

Gender Equity in Accounting: How the CPA Profession Is Balancing the Numbers

KRISTEN RAMPE
AND SARAH ELLIOTT

Ripe with opportunities for growth, the accounting profession is struggling to identify leaders to fill the shoes of its retiring baby boomers. Although more diverse organizations typically outperform their peers and certified public accounting (CPA) firms hire approximately equal numbers of men and women, men hold more than three-quarters of these firms' leadership positions. Achieving gender equity in the profession's top ranks is challenging, particularly since organizational leaders tend to groom individuals who mirror themselves. CPA firms that utilize a conscious strategy to retain and develop female professionals, however, are beginning to balance the numbers. Their experiences offer valuable lessons for leaders of any organization striving for sustainable succession planning. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

What is the optimal number of women in top leadership positions in certified public accounting (CPA) firms?

The answer will vary depending on who is being asked, but most industry diversity experts feel that the current number is not high enough. With awareness, intention, and effort, public accounting can retain and develop more women to the benefit of individuals, the profession, and the many clients they serve.

Since the late 1980s, approximately half of accounting graduates in the United States have been women, according to the long-standing survey, Trends in the Supply of Accounting Graduates and the Demand for Public Accounting Recruits (AICPA, 2015a). According to the CPA Firm Gender Survey released

by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' (AICPA) Women's Initiative Executive Committee (WIEC) in November 2015, however, women account for only 24 percent of partners in CPA firms nationwide (AICPA, 2015b).

The business case for supporting women's retention and advancement to leadership positions within CPA firms is compelling:

- The pool of talented candidates to succeed exiting leadership shrinks as women leave the profession. Without more female leaders, the profession will face a shortage of talent to fill the shoes of retiring baby boomers.
- When a group that makes up nearly half of the profession (AICPA, 2015a) does not reach the highest-ranking leadership positions in similar proportion as the other half, sustainable growth is impeded.
- Diversity in leadership and within teams results in more effective problem solving and increases the profitability and performance of organizations (Catalyst Information Center, 2013).
- As the numbers of female business owners and corporate decision makers continue to grow, clients and prospects expect a more diverse representation from their CPA firm.
- Employees and clients compare cultures across industries, and increasingly expect a family- and gender-friendly environment.

With more women in leadership positions, firms can benefit from a better working environment,

happier clients and teams, and an improved bottom line (Catalyst Information Center, 2013). CPA firms are risking the future of their profession if they do not shift significant focus to retaining and developing more women for leadership positions.

Moving the Needle on the Spectrum of Leadership

Just as the effort and resources needed to achieve physical fitness vary by individual, the effort and resources required to retain and develop top female talent differ from firm to firm. Some people naturally engage in strenuous exercise, while others find it challenging to even get out for a walk. Some people have significant resources to support their fitness efforts, such as a personal trainer, exercise equipment, and gym memberships, while others do not have the budget for such expenses. To influence gender equality with intention, business leaders must recognize and work with similar types of differences in firm culture and resource accessibility.

On one end of the spectrum are CPA firms whose leaders do not feel compelled to advance women to their top ranks. A bit further along the spectrum are firms that have an overwhelming majority of male leaders, but wish to advance more women to leadership. Given their demographics, these firms may find it challenging to do so, and will need to put more effort and resources toward increasing the proportion of women in the top spots at their company. On the other end of the spectrum are firms that have identified, promoted, and retained qualified female talent, along with male counterparts, without any specific “women’s initiatives.” These firms often have visible female leaders and exhibit less unconscious bias, producing gender diversity with less effort.

Mary Bennett, a consultant specializing in diversity and gender strategy for public accounting firms, finds that firms that do not have a formal women’s program in place yet have a higher than average number of women partners in the organization tend to have strong female role models and leaders who

are strong developers of talent of both genders. Strong female role models create a solid foundation while providing a clear answer to the question, “Can a woman make it in this organization?” The most effective leaders, whether male or female, will mentor women and men and sponsor them to leadership levels in the organization.

Intentional Gender Diversity: A Continuous Process

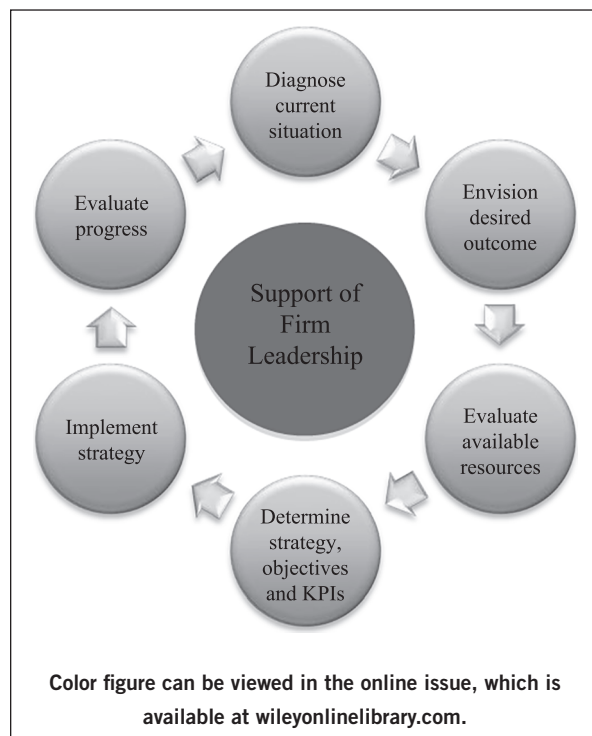
Regardless of where a firm falls on the spectrum of leadership, awareness of gender disparity and bias, whether conscious or unconscious, can benefit any firm. A CPA firm can better retain and develop its women using any number or configuration of approaches. Regardless of the avenue taken, a well-executed plan puts success within reach. Firms that align their actions with a well-defined purpose achieve more meaningful and consistent results. **Exhibit 1** illustrates the steps that firms can take in a continuous process to move the needle on gender diversity.

According to Bennett, an accurate diagnosis requires an integrated scorecard approach that helps a firm’s leaders understand the specific issues they face (for example, turnover or stagnation) and the interplay between the various scorecard statistics (for example, women hired, women leaving, promotion statistics, duration at each level).

Obtain the Support of the Firm’s Leaders. The success of a gender-diversity program hinges on leadership’s support throughout the entire process. A firm’s leaders are most effective when they champion the mission and benefits of gender diversity in words and in deeds, publicly and privately. Leaders also need to communicate the business case for and the benefits of advancing more women to the entire organization.

Diagnose the Current Situation. CPA firms that successfully move the needle with respect to retaining and developing female talent within their organization

Exhibit 1. Intentional Gender Diversity: A Continuous Process



start with a clear picture of where they stand. The reasons why it is essential to improve gender diversity must clearly be laid out so that all stakeholders are directed to work toward a common purpose. The next step is to take the necessary time to identify specific challenges and explore related root causes. It is also helpful to consider what is working well already and how the firm's leaders may be able to expand on that. According to Bennett, an accurate diagnosis requires an integrated scorecard approach that helps a firm's leaders understand the specific issues they face (for example, turnover or stagnation) and the interplay between the various scorecard statistics (for example, women hired, women leaving, promotion statistics, duration at each level). Once the challenges are diagnosed, the firm's leaders can begin designing and implementing solutions to address them.

Envision Desired Outcomes. Organizations that know what they want to accomplish in gender-diversity initiatives focus their efforts, mitigating the risk of

diffusing resources and diluting results. These firms define what success looks like within the context of their overall vision, mission, values, and culture. They then paint a clear picture of the desired outcome, including both objective elements (for example, desired scorecard metrics) and subjective elements (such as shifts in culture and attitudes).

Evaluate Available Resources. Before committing to the implementation of a strategy to address gender diversity, it is imperative to consider the firm's internal and external resources. Internal resources include people, time, talent, and budgeted dollars. External resources include expert consultants and training from professional organizations. Although hiring an expert in diversity strategy can be costly, firms typically leverage the expenditure to achieve meaningful results more quickly.

Determine Strategy, Objectives, and Key Performance Indicators. The next step is to design a strategy that makes the best use of the available internal and external resources to effectively retain and develop the firm's female talent. Firms that successfully achieve their desired outcomes choose one to five key areas to focus on and determine a feasible timeline in light of the available resources. At this point, the firm's leaders also need to evaluate how their gender-diversity strategy fits into the organization's overall strategy. They begin by setting high-level strategic goals in each key area. Then, for each strategic goal, they set specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound supporting objectives. Next, they select key performance indicators (KPIs) for each of their objectives, considering which critical metrics will best indicate progress toward the desired outcome. They consider when, how often, and at what level they will measure these metrics. **Exhibit 2** lists some common KPIs that an organization can customize to chart progress for its gender-diversity program. **Exhibit 3** outlines two examples of KPIs mapped to their related desired outcomes, key focus areas, strategic goals, and objectives for a gender-diversity initiative.

Exhibit 2. Examples of Key Performance Indicators

- Percentage of women at each level within the firm
- Percentage of women in visible leadership roles (e.g., functional leaders, geographic leaders, board of executive committee positions, managing/executive partner, chief operating officer, industry and niche leadership roles, other market-facing roles)
- Statistics by gender and level, including:
 - turnover rate,
 - duration at each level,
 - promotion statistics, and
 - employee satisfaction and engagement survey statistics

Exhibit 3. Example of Key Performance Indicator Mapping

Desired Outcome	Key Focus Area	Strategic Goal	Objective	Key Performance Indicators
A partnership as gender diverse as the firm	Admittance of female partners	Women admitted to the partnership each year in the same proportion as women in the firm	Admit a proportion of female partners in 20XX representative of the firm-wide population of women, within a 10% variance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of female employees in the firm • Percentage of women in the partnership pipeline (i.e., female partner candidates) • Percentage of women admitted to the partnership in 20XX
Better equip women for partnership responsibilities	Sponsorship of women	Create a sponsorship program for female partner candidates	Implement a sponsorship program for female partner candidates by 12/31/20XX.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of female partner candidates paired with a sponsor • Percentage of female partner candidates with a personal development plan signed by a sponsor • Percentage of female candidates and sponsors that attended training • Percentage of women admitted to the partnership each year

Implement Strategy. Next, successful organizations determine what programming elements will achieve the desired results. Each firm, and even each office within a large firm, is inherently unique in terms of culture, demographics, geography, expertise, resources, etc. Therefore, to be effective, the strategy must consider the firm's (or office's) unique strengths, challenges, objectives, available resources, and environment. During program implementation, it is important to identify who is responsible for each element. A solid team structure allows for a diversity of perspectives and greater innovation and collaboration; however, accountability should reside with specific individuals.

Evaluate Progress. Finally, it is important to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the program by reviewing KPIs in addition to subjective, anecdotal evidence of progress toward the desired objectives. CPA firms that do this successfully assign responsibility for progress (or lack thereof) to specific individuals and determine how to hold them accountable. If progress falls short of the desired outcome, the team considers what elements of the strategy to modify.

Evaluating progress at designated intervals provides leaders with an updated diagnosis of the gender balance in the firm. Then they may modify or

reset their desired outcomes accordingly. Since the availability of resources changes over time, strategies, objectives, KPIs, and programming may need adjustment to ensure ongoing progress.

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A Range of Initiatives Address Gender Diversity

The elements and results of several gender-diversity efforts undertaken at eight successful CPA firms are outlined in **Exhibit 4**. The experiences of these firms showcase some of the steps in the continuous process described above.

Strong Leadership Buy-In and Leveraged Resources at CohnReznick

One of the top 25 accounting firms in the United States, CohnReznick employs more than 2,500 people nationwide. Its WomenCAN: A Collaborative

Advocacy Network for Women program gives female employees access to mentors, roundtable discussions with firm partners, leadership development courses, and other professional growth opportunities. Michelle Lifschitz, CohnReznick's full-time WomenCAN manager, advises, "You need a dedicated resource on the team, and hiring an expert is a must."

CohnReznick's chief of staff, Risa Lavine, attributes much of WomenCAN's success to solid leadership buy-in, particularly from the firm's CEO, Frank Longobardi, who visits each office to share the WomenCAN vision for creating a cultural shift. According to Lavine, "Frank being so enthusiastic and supportive gives people permission to join in."

During "Lightbulb Moments, Highlights, and Takeaways," a webinar conducted in November 2015 by the Accounting MOVE Project, which compiles an annual survey of members in CPA firms to determine the state of women in the industry, Lavine noted that the leadership team of CohnReznick realized that "advancing women is a business opportunity; not just a business challenge" (2015a). She further explained that retaining and advancing women is not only critical to the firm's success but also to its clients. The firm leveraged its resources to achieve multiple objectives by creating

Exhibit 4. Components of Gender-Diversity Initiatives at CPA Firms

Component	Firm
Support of firm leadership	CohnReznick
Diagnose current situation	Baker Tilly
Envision the desired outcome	D Supkis Cheek, PLLC
Evaluate available resources	CohnReznick
Determine strategy, objectives, and KPIs	Yeo & Yeo
Strategy implementation: flexible work arrangements	Hungerford Nichols Windham Brannon
Strategy implementation: men's involvement	PwC
Strategy implementation: leadership development	PwC Windham Brannon
Evaluate progress	Moss Adams

the Executive Women's Forum, an initiative under the WomenCAN umbrella to promote education and communication among female business leaders and decision makers. Executive Women's Forum is open not only to CohnReznick employees but also to executive women from other organizations, including the firm's clients, prospective clients, and centers of influence.

CohnReznick cites the following results from its WomenCAN program:

- Increased retention and advancement rates for women, resulting in a more robust pipeline at all levels of the firm.
- Improved comfort, confidence, and readiness of women for a partnership role as a result of increased opportunities to demonstrate business development skills.
- Inclusion of the firm on the 2014 and 2015 Accounting MOVE Project Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list, compiled by the American Woman's Society of CPAs (AWSCPA) and the Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance (AFWA).
- Receipt of the AWSCPA's 2015 Innovation in Women's Programming Award.

Diagnosing the Situation at Baker Tilly

Baker Tilly, a Top 25 accounting firm with offices throughout the nation, employs approximately 2,500 people. In 2007, the firm's leadership team took a fresh look at its percentage of female leaders and realized that it was well below the percentage of women in the lower ranks. Recognizing the problem that this inconsistency posed, management decided to "affirmatively do something about it," according to partner Julius Green. He described the process of reviewing where they stood as "eye opening, but not surprising."

When Baker Tilly's leaders recognized the challenge of balancing gender diversity in the leadership ranks, they formed a diverse committee of leaders to shape the organization's future. These leaders

adopted a broader approach around gender intelligence. "We're not just talking about the numbers, but educating about the different perspectives diversity brings to the table," said Green.

Since starting the Growth and Retention of Women initiative, Baker Tilly leaders continue to assess the firm's situation. They evaluate programming efforts during leadership meetings, and determine what the firm must do next to retain and advance women to leadership positions. As a result of these efforts, Baker Tilly has:

- Improved the proportion of female partners by 11 percent from 2008 to 2014.
- Raised the proportion of female owners by 42 percent from 2008 to 2014.
- Been included on the Accounting MOVE Project Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014.

Envisioning an Integrated Life at D. Supkis Cheek

D. Supkis Cheek, PLLC, a sole proprietorship based in Houston, Texas, employs four people, including Danielle Supkis Cheek, the owner. As a sole proprietor, Supkis Cheek does not have access to the volume of resources that a larger firm has. Instead, she leverages the resources of professional organizations, such as AWSCPA and AICPA, to create a supportive and flexible environment for her employees.

"There is no difference between women and men in our office," notes Supkis Cheek. "I just want to make sure everyone has the accommodations they need for their personal lives." For example, one employee arrives and departs later than her colleagues to accommodate her child's schedule. Another female employee works a flexible schedule that allows her to attend classes to complete her master's degree. Supkis Cheek allows another employee who is a fitness buff to leave the office in time to attend to his sports activities.

Supkis Cheek believes that supporting employees' health and wellness contributes to the integration of

work within their personal lives. For a holiday gift, she gave each team member the option of receiving a standing desk or something else of equal value that they wanted instead. In her firm's future, Supkis Cheek envisions a nursery and a kitchen with a chef to prepare nutritious meals on the premises. She expects this to be a significant benefit for the team, particularly during busy times of year. "It's all about making our lives easier, not about men versus women," says Supkis Cheek. "You don't need to be in the office nine to five, but I want to know where you are and make sure the work gets done." Focusing the organization's resources on healthy work-life integration for team members has resulted in:

- More engaged staff producing better quality work.
- Increased capacity without the hiring of additional employees.
- No unplanned employee turnover during the firm's first two and a half years.

Strategic Communication at Yeo & Yeo

Yeo & Yeo CPAs & Business Consultants, a leading regional accounting firm with offices throughout Michigan, employs approximately 220 people. According to Suzanne Lozano, principal and founding member of Yeo & Yeo's Career Advocacy Team (CAT), the firm initially formed CAT to address women's issues. The team soon realized that expanding its reach would benefit the entire firm, for CAT addresses issues common to all employees, such as flexible scheduling, creating individual career paths, and developing a better, progressive leadership program for emerging leaders.

By design, CAT includes a balanced distribution of men and women as well as representation from different offices. Lozano explains that Thomas Holterback, president and CEO and father of three daughters, strongly advocates for women at Yeo & Yeo, and that John Haag, a principal with the firm, advocates the importance of listening to and providing all the firm's professionals, both male and

female, with the resources to pursue a successful, rewarding career. "Having a male support and lead this sends a powerful message. His passion is evident," notes Lozano.

According to Kimberlee Kelley, director of marketing at Yeo & Yeo, the firm leveraged the power of social media to showcase its women and share the value of advancing them. Yeo & Yeo profiled 13 women on the firm's Intranet and website and via Facebook, LinkedIn, and GlassDoor over a three-month period, and used total social media reach as a KPI. Achieving multiple objectives in the key areas of recruiting, retaining, and advancing women leaders in the firm, Yeo & Yeo strategically used its social media campaign to:

- Spotlight the firm's professionals.
- Highlight the firm's culture.
- Mentor and motivate the firm's female employees.
- Use a human element to appeal to others, including clients and prospects.
- Recruit and retain women at the firm.

"The resounding theme of the social media outreach was flexibility, whether the women had kids or not. It shouldn't matter what you do [outside of work]. If it's a priority to you, take care of it," said Lozano. Yeo & Yeo's gender-universal strategy and communication has yielded the following results:

- A greater number of women than men have been promoted to partner in the past three years.
- More than 50,000 people were reached in the first six months of the firm's featured women leaders social media campaign.
- The firm was included on the 2015 Accounting MOVE Project Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list, released by AWSCPA and AFWA.

Decades of Flexibility and Mentorship at Hungerford Nichols

Based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Hungerford Nichols employs approximately 75 people. Its

experiences show how a smaller firm can retain and develop women without a formal initiative in place. Hungerford Nichols has offered flexible work arrangements for more than 25 years, beginning when the firm had only 12 people on staff. Carla Grant, a shareholder, recalls that when she became pregnant in 1990, the firm's progressive leaders offered her the option to work part-time upon returning from maternity leave. Grant accepted the offer, the firm promoted her to shareholder while she worked reduced hours, and she still works part-time today.

Grant noted that when she was first offered a part-time option, the prevailing philosophy at most CPA firms was "You can't work here if you don't fit the mold," which meant little to no flexibility in scheduling. Today, Hungerford Nichols continues to offer flexible work arrangements and has implemented a mentorship program to support women as they advance through their careers. Its efforts have yielded the following results:

- 33 percent of the firm's shareholders are women.
- 47 percent of the professional staff and 69 percent of the workforce are women.
- The firm received the 2016 Pillar Award from the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Women's Resource Center.

Flexibility and Strengths-Based Development at Windham Brannon

Based in Atlanta, Georgia, Windham Brannon employs approximately 160 employees. Although there is no official women's initiative at the firm, "candidates are attracted to the culture and substantial benefits that Windham Brannon offers," says the firm's managing partner, Heidi LaMarca. She cites flexible work arrangements as the cornerstone of the organization's success in retaining, developing, and advancing women to leadership positions.

Since its inception in 1957, Windham Brannon has created a culture of flexibility, customizing flexible

work arrangements based on individuals' specific needs, instead of relying on formal, one-size-fits-all policies. "If you find the right person, do whatever you need to do to keep them at whatever capacity they have to work at the time," advises LaMarca. "Both the firm and the individual need to be flexible. There is no one right answer."

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Windham Brannon created Leadership Academy, an internal development program for women and men that the firm's partners identified as partner candidates. Established in-house to meet the firm's needs and leverage its culture, the program educates partner candidates on all aspects of running a CPA firm, including key performance metrics, business development, and personal development and branding. According to LaMarca, the program's strengths-based development approach "enables and empowers women—and men, too—to thrive and grow at the firm and in their careers." As a result of Windham Brannon's efforts:

- 42 percent of the firm's shareholders are women.
- 50 percent of the leadership team is made up of women.
- The firm was recognized as one of the 2015 Accounting MOVE Project Equity Leadership Firms and included on the 2013 Accounting MOVE Project Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list, released by AWSCPA and AFWA.

Asking the Support of Men, Sponsors, and Visible Female Leaders at PwC

A Big 4 accounting firm with more than 208,000 employees in 157 countries and significant resources at its disposal, PwC has an extensive program in

place for retaining and developing women. PwC's programming includes efforts to garner the support of men, a leadership development program for women partner candidates and their sponsors, and the intentional promotion of women to visible leadership positions.

Since men represent 56 percent of the profession and a majority of the leadership ranks (AICPA Trends, 2015), the leaders of PwC understand that the firm's involvement in and support for gender diversity is critical. Dennis Nally, chairman of PwC International Limited, was a founding champion of the United Nations' HeForShe, an initiative to promote gender equality around the world. "To create real and lasting change for global gender equality, we need to help men and women work together to realize everyone's full potential," says Nally. PwC has committed to taking the following actions to support the HeForShe mission:

- Developing and launching an innovative global gender curriculum to educate men to be gender equality advocates and address the root causes of gender inequality, including power dynamics and unconscious biases.
- Launching a Global Inclusion Index to further increase the number of women in leadership roles within PwC.
- Raising the global profile of HeForShe among PwC employees, clients, and communities by encouraging the men in these groups to take the HeForShe pledge and take specific actions toward gender equality, such as calling out gender-biased language and insisting on seeing diverse candidates for every position when hiring.

Recognizing that intentional sponsorship and development of women leads to greater gender diversity in its partnership ranks, in May 2011 PwC's top management launched Breakthrough Leadership, a two-day program for female partner candidates and their sponsors to attend together. Jennifer Demirdjian, a member of PwC's Office of Diversity, says the

intensive program has a dual focus, preparing both the candidate and her sponsor for their respective roles. Breakthrough programming includes panels featuring topics such as partner-admission strategy and tactics, how to give and receive candid feedback, executive presence, partner compensation, career derailers, and work-life integration. Sponsors learn the benefits of sponsoring a woman and how to effectively do so.

One of the most meaningful elements of PwC's gender-diversity efforts, adds Demirdjian, is succession planning with women in mind to ensure that women are in top positions throughout the firm. "The more visible women are...they influence behaviors...they serve as role models," she says.

These are some of the results of PwC's strategies:

- More than 21,500 men across the global PwC network have taken the HeForShe pledge.
- Of the 15 partners on the US Leadership Team, five are women.
- Of the employees promoted to partner in the United States in 2015, approximately 30 percent were women.

Scorecards and Accountability at Moss Adams

A Top 25 accounting firm with offices throughout the western United States, Moss Adams employs 2,200 people. Under its Forum W initiative, a women's leadership scorecard is created for each office every fall. The scorecard indicates the percentage of women by level, the percentage of women in leadership, and turnover of women employees. Local office leaders present their scorecard statistics at monthly management meetings and compare them to historical data, targets, and industry averages. The leadership team discusses current metrics and determines specific follow-up actions.

Forum W served as a catalyst for the Getting Real workshop at Moss Adams, which educates female senior associates and managers on topics as morale,

leadership, and work-life integration in a forum facilitated by female partners from different locations. Danielle O'Connor, a senior manager with the firm, said that Forum W “wanted a Moss Adams partner to facilitate Getting Real, but not someone the women worked with every day, so the conversation could be open and honest.” In these programs, the facilitators share their personal career stories to generate a two-way dialogue with the women in the audience. In 2015, Forum W was expanded to address the development of male employees as well by including programming for all-male audiences.

With Forum W, Moss Adams has achieved the following results:

- An increase in female partners from 20 percent in 2009 to 26 percent in 2015.
- Recognition each year from 2011 to 2015 on the Accounting MOVE Project Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list, released by AWSCPA and AFWA.
- At 6 of its 21 offices in 2015, at least 32 percent of the partners were women.

The Role of Professional Organizations

Smaller accounting firms that do not have access to extensive resources can turn for support to several professional organizations. Complementing each other, these organizations play a significant supporting role in the retention and development of women in the CPA profession.

AICPA Women's Initiative Executive Committee

WIEC promotes and supports talent engagement and leadership opportunities for women in order to sustain the CPA profession. With the American Woman's Society of CPAs and CPA Canada, each year WIEC holds the Women's Global Leadership Summit, which focuses on leadership, boardroom diversity, and best practices to promote women leaders in the financial community. WIEC also provides various methods of support to firms that want

to create a women's initiative, including in-person workshops, electronic media, free member webcasts on such topics as unconscious bias, and a step-by-step guide, “Organizational Strategies: Retaining and Developing Women Leaders.”

WIEC also created a LinkedIn Group, “AICPA Women in the Profession,” as a forum for individual women to share ideas and resources and to network with other women. In addition, WIEC sponsors the Women to Watch program, which uses a nomination and awards process to highlight role models for up-and-coming talent in the profession by state. (For further information on these awards, see Additional Resources at the end of this article.)

American Woman's Society of CPAs

Eight women in Chicago, Illinois, created AWSCPA in 1933 to serve as the voice of women in the accounting profession at a time when there were only 116 female CPAs in the United States. For many decades, the AWSCPA focused on advocacy and the advancement of women in the profession. After the profession's collective advocacy efforts resulted in the successful formation of AICPA's WIEC in 1989, AWSCPA redesigned its purpose to support the individual female CPA's desire to succeed personally and professionally. Today AWSCPA fulfills its mission to support female CPAs through career and personal transitions with innovative training, customized mentorship, and focused relationships.

Members pay annual dues to participate in AWSCPA. Primary membership benefits include events that provide networking and training, advertising opportunities, discounts with business partners, and the Lifelines program, which offers virtual meetings for small groups of members to facilitate goal-setting and accountability.

The Accounting MOVE Project

The Accounting MOVE Project enables CPA firms to view and share insights, resources, and accountability on women's initiatives through a detailed report

first launched in 2010. Available free of charge on the Accounting MOVE Project website, the Accounting MOVE Project Report (2015b) includes a vast amount of data on women in accounting, leadership development programs, flexible work arrangements, and other common elements of gender-diversity efforts. The report also highlights real-life accounts of practices that improve gender equity at all ranks. This information can help the leaders of any firm, even one with limited resources, understand what their peers are doing to improve gender diversity and how they may make the changes needed to stay competitive within the industry.

Firms interested in participating in the project complete a series of questionnaires and provide case-study information regarding women’s initiatives. To be a part of the Accounting MOVE Project, member firms pay a fee that varies according to how much personalized, benchmarked data the firm wants to receive. According to Joanne Cleaver, founder of the Accounting MOVE Project, participating firms are interested in advancing women at their organization, are willing to participate in a formal measurement program, and believe that the value of receiving detailed benchmark data exceeds the investment.

Overcoming Common Obstacles to Achieve Sustainable Results

As well intentioned as a firm’s leaders can be when initiating a gender-diversity program, common obstacles could impede their progress. As shown in **Exhibit 5**, these include a lack of leadership buy-in, strategy, flexibility, role models, and sponsors. Awareness of such obstacles and their potential impact will help organizational leaders devise a strategy to prevent or overcome them.

What results can a firm expect when they implement a purposeful gender-diversity program? **Exhibit 6** lists some ways in which the consultant Mary Bennett has seen successful firms improve their scorecard statistics and achieve less tangible but nonetheless significant secondary benefits. Bennett recalls that one male partner of a CPA firm told her, “Before, I felt I had to conform to a certain masculine prescription of what a leader had to be. With more women on the leadership team, I now realize I have a broader leadership profile and am able to demonstrate more aspects of myself as a leader, such as compassion, listening, collaboration...things that would have been characterized as weak in the past.”

Exhibit 5. Common Obstacles in Gender-Diversity Initiatives

Obstacle	Impact
Lack of leadership buy-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal results with insufficient budget allocation and unclear communication
Haphazard programming, lack of strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change perceived as impossible or improbable • Diffused resources and diluted results • Initiative perceived as a public relations ploy • Inability to measure progress or attribute results to causes, making success difficult to expand
Emphasis on hours over results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals achieving results in fewer hours may not be rewarded • Pressure to work more hours, leading to burnout • Struggle to retain women and men
Shortage of female role models, including owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of the firm undervaluing women as leaders • Women less likely to envision themselves as leaders in the firm
Lack of sponsors (male or female) advocating for women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer opportunities for women to develop and demonstrate leadership capabilities

Exhibit 6. Results of a Purposeful Gender-Diversity Program

Scorecard Statistics

- An increase in the number and proportion of women in leadership at the highest levels of the organization
- An increase in the number of women in “power” positions, such as seats on the board of directors or as rainmakers
- An increase in the percentage of women within a particular promotion class
- A decrease in stagnation of female employees (defined as an employee remaining at a particular level within the organization for a longer time than usual, or “stuck” at a level)
- A decrease in turnover of female employees
- A positive shift in results of attitudinal surveys taken over 12 to 18 months

Intangible Benefits

- An attitudinal shift, representing greater acceptance of a culture of flexibility for everyone, not just women (in particular among millennials)
- Stronger financial results, including higher returns on investment stemming from more diverse teams and leadership
- Freedom for men to broaden their own leadership style
- Expanded developmental efforts, such as sponsorship programs, leadership development, and succession planning, to include minority and male candidates
- Strengthened developmental efforts for everyone in the firm
- More effective teams

What are next steps for the CPA profession to further balance the numbers of women leaders in accounting? Regardless of where they fall on the gender-diversity spectrum, each individual and firm has the opportunity to contribute. Firm managers and owners can provide mentorship and sponsorship, while female leaders can serve as positive role models. Firms that have not yet done so can join in gender-diversity efforts, and firms that are already actively working toward gender diversity can continue to evolve their process and share the lessons they learn with others.

In focusing on flexibility and professional development for all personnel, the leaders of CPA firms will tap into the millennial generation’s desires and expectations. Building stronger, more diverse teams likely will prove to be a key component in their strategic and sustainable succession planning.

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Additional Resources

The Accounting MOVE Project’s website includes links to annual project reports and additional resources: <http://www.afwa.org/career-resources/accounting-move-project/#.VszIKPkrJhE>.

The AICPA’s Women in the Profession website includes links to several additional resources, including the Women to Watch awards program: <http://www.aicpa.org/Career/WomenintheProfession/Pages/Resources.aspx>.

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***Kristen Rampe**, CPA, is the owner of Kristen Rampe Consulting, which provides leadership development and practice management consulting to forward-thinking CPA firms. She helps practitioners and firms connect, communicate, and prosper with their clients and teams. Before founding her consulting practice in 2011, Ms. Rampe worked in public practice for ten years. She was named a Woman to Watch by the California Society of CPAs in 2011 and one of the “40 Under 40” by the CPA Practice Advisor in 2015. Her website is kristenrampe.com and she can be reached at kristen@kristenrampe.com.*

***Sarah Elliott**, CPA, is the owner of Ellivate Advisors, LLC, and serves the CPA profession as an executive coach and leadership development consultant. Previously, she balanced client service, firm management, and industry leadership throughout a 14-year career as a practicing CPA. Ms. Elliott holds a graduate certificate in executive and professional coaching from the University of Texas at Dallas and is a credentialed coach through the International Coach Federation. An active volunteer for her profession, she serves on several AICPA task forces and on the board of directors of American Women’s Society of CPAs. Her website is ellivateadvisors.com, and she can be reached at sarah@ellivateadvisors.com.*
