

Why Attracting Female Accounting Talent is not One-Size-Fits-All

By Amy Vetter

In a recent column, I explored how we can empower female accountants who want it all. As a working mom myself --I own a small business in Ohio and am global vice president of education and head of accounting U.S. at Xero-- I've learned that it is about knowing your breaking point and building a supportive network.

The most important discovery I've made, however, is that what works for one woman might not work for another. While many accounting firms correctly recognize the need for female talent in their practice, too many treat related recruiting and retention activities as one-size-fits-all. Despite their best intentions, this approach won't move the needle.

While I'll be exploring this issue in-depth at my Women in Business panel at Xerocon in August, I've asked a few of my peers to share their perspective on how to nurture female talent in the accounting space.



Kimberly Ellison-Taylor, CPA, CGMA, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors, AICPA: *Embrace the Non-Traditional Path*

It is no secret that there is a well of untapped potential in the accounting profession. By continuing to work towards recruiting the best and brightest students, we're able to draw from a larger pipeline of talent in the accounting profession.

But the work doesn't end once these students earn their CPA license. Working towards a more diverse and inclusive profession also means focusing on retaining talented CPAs of all backgrounds. And through these dual efforts of recruitment and retention, I believe we'll see more females in senior leadership positions. The reason I am confident we'll close the gap is the work being done across the profession in the Public Practice, Business/Industry, Education, Not-for-Profit, Government, and Consulting areas.

One of the initiatives that especially resonates with me is increasing awareness to the many ways individuals enter the profession so that we identify talent from a broader pipeline perspective. While every path may have a unique nuance, I have met many professionals, both male and female, who have made choices around their family dynamic. Most notably, firms and organizations that are able to offer different work schedules and more flexibility have achieved great success with attracting and retaining top talent, especially as it relates to females.

And while it's important to not over generalize, the approach that worked for baby boomers in 1970 or 1980 will not be the best fit for millennials. There is no cookie-cutter approach. How, when, and where we work are not generic factors that can be assumed--our value proposition to the candidates must be clear as well as the outcomes we expect.

Today's "traditional" journey through the profession has actually become the "nontraditional" path. As part of the strategy to increase our talent pipeline, practice leaders may want to consider that today's "ideal" candidate has many dimensions. The blueprint to the next senior position must be clearly communicated and developed with the specific professional in mind. Hiring managers may need to analyze their recruiting strategies and adjust accordingly.

For example, I grew up in inner-city Baltimore and majored in information systems, as my college didn't have an accounting program. After getting my MBA from Loyola University and attending a community college to get an accounting certificate I passed the CPA exam at 29. From where I grew up, to my educational background and the age I started in the profession, I have followed a non-traditional path.

However, I was fortunate to have answered the call of the Maryland Association of CPAs (MACPA) to engage and volunteer in the profession. And this has allowed me a platform to share my experiences and give back.

Mentorship, sponsorship and coaching are all important aspects as we seek increasingly higher levels of responsibility and among others, the MACPA has served in each role throughout my career.

Joanne Cleaver, President, Wilson-Taylor Associates: *Business Development is Make or Break*

As women progress in their careers, especially in the professional services space, many are tasked with business development responsibilities. Too many, however, only have their first exposure to business development once they've reached a senior manager level. Coupled with the fact that this is often when women begin having kids, it can be an overwhelming experience.

Rather than throwing senior female talent into the proverbial business development deep end without a lifeboat, accounting firms should begin to integrate business development training from the get-go. That's not to say that entry level employees and senior managers should be held to the same business development standard. However, all employees should have an appropriate level of business development exposure, regardless of title level.

As firms look to bring employees into the business development process, they must first understand that networking today is very different than it was 10 years ago. Relationships that were once made on the golf course are now made in cyberspace, via tools like Facebook and LinkedIn. Your business development value is no longer based only on traditional factors, such as how many non-profit or charity boards you sit on, but also on how well you engage with users on social media.

Understanding this paradigm shift will be helpful in determining the business development roles and responsibilities appropriate for each title level. An entry level employee, for example, might be given credit for sharing a blog post on LinkedIn. On the other hand, a senior manager might be measured on how effectively she leverages her connections in order to drive new business.

By scaling up business development responsibilities over time, employees build confidence and gain relevant experience. Thus, when it comes time to drive and own a firm's business development activities, female employees will feel empowered to succeed, not fearful and overwhelmed. ●



Amy Vetter, CPA.CITP, CGMA (@AmyVetterCPA) is Xero's Global Vice President, Education & Head of Accounting, USA.