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Is Community Service the Key for Women in Accounting?

By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)

[Each year](#), the Accounting MOVE report focuses in on a particular dynamic that affects women's career advancement in public accounting. This year the report's creator, Joanne Cleaver, president and founder of the research firm [Wilson-Taylor Associates](#), took some advice from Tammy Young, the managing director of human resources for [Moss Adams](#), one of the report's sponsoring firms.

>>the narrative is how we developed the point of view for the report, including behind-the-scenes collaboration

According to Young, community service is an underappreciated route for advancing women. Cleaver followed up on the tip and what she discovered truly has the power to change the lives of countless women in accounting, fulfilling their desire to move up in the firm and give back to their communities.

Cleaver found that community service is available to all women, in firms of all sizes, in all communities. Many nonprofits offer leadership development training that local

firms can access to enhance their in-house programs. But what exactly are the benefits of an accounting firm providing women with opportunities to integrate their career aspirations with community service? According to Cleaver, numerous studies validate that women are deeply motivated to find meaning (greater than a paycheck) in their work, and now, the [2012 Accounting MOVE report](#) sheds even more light on the possibilities.

>> *more insight!*

“There are only so many hours in the day. Women rising through the ranks at public accounting firms must acquire business development skills and that demand increases as they become managers,” Cleaver said. “Often, that stage coincides with family responsibilities. It’s an awful lot to fit into the work week, so when firms align their growth drivers with talent development, they can identify community service opportunities that intersect with firm goals. Community service can do triple duty: it is a channel for gaining business development skills, that also fulfills women’s deeper career motivations, and can help firms develop tomorrow’s partners.”

A Bigger Sense of Purpose

>> *data/facts*

The 2012 Accounting MOVE report found that 71 percent of participating public accounting firms offer leadership training through employer-supported volunteer responsibilities; 64 percent offer leadership training through support for business board positions; 79 percent offer leadership training through support for nonprofit board positions, and 36 percent offer organization marketing tied to sponsorship/support of entrepreneurs. According to the report:

“Targeted volunteering not only equips women with the networks and networking skills they need to advance to partner; for many women, it integrates a bigger sense of purpose with their professional goals. This dynamic accelerates women’s rise to senior leadership at firms because it provides a context for loyalty to the firm and their career paths. And, strategic community service particularly appeals to social responsibility-minded millennials and Gen X women.”

It’s important to note, however, that community service is a smart way for women re-entering the workforce midcareer to showcase their abilities. According to Cleaver, it enables them to show themselves in action driving results for the organization, which they can frame in case studies in their resume and cover letter.

Also, community service provides an even networking field that doesn’t exclude women as other activities, such as golfing, often do. This is just an unintentional benefit of Cleaver’s research. Her hope is that the MOVE report inspires internal women’s networks to build strategic alliances with nonprofits.

>> *Here’s some insight*

“This very process of exploring and negotiating a robust, mutually beneficial relationship with a nonprofit is a developmental assignment,” Cleaver said. “These days, nonprofits are entrepreneurial. They want deep, long-lasting relationships with firms and with women professionals. Why not work with them to specifically frame volunteer assignments as career development, and build in measurements so you can prove ROI for the nonprofit, women, and the firm?”

Making It Work For You

>>> *external validation/commentary*

In order for this to work, firms have to link their CSR back to their firm’s core competencies and strategic goals, as

outlined by Dr. Kellie McElhaney, author of *Just Good Business* and director of the Center for Responsible Business at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley. McElhaney asserts that in order to be successful, firms should support causes that relate to their business objectives and the MOVE report's findings reinforce those of McElhaney.

As mentioned previously, 71 percent of firms support volunteer activity through nonprofits and one main way is through paid time off to volunteer; and 79 percent of firms offered training to help employees be successful board members. What Cleaver found in practice, however, was that there was much less support and guidance at initial levels of community involvement. Some women reported that they churned through several types of assignments before figuring out which ones actually propelled professional growth. As a result, Cleaver would like to see firms include community service in mentoring, coaching, and developmental assignments for associates.

Women also need to ensure that they're taking the proper steps to making community service work for them.

According to Cleaver, the key is to identify several skills they need to build their networking and leadership ability and understand how opportunities escalate from doing the leading (i.e. serving in a tactical role).

>> *case study/example*

“The most obvious place to start is with a finance committee; most nonprofits need professional help with analyzing budgets and ensuring financial oversight,” Cleaver said. “But if you really need to gain confidence networking, you’ll want to segue from the finance committee to something like running the budget for a major fundraising event. That puts you in the middle of the action for a profit-and-loss project.

You'll see how marketing, operations, logistics, and finance fit together and soon you will qualify for chairing an event, gaining invaluable operating experience.”

That sort of success will likely propel a woman to the executive committee of the nonprofit, raising her profile and reputation in the community – and dramatically expanding her network. The 2012 MOVE Report is full of case studies that show how women CPA's gained career traction through choosing the right community service responsibilities in the right order and the report also highlights firms who've expertly aligned their businesses with nonprofits.

>> *how to's/tips*

If you're a woman working at an accounting firm that isn't placing emphasis on community service – fear not. You don't need your company behind you; you can get the ball rolling on your own. The first step, according to Cleaver, is figuring out what causes are deeply meaningful to you and looking at how community service has played into the career progress of women you admire. Cleaver suggests weighing your comfort zones and truthfully pinpointing where you need to challenge yourself and stretch. Next, you should talk with the volunteer coordinator of several groups and gain insight into the culture of the groups and build the business case for each of several assignments. Cleaver recommends starting with a short-term assignment so you can get the inside scoop on the nonprofit's culture and operations. Keeping track of all of these steps is also crucial because community service and success helps qualify you for advancement within your firm.

Making New Routes the Norm

For now, incorporating community service into how a business operates may seem unusually progressive, but Cleaver is confident that this is the way of the future and as more firms do it, the more normalized it will become – and that's a good thing.

“Social responsibility commitments are values in action. How a firm directs its philanthropic donations; how it chooses to align with nonprofits and which nonprofits it aligns with; and how it integrates its nonprofits support with daily operations – all of that reveals a firm’s true values,” Cleaver said. “I believe that professional development through community service is today where flexwork was a decade ago. Back then, people were excited to discover others who were finding the same benefits to alternative schedules. Now, there is enough proof that flexwork retains employees and stabilizes workplaces that it has become the norm. I anticipate that there will be a burst of innovation in shaping advancement through community service; then those new routes will become the norm. In a decade, community service will be the main path to partnership.”

>>> *‘forward spin’ insight/expertise is often used as a finishing statement that sets up future coverage while solidifying the main point of view*