditors evaluated earnings-altering actions as less ethically acceptable than other groups under investigation, whereas self-employed practitioners were the most permissive. We assume that auditors assess earnings management more strictly due to their professional role, which demands independence, objectivity, and compliance with auditing standards. Their frequent exposure to financial reporting manipulations, together with organizational and

regulatory pressures, likely makes them more sensitive to ethical breaches than other accounting professionals. In contrast, self-employed accountants may view earnings management more leniently, as they face less oversight, fewer regulatory constraints, and stronger incentives to meet client or business objectives, which can normalize such practices. These assumptions are supported by our findings, which align with prior research indicating that auditors adopt stricter ethical standards (Cohen et al., 2012; Hammersley et al., 2013), while less-regulated or self-employed professionals tend to be more lenient (Carcello et al., 2005). However, this study added a new perspective to the literature. By examining a broader set of professional groups beyond auditors and standard accounting office employees, we captured a wider spectrum of workplace contexts in the evaluation of earnings management. Moreover, the use of repeated measures ANOVA across 13 scenarios of the Bruns and Merchant (1989) questionnaire tasks provided stronger evidence that these differences persisted at the scenario level, not only in aggregated scores.

Focusing on specific types of earnings management, we found that workplace effects were more pronounced for certain practices. Accrual-based earnings management (H2) and managerial actions affecting only the current fiscal year (H5) showed clear differences across workplaces. More specifically, auditors were stricter than accounting office, private company, and self-employed accountants, who in turn were the most lenient. By contrast, real earnings management (H3) and multi-year earnings management practices (H4) did not exhibit significant workplace-related differences.

Due to the lack of comparable studies, it is difficult to relate our findings directly to an international context. Nevertheless, national culture likely influences our results (Choi et al., 2024; Viana Jr et al., 2022). Poland, as a highly religious and largely monoreligious country, exhibits cultural traits that shape corporate behavior and business ethics, making religion a potential determinant of earnings management (Wójtowicz & Grabiński, 2019). In this line, Misztal and Comporek (2025) showed that individual moral philosophies affect perceptions of earnings management, and that Polish accountants judged both accrual and real manipulation scenarios more strictly than U.S. counterparts (Fischer & Rosenzweig, 1995), suggesting that cultural, historical, and personal moral factors increase sensitivity to such practices.

We are aware that our study had several limitations. First, it was based on a relatively small sample of 100 respondents, which limited the generalizability of the findings and suggested that future research should be conducted on a larger scale. Second, the results did not account for other variables that may influence perceptions of earnings management, such as age, professional experience, education, or exposure to ethical training. Third, our data were self-reported, which raised the possibility of social desirability bias, as respondents may have provided answers, they considered more acceptable rather than their true opinions. Fourth, we relied on a questionnaire-based approach, which, although widely used in prior research, captured stated perceptions rather than actual behavior in real decision-making contexts. However, we hope our findings offer practical insights for regulators, accounting professionals, and other stakeholders concerned with financial reporting transparency. They indicate that auditors may benefit from tailored ethical training and stricter oversight, while self-employed and less-regulated professionals could gain from guidance on recognizing and mitigating earnings management practices.

Future research could extend these findings by using larger and more diverse samples or by including participants from multiple CEE countries to highlight regional differences. Incorporating additional factors such as age, professional experience, education, and ethical training could provide a deeper understanding of how accounting professionals form ethical perceptions of earnings management. Finally, alternative methods, such as experiments or observational studies, may complement self-reported data, while examining societal and regulatory influences could clarify why auditors consistently adopt stricter ethical standards than other professional groups.

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