

A bright future for women in accounting

For generations, women in the accounting profession, as in many other fields, have been fighting for equal opportunity, equal pay and an equal voice.

To get a sense of where things are now, and where they're headed, Crain's Custom turned to women at accounting and advisory firm Citrin Cooperman, which has implemented a multi-pronged Women's Initiative aimed at recruiting, retaining and developing women for leadership roles. We spoke with Alyson Caligore, tax manager; Nichol Chiarella, tax director; and Patricia Cummings, co-managing partner of the New York City office.

Q Crain's: What was it like being a woman in accounting at the start of your career—and is it different now?

A Cummings: One vivid (and unfortunate) memory is when I told my boss in 1991 that I was having a child. He quickly informed me that he would not guarantee my position if I was out on maternity for more than six weeks. I also experienced my share of "workplace bullies" along the way. Today, maternity and paternity policies are much more liberal. In addition, labor laws provide employees with job-protected and unpaid leave for qualified medical and family reasons. Thankfully, the culture of most firms has evolved, with harassment of any kind now being viewed as unacceptable.

Chiarella: When I started in public accounting in 2001, we were not yet a paperless profession, and work included long hours in the office—seven days per week, in a business suit during tax season. By the time I had my first child (10 years later), many mid-to-large firms had become completely paperless, making it possible to work from home. I remained full-time but began a flexible work arrangement, which allowed me to enjoy being present as a mother, as well as continue to focus on the upward trajectory of my career.

Q Crain's: Looking back, what helped you most in advancing in your career? Did you have a great mentor or sponsor?

A Caligore: I was fortunate enough to have two very loving, dedicated parents who reminded me throughout my formative years that "you can do anything you set your mind to." What has helped me advance most in the past seven years is my ability to set out to ask for what I want, and not to shy away from the challenges that may crop up along the way. Nobody does it alone, no matter who you are—so I am grateful that I have

spent my career at a firm that retains countless mentors and sponsors (both male and female) in leadership positions who continue to listen, understand, and help me achieve my goals.

Chiarella: I have had two incredible mentors in my career. One came to me about four or five years into my career. He emphasized a focus on becoming a well-respected technician in the industry, as well as developing an emotional intelligence that led to a greater self and social awareness. My other mentor was a woman I met during her tenure as the president of our local NYSSCPA chapter. She encouraged me to leave a small firm and move to a mid-sized firm in order to become more challenged technically. She continued to encourage me as I became a mother, showing me that it was possible to have a family and a career with the proper support at home and the right culture at the office.

Q Crain's: Many accounting firms are looking to attract more talented women. Based on your own experience, what would you advise them to do?

A Cummings: Firms should focus on creating a culture where their women can thrive. I would eventually like to see a time when "women's initiatives" are not required—but for the moment, gender diversity is a true business imperative. Firms should embrace the difference in styles between the genders, and accept and embrace women's differences and celebrate their successes.

Caligore: Attracting more talented women starts with retaining the talented women the firm already has, especially those below partner. Have candid discussions with transparency and mutual respect. Find out what the specific issues are that women are facing under your own roof. The feedback from your staff may very well be your firm's best asset. By tapping into their ideas and incorporating them into a collaborative, strategic, and actionable vision, an accounting firm will gain a competitive edge.

Q Crain's: Some firms that succeed in recruiting women are finding they cannot retain them and, as a result, don't have a large pipeline of women on the partner track. How can they improve their retention rates, based on what you have seen in your own career?

A Cummings, Chiarella and Caligore: Firm leadership must buy into the need for change and sponsor diversity and inclusion initiatives, including a women's initiative.

Having qualified women in leadership roles is imperative. Women need role models and mentors.

Advocates within the firm can offer promising female employees valuable insights, help them gain visibility with firm leadership and advise them to take on assignments that enhance their skills and experiences.

Firms must foster the type of work environment where women thrive, including:

- Offering flexible work schedules where professionals who take advantage of such arrangements are equally eligible for leadership positions
- Equipping staff with technology that allows working from home
- Developing leadership training and mentoring programs
- Allowing staff access to firm leaders
- Providing equal pay for equal work

Q Crain's: How do you think the experience of millennial and Gen Z women will be different from earlier generations of women in accounting? What forces are driving the change?

A Chiarella: Millennial and Gen Z women differ from earlier generations because they are unafraid to challenge the status quo. They demand transparency. Many of these millennial and Gen Z women were raised in dual-income households, watching their working mothers shatter glass ceilings and share household and parental duties with their partners. They expect no less from their careers and employers.

A Caligore: Millennial and Gen Z women have more allies in the industry than women in earlier generations. Terms like "women's initiative" and "sponsorship" didn't exist 30 years ago. Dialogue and action surrounding these issues is taking place within the accounting industry, whereas before, perhaps the norms were "unwritten rules" that many women were afraid to push back on, for fear of losing their jobs. Millennial and Gen Z women know their worth, and the value they bring to the table. ■



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