

What Women in the Profession Are Thinking: A Focus Group Recap

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WORK/LIFE & WOMEN'S INITIATIVES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

AICPA



Introduction

The statistics show that over 50% of the college graduates in accounting and new employees in CPA positions are female, yet, only 11–19% of public accounting partners and senior executive accounting positions are held by females.

The AICPA Work Life and Women's Initiative Executive Committee (WLWIEC) conducted six focus groups in the fall of 2005 to better understand issues related to women's career advancement in the profession. Specifically, the committee was interested in what changes had occurred and why, what issues still exist and what is needed for the future.

The six information gathering sessions were conducted during the fall of 2005 at the following events: Joint National Conference of AWSCPA and ASWA (Sept. 2005), New Mexico CPA Society Women to Watch Awards (Nov. 2005), National Association of Black Accountants (Sept. 2005), AICPA Women's Summit (Oct. 2005), Illinois CPA Society Women to Watch Awards (Nov. 2005), and AICPA National Conference on Banks and Savings Institutions (Sept. 2005).

Invitations to participate in the project were offered and a total of 42 women participated. Demographics of the participants were:

	Participants
• Industry	17
CFO/Controller/VP Finance Managers/Directors	7 10
• Public Accounting	23
Solo practitioners	3
Partners	16
Managers/directors	4
• Academia	2

This report is a compilation of the results of this research.

What changes have been seen?

Stories were told of women remembering times when...

- ... women only wore skirts, navy blue or pinstripe suits and rosette ties.
- ... clients did not want to work with female accountants.
- ... partners were reluctant to share business development activities (e.g. golf, sporting events, and business lunches) with female accounting staff.
- ... pregnancy was treated as a disease which required secrecy and certain adverse impact on career advancement.

All participants reported that, thankfully, positive changes have been made. The changes they have seen include:

- Their direct supervisor has a strong impact on their own career advancement/retention. They experienced support and flexibility from both male and female supervisors in responding to their career and life needs.
- They see more women in management and executive leadership positions. While the numbers are still small, they see that women are being actively considered for such positions.
- Flexible schedules and policies to support work/life balance have begun to emerge as organizations recognized the need for a more diverse leadership group. They are also seeing the positive impact of these policy changes on the retention of younger male professionals.
- Greater knowledge is available on differences in male and female communication and leadership styles.
- Men are willing to mentor women since they see them as valuable assets for the future of the organization. They are more willing to include them in key discussions and business development activities.

- With more client businesses being owned or run by women, acceptance of women as trusted advisors is not only needed but a good business strategy.
- Organizations are supporting women's initiatives, not just as a politically correct activity, but as a true change vehicle for the organization.
- Some organizations are recognizing the talents women bring beyond the technical skills and the value this presents to the organization. For example: collaboration, team building, developing people and multi-tasking.

What issues still exist?

As one participant stated “The glass ceiling is cracked but not shattered.” She went on to explain that some cultures provide opportunities for women who work hard and put in the time that is required and if they meet the expectations, they can continue to rise in the organization. However, when flexibility is required, barriers continue to exist.

The issues fell into four areas: the organization, the profession, client expectations and the individual.

The organization

There are senior leaders who do not yet understand the issue of women's retention and advancement. This mindset becomes prevalent in the culture of their organizations at all levels, causing the glass ceiling to be encountered earlier in a woman's career.

There is an unspoken political game that men understand and women are often excluded. Organizations need to understand this cultural component and work to shift these norms in order for the glass ceiling to be moved or shattered.

It is often hard for individuals who are included in decision making and advancement to recognize what it would be like to be excluded. While the appropriate verbal support is given, the actions do not support the words.

The individual requesting flexibility can be interpreted as a "second-class employee". The mindset seems to be, "If you won't sacrifice all for the organization, are you a useful employee worthy of advancement?"

Continuing to use business development activities like professional ball games, golf outings and hunting trips which often exclude women.

The partnership or senior leadership position does not appear an attractive position. The workload requirements, risk involvement and added leadership requirements may be seen as an additional challenge for flexibility. This may demotivate women or the younger generation to seek these positions.

Because there are fewer women in senior leadership, these women are often leading the change in women's initiatives. This is often a responsibility above and beyond their job responsibilities. This has caused challenges for several of these women. The challenges include: they become tired of leading the challenge; they often find that their voices are not heard, where an external consultant can enter the organization and be heard; if they speak too loudly they often create conflicts between the politics of the situation and their own career support.

The profession

Sarbanes-Oxley was identified as a change in the profession that has significantly increased the number of hours for everyone. This has created additional stress as the demands increase for travel, documentation and billable hours. This has created breaking points for both males and females in the profession, causing some employees to look for other employment options with less stress and greater work/life effectiveness.

Women and young families are re-prioritizing their values with quality of life and family on the top of the list. As these priorities have changed, the profession is faced with an old business model that does not support the needs of these professionals. Unfortunately, we do not have a ready made replacement model to follow, leaving the profession to grapple with what this model might look like.

Risk issues and PCAOB regulations were identified as professional barriers that cause greater scrutiny in investing in a firm. Several women acknowledged that they may be less willing to risk family security than their male counterparts.

There is a high demand for good employees not just in the CPA area but in all business areas. This competition can present opportunities to employees for less stressful, more flexible work environment away from the accounting profession. As baby boomers prepare to retire, there will be a huge gap in senior leadership in the profession with the need to retain and develop younger employees. The issue of work/life effectiveness is no longer just a female issue. The younger generation is asking for the same degree of flexibility. **Succession planning, retention and development** are all issues identified by the focus group participants that will play a strong role in shifting the profession and creating more opportunities for women.

Client expectations

In this world of strong competition and high client expectations, the need to know who will answer the client if the primary client contact is on a flexible work schedule is a concern. The current model of a primary client contact may need to shift to a team model to facilitate both the needs of the client and the employee. It was mentioned that clients are also struggling with work/life integration and flexibility issues with their employees, creating a perfect time to re-educate our clients and set new expectations.

The individual

Regardless of how many external considerations change, the participants agreed that in order for women to succeed and advance there were individual factors that needed to be recognized and developed.

The list includes:

- Confidence in their abilities. Women need to recognize and express their unique talents which add value to the firm or company. These often include being a team player, developing others and multi-tasking.
- Guilt. Making choices between family and work will generally cause some level of trade-offs. Guilt can cause the women to doubt themselves and undermine their own self-confidence.
- Assertiveness. Because women are often collaborative, they may not always ask for what they need. Assertiveness is an important ingredient in achieving “the goals they set.
- Understand the “language of men” and use this information to create relationships.
- Setting realistic expectations for family and work.
- Find role models and have the courage to ask for mentoring and guidance—both inside and outside the profession and the organization.
- Have a support network including your spouse or significant other, friends, co-workers, family, nannies, and caregivers. There is no need to do it alone.

Differences in women's career advancement

Participants spoke of varying needs in their career development based on the needs of their family. While they might choose to stay home and raise children, they did desire to return to their careers after the children have reached a certain age. They voiced a strong desire for flexibility, but not a decreased desire to work hard and achieve results.

If the participants were not able to negotiate a variety of choices within their current organization, they would look for other organizations that would recognize and support their needs. Options identified were solo practices, smaller firms, family friendly firms or corporations.

What initiatives have worked

Several formal and informal programs were identified as significant initiatives that have supported women's career advancement.

- Flexible work arrangements: Individually based plans, not one size fits all. This may be a part-time/prime-time schedule or simply flexibility with hours and location for full time staff.
- Partnership options: Part-time, flexible work arrangements are included as a positive path to partnership. This requires adjustments to billable hours and compensation.
- Women's initiatives as a strategic direction of the organization's strategic business plan, not just a "token task force."
- Networking, education and support both inside and outside the organization.
- Leadership skill development for supervisors, managers, executives and partners.

- Training on diversity, team development, leadership styles and executive development programs.
- Project teams versus a primary client contact. This allows for client responsiveness while still respecting the employee needs for flexibility and work/life balance.
- “Off Ramp” considerations. Keeping employees connected to the organization while they are on family leave. This includes CPE training and access to e-mail and inter-office communications.
- Create policies to support work/life effectiveness and include men and women on these culture and policy committees.
- Technology investments (blackberries, laptops, cell phones) to support flexible work options like telecommuting.
- Mentoring program—both formal and informal. The organization supports and encourages mentoring relationships for all members of the organization—from new associates to senior partners.
- Support networks: Encouraging internal sharing of best practices both professionally and personally. Encouraging internal friendships.
- Creating choices in career direction. The “up or out” model may not be most effective in retaining and advancing women in the profession. Yet, if you do not move up, the professional stigma of creating a different path may lead to leaving the organization for other options. Organizations that have identified optional, respected choices were successful in retaining females who often chose to advance at a later time in their career.

Summary

"I think there are great things that are going to create great opportunities for women. I think women are smarter, more demanding and they won't take the status quo, but they'll do it in responsible ways and really make change and not be so constrained like we were in trying to follow all the rules."

Female Senior Partner, Public Accounting Focus Group Participant

The focus groups expressed positive comments about the changes that have been made and felt optimistic about the future. Clearly, the change process needs to be continued—and these changes will be more complex as the paradigms of the profession shift. The initiatives already taken have shown progress with benefits not only for females, but also for the needs of the younger generation, clients, the organization and the profession. There was a mandate from the participants that the profession continue its commitment to the challenging work ahead.

Supporting Women's Retention and Advancement: Key Questions Your Organization Needs to Ask

Following are key questions any organization should consider in supporting women's retention and advancement.

1. Do you track the percentage of women entering your organization and the percentage of women in leadership positions?
2. Are women targeted as a part of your organization's succession plan?
3. Is women's retention and development a component of your strategic initiatives?
4. Are women on key committees and task forces in your organization?
5. Do you have policies that support work/life effectiveness?
6. Do you encourage and support internal mentoring—whether formal or informal?
7. Do you offer individualized flexible work arrangements to your employees?
8. Do you offer opportunities for advancement for individuals using flexible work schedules?
9. Do you provide leadership and management skill development training to all levels of employees in your organization?

10. Do you provide training on gender differences?
11. Do you provide alternative work options for employees on family leave (e.g., laptops to receive company e-mails, continued opportunities to participate in training and CPE activities)?
12. Do your employees have adequate technology support (e.g., blackberries, laptops, cell phones) to allow for flexibility?
13. What options do employees have in creating alternative career choices at various stages of their family and life development?
14. Do you have client assignment policies that are inclusive and avoid assumptions?
15. Do you conduct compensation audits at raise time to ensure fairness and gender equity?



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