



Bea L. Nahon, CPA
Bellevue, Washington
Sole Practitioner
Member, AICPA Board of Directors
Past President, Washington Society of CPAs

How do you measure your success?

As I reflect back over my career, I think about how attitudes have changed since I entered public accounting in the mid-1970's. I can recall hearing one of the partners calling a client to see if it would be "alright" if they sent a woman to observe the parts inventory. I will never forget a conversation with one of the leaders in the profession, who commented to me that "women were only in this profession temporarily." And various CPAs, men and women alike, counseled me that if I was going to be successful in public accounting, I certainly would not be able to have children - it had to be one or the other, but definitely not both. Fortunately, my gut and my heart told me otherwise! So, as a younger CPA, I measured my successes one achievement at a time - each new client, each successful engagement, etc. Today, the individual "wins" that I have with my clients are very satisfying, but on the larger scale, I consider my success more cumulatively. My practice is thriving, I've had the privilege of serving in several leadership roles in the CPA profession, and most important, I have a beautiful family – a loving husband and two grown daughters who are now making their own successes.

Did you have a mentor and if yes, how did the experience affect your career?

I never had a formal mentoring relationship, instead there were several informal opportunities. I've always tried to carefully observe what is going on around me and to engage in dialogue, whether that was at the CPA firm where I began my career, or at a client's office, or in a State Society volunteer position. I've learned so much by observing and talking with others - and some of the most valuable experiences have come from talking about or observing things that didn't go as well as planned.

Do you still have a mentor? What role does that person play now?

I have the privilege of working with so many people that I have the ultimate respect for - at the Board of the AICPA, at my State Society (WSCPAs) and in my practice and my client base. My most valued mentor relationships today, though, are my husband and daughters. They provide me with unlimited support, encouragement, guidance and candid opinions.

Are there organizations or networking groups that helped you achieve your goals?

The Washington Society of CPAs and the AICPA have helped me beyond measure. These organizations allow CPAs to develop new leadership skill sets in a safe environment, away from the direct eyes of the employer. I've made friends around my state and around the USA, who I can call on at any time for guidance and resources on anything from technical questions, to management issues, to finding out where the best restaurant is in their town.

What is your approach to integrating your work and personal lives? Have any strategies proved more successful than others?

It's a never-ending challenge. There's always more work to do, but we need to have the balance in our lives. I'm especially fortunate because my husband works with me - he's not a CPA, but our fields are complementary, and it's been a successful work arrangement for nearly 20 years. We get to see each other during the day, and he makes sure that I leave at a reasonable hour!

At one point, I briefly experimented with taking a day-off each Wednesday to have personal time, and then making up the client work on evenings or weekends. That was a short-lived experience! I found myself stressed every Tuesday to take the next day off, and then the phone calls and e-mails would pile up on Wednesday so I would spend each Thursday catching up. I think that lasted less than a month.

I do pre-schedule my vacations several weeks (or even months) in advance. These can be long weekends or longer trips, and I plan my work schedule around those trips. I am involved in litigation support, and so if a trial date would interfere with a scheduled vacation, the vacation will prevail and I will decline the engagement.

I can remember attending a MAP conference several years ago, where the speaker proudly commented that if a he had to miss a personal event, such as his son's Little League game, he would charge the client a premium fee to make up for the loss. I disagreed then and I disagree now - nothing compensates for missing family moments. The best clients totally understand and respect this, and in fact, lead their lives the same way.

How does your firm handle advancement of women?

My firm has always been small and so my highest priority has always been to have everyone in the firm be allowed to learn new skills and work to their fullest potential, regardless of their gender. I've always set my expectations high, but also tried to provide encouragement to do so.

What advice would you give to a young CPA about having a rewarding career?

Plan thoughtfully. Take some risks (but not with the advice you give to your clients!). Volunteer your time to worthy causes - including your profession. Be proud of what you do. And enjoy the love of your family and treasure every moment that you spend with them.

What book are you reading now?

"Wicked" by Gregory Maguire - is currently being sent to me by the library. I saw the play on Broadway (I'm a theater-junkie!) and was wowed by the production and the story. I mentioned the play to my optometrist, and she recommended that I read the book, as it delves deeper into how we isolate and hurt those around us who are different.

Any final thoughts?

Many people still talk about the glass ceiling. Trying to break through it can be a challenge, and I'd recommend being very careful trying to smash the glass ceiling, unless you are positive that whatever is on the other side, in this particular company or situation, holds the right future for you. If the corporate culture has created an impenetrable lid to your advancement, you may be far happier and more successful in the long-run if you simply move on. So, my solution to the glass ceiling is - put away the chisel and instead, head for the elevator, and find the environment that will recognize your talents and provide you with positive opportunities.