

Top Public Accounting Firms for Women in 2017

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More women are advancing to top leadership positions at the 12 accounting firms that comprise the Accounting MOVE Project's 2017 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list.

Now in its eighth year, the [Accounting MOVE Project \(http://wilson-taylorassoc.com/move/accounting\)](http://wilson-taylorassoc.com/move/accounting) is the profession's only annual benchmark of the status of women in the leadership pipeline.

According to the [2017 Accounting MOVE Project report \(http://wilson-taylorassoc.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/2017-Accounting-MOVE-Project-Report.pdf\)](http://wilson-taylorassoc.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/2017-Accounting-MOVE-Project-Report.pdf), there was once again a steady increase in the proportion of women in leadership roles at the 49 firms participating in this year's project.

The number of women partners and principals at those 49 firms increased from 23 percent in [2016 \(http://www.accountingweb.com/practice/practice-excellence/top-public-accounting-firms-for-women-in-2016\)](http://www.accountingweb.com/practice/practice-excellence/top-public-accounting-firms-for-women-in-2016) to 24 percent in 2017, while the proportion of women participating on management committees increased from 21 percent last year to 24 percent this year.

In addition, women comprise 28 percent of partners and principals at the 12 firms on the 2017 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list.

“Innovative firms are finding that they win new clients when they clear the way for senior women to open new offices and new lines of business designed around workplace flexibility and collaborative growth strategies,” Joanne Cleaver, president of Wilson-Taylor Associates Inc., the content strategy firm that designed and manages the annual Accounting MOVE Project, said in a written statement.

The 2017 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list, which is sponsored by the Accounting & Financial Women’s Alliance (AFWA) (<https://www.afwa.org/>) and the American Woman’s Society of CPAs (AWSCPA) (<http://awscpa.org/>), was released earlier this month.

The annual list is based on results from Accounting MOVE Project research.

According to the AFWA, the 12 firms named to the list embrace the same three characteristics when it comes to the advancement of women:

- Consistent, measurable progress in advancing women to leadership.
- Proven and continually evolving programs that retain and advance women.
- Clear and compelling integration of the business case for advancing women with business results.

The 2017 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women are:

BeachFleischman PC, *Tucson, AZ*: Digital business development through content marketing has emerged as a powerful magnet for new clients – and it aligns perfectly with the ambitions of telecommuting women.

BeachFleischman tracks wins and credits individuals for their successes.

It's one of many reasons why women comprise 37.5 percent of its partners and principals.

BPM LLP (formerly Burr Pilger Mayer), *San Francisco*: Proactive [pay-equity policies \(http://www.accountingweb.com/practice/practice-excellence/cpa-firms-use-pay-equity-to-build-employee-trust-and-their-brand\)](http://www.accountingweb.com/practice/practice-excellence/cpa-firms-use-pay-equity-to-build-employee-trust-and-their-brand) ensure that partners are examining pay decisions from all angles and that women know exactly how the firm is holding itself accountable for fair compensation practices.

Brown Smith Wallace LLP, *St. Louis*: A firm-wide initiative includes young women from the start of their careers, seeding expectations that they will bring in new business and backing that up with training on social skills and networking as part of the firm's commitment to professional growth.

Clark Nuber PS, *Bellevue, WA*: Reframing business development as an exercise in collaboration, not raw competition, is not only driving consistent growth but has also propelled women to 40 percent of the firm's shareholders.

CohnReznick LLP, *New York City*: Consistent measurement of the status of women at each point in the firm's pipeline ensures that candidates for promotion and sponsorship aren't overlooked. CohnReznick also invests in developing current partners as executive sponsors through coaching and training so they can demonstrate top-notch sponsorship skills.

Frazier & Deeter LLC, Atlanta: Here's the evidence that a holistic overhaul of firm culture, to focus on mutual accountability and shared wins, especially benefits women: 32 percent of the firm's partners and principals are women. Development – of people and of business – is a core, measured competency for every leader.

MCM CPAs & Advisors, Louisville, KY: External work-life coaches help women get ahead of emerging work-life conflicts and forge a path forward. That's one reason why women make up 38.3 percent of the partners and principals at this five-office firm, which has continued to develop its women's initiative.

Moss Adams LLP, Seattle: Moss Adams makes metrics meaningful by translating firm-wide trends into scorecards for each office. The firm is accelerating toward its 2022 goal of having women comprise 30 percent of its partners and principals. Six years ago, 22 percent of the firm's top leaders were women. Today, the firm is at 26 percent.

Novogradac & Co. LLP, San Francisco: Instead of expecting women to organize their lives around business development, Novogradac gives them the chance to design new practice areas and offices around their lives. The result: Women comprise 32.6 percent of partners and principals, and the firm is among the best at retaining women from senior-level managers to partners.

Plante Moran, Southfield, MI: Top managers lead by example, mentoring and sponsoring midlevel women. In the process, they seek insight into how the firm's vaunted culture is playing out for the next generation of leaders – and how to evolve work-life and advancement programs accordingly.

Rehmann, Troy, MI: Rehmann ensures a balanced slate for diverse candidates for its two leadership development programs, and firm leaders review the progress of candidates regularly. Emerging leaders are paired with sponsors who have different backgrounds, amplifying the importance of cultivating a diverse perspective. The programs retain 77.3 percent of the women participating and drive the firm's continual growth of women principals and owners, currently at 28 percent.

The Bonadio Group, Pittsford, NY: Due to a combination of strategic growth and impending partner retirements, the firm expanded its partnership career paths by adding a limited equity partnership track that allows for alternative career paths, including part-time partnership. The firm also continues to focus on promoting women, with women making up 22 percent of partners and 57 percent of principals, which is especially impressive within a 700-person firm.

“As a longtime sponsor of the MOVE Project, it is satisfying to see progress not only at our firm when it comes to improving retention and partnership ranks but in other MOVE firms,” said Risa Lavine, chief of staff at CohnReznick. “There’s much more progress to be seen, but we’re seeing the opportunities that arise when firm culture embraces the understanding that when women win, everyone wins.”

The Accounting MOVE Project also announced its annual Equity Leadership List (<https://www.afwa.org/move-project/>), which includes firms with at least 50 employees, where women comprise 30 percent of partners and principals.

For the past three years, women have also comprised 47 percent of senior managers, “indicating that firms are getting a bit better at retaining women at this critical career point,” Cleaver said.

Top 3 Trends at MOVE Firms

The top three trends from the 2017 Accounting MOVE Project include:

- 1. Transparent career paths that enable women to anticipate work-life conflicts and proactively propose solutions.** Both Rehmann and Clark Nuber, for example, offer exceptionally transparent career paths that outline what is required to achieve certain “destination positions,” such as partnership. They also clearly outline how staff can qualify for those positions.
- 2. Regular communication between firm leaders and rising women to ensure women are able to make many small course adjustments necessary to remain in the partnership pipeline and to ensure they are offered growth opportunities.** OUM & Co. LLP, for instance, consciously includes midlevel women in conversations about new projects, even if they have not taken on such opportunities in the past.
- 3. Office- or practice-specific metrics designed to track women’s progress.** A few firms are breaking down firm-wide measurements for advancing women to practice areas and offices. Moss Adams, for example, uses scorecards to track each office’s efforts to attract, develop, retain, and advance women. This injects immediacy to the overarching initiative and equips office and practice leaders with context for creating fresh ways to retain and advance women.

However, this year's Accounting MOVE Project is doing more than simply tracking leadership trends for women, Cleaver said. The MOVE Project has also issued a call to action – challenging firms to “move beyond the business case” and “commit to measurable action” to ensure more women achieve leadership roles.

“We are asking firms to be open, transparent, and consistent about their commitment to advance women and about how they will hold themselves accountable for achieving results,” she said. “The most important factor is mutual accountability at each firm: Exactly how does your firm define progress for women staff, and how do you measure your results?”

To that end, the 2017 MOVE Project report contains a Partner Challenge designed to help firms jump-start their women's leadership efforts by taking the same steps leading firms are already using to catalyze meaningful change.

“Vague promises don't result in action,” Cleaver said. “It's only when firms dig deep to understand how everyday decisions affect women's ability to move ahead, that cultures change and women can fully participate in driving firm growth.”

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