Building Bridges:

Updated Guide to Building
a Successful Off-Ramping Program

SUMMARY

Recognizing that the future of the public accounting industry promises greater and greater constraints on our talent pool and more competition for talent we do have, it follows that the implementation of an off-ramping program is something that should come naturally. The future is upon us now and the retirements we have forecasted for years are now in progress. We hope this guide serves to provide options and guidelines to leadership in our industry for how to implement a program that will meet the needs and goals of different firms.

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Why Implement an Off-Ramping Program? The Business Case

Over the past few years, it has become clear that organizations in the financial services, accounting and consulting industries need to focus their energies on the attraction and retention of women professionals. The talent of these individuals is essential to the success of any professional services firm, and as the below statistics will reveal, this talent pool is experiencing tremendous change:

▶ From 1946 to 1963 (a 17-year span), 79 million baby boomers were born in the United States

▶ The following two decades resulted in the birth of only 43 million people

▶ By 2020, the U.S. civilian labor force older than age 55 will increase to 25.2%, up from 19.5% in 2010

▶ By 2020, women are projected to make up 47% of the U.S. workforce

▶ In 2011-12, 48% of all combined bachelor's and master's degrees were granted to women

▶ In 2011-12, 45.6% of students enrolling in undergraduate and 50.4% in graduate accounting programs were women

▶ Over their careers, 31% of professional women will voluntarily leave their jobs (both temporarily and on a permanent basis)

   • 74% of these women leave to care for small children, which is an increase of nearly 30% since 2004

▶ In addition to the 31% who exit the workforce, 58% opt to take a part-time, reduced-time or flex-time schedule

▶ On average, these off-ramped women are out of the workforce for just 2.7 years

▶ After this brief break, 89% will try to re-enter the workforce

   • Of this population, just 40% return to full time work

▶ A full 69% of women say they wouldn't have off-ramped if their companies had offered flexible work options such as reduced-hour schedules, job sharing, part-time career tracks or short unpaid sabbaticals

▶ 54% of off-ramping women left without even discussing flex options with their supervisor

▶ Women lack support from senior colleagues: 89% don't have a sponsor to move them forward in their careers, 68% lack mentors and 61% lack role models

The statistics outlined above illustrate some specific facts that have tremendous impact on the public accounting profession:

1. The pool of available professionals is shrinking while the demand for these professionals over the recent past has increased dramatically.

2. Most leaders in the accounting industry are familiar with the fact that a very large number of baby boomers will retire in the next 10 years and at least 50% of the accountants available to take their place are female.

3. Male and female emerging leaders from younger generations continue to value nontraditional career paths and time frames that include sabbaticals and other types of off-ramp periods.

4. A large percentage of women professionals will "off ramp" or exit the workforce sometime in their careers, representing a loss of talent and resources to their employers if creative solutions are not in place to prevent this drain of talent.

Given these facts, it is essential that all organizations thoughtfully continue a strategic approach to staffing in the coming years. This includes development of strategies that enable women and men to balance their professional and personal commitments in order to remain in the workforce.

But, what if women still choose to exit the workforce for a given period of time? Many organizations are taking a hard look at those who choose to exit the workforce and choose to see them as an opportunity rather than a loss. By facilitating the off-ramping process with guidance and training, and then maintaining strong relationships with those who have chosen to off-ramp, organizations successfully are tapping for future employment needs, temporary work, contract work and other unique opportunities. Such programs and initiatives are designed to capture this pool of talent and create opportunity for the public accounting industry in a time when there is great need. Although these off-ramping programs are somewhat new, they do show tremendous promise in terms of their ability to support and supplement the strategic staffing goals of the accounting profession.

This guide is designed to help organizations consider their options for building and delivering off-ramping programs or initiatives appropriate to their population and needs. The options and ideas provided should serve as a starting point for leaders as they consider how best to implement strategies that will support their staffing needs in the face of future challenges.

SIX IDEAS THAT MAKE SENSE:
Best Practices in Building Loyalty Through an Off-Ramping Program

Because off-ramping is not a new approach in this industry, we are able to look at what has been successful thus far and what have proven to be the overall best practices for building and maintaining an effective off-ramping program. Although there are many variations, the following list provides the areas to be covered in this guide:

1. Supply technology

2. Offer training

3. Communicate via different channels

4. Provide networking opportunities

5. Provide support circles with other parents and people who have chosen to off-ramp

6. Facilitate the on-ramping process when people choose to return to work

Over the following sections of this guide, we will review and address each of these practices with the intent to provide means and methods of implementing each of the best practices within the context of your organization. Understandably, this sort of a program is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but one that must be adapted to the culture and conditions of each particular organization. Regardless of how each organization may plan to use these best practices, the business case provided should serve as convincing support for the implementation of some sort of program (or elements of a program) in order to ensure a qualified and sufficient workforce in the years to come.

Supply Technology — Keep Them "Connected"

The more we are able to leverage technology, the more flexible our workplace becomes. Although the dollar investment in laptops, smartphones and other hardware may seem daunting to organizational leadership, the plain truth is that this technology enables our people — our key resource — to work from anywhere at any time. This flexibility serves organizations in allowing them to maximize the availability and commitment of employees to get the job done. At the same time, it allows employees to make personal choices about when and where they are able to work and facilitate both their personal and professional lives. Whether they are able to participate in that conference call with an overseas client from home, take their smartphone on the 70-minute train commute to the office, or avoid traveling across the country in favor of participating in a meeting via video conference, the availability and effectiveness of technology has allowed people to stay connected while finding the ability to meet their personal needs.

Similarly, as we look at the population of women (and in some instances, men) who choose to off-ramp at given junctures in their careers, technology, and our willingness to support off-ramped professionals with technology, will meet two purposes. It will allow the off-ramped professional to "stay connected" through ongoing access to a professional network of resources and people, and it will allow companies to maintain the loyalty and interest of employees who feel entrusted with an organizational resource, and thus recognize that organization's desire to retain them in the long run.

Options for keeping people connected:

▶ Access to the firm's intranet

▶ Continued access to a firm email account

▶ Laptop and full access to the organization's network

▶ Smartphones or other mobile devices if deemed appropriate

▶ Participation from time to time in conference calls, video conferences or other web-based meetings

▶ Potential for special project work or part-time assistance as desired by the participant and the firm

Regardless of the extent to which technology or access is supplied to an off-ramped professional, the most important way to maximize this opportunity is to communicate about it. If you are willing to provide an off-ramped employee access to the intranet and an email account, this professional will be able to keep in sync with what's going on within your organization as well as to maintain personal ties and contacts with other professionals who still are employed on a full- or part-time basis. The more you are able to encourage off-ramped employees to maintain these strong ties — not only to your organization but also to your organization's people — the more likely those off-ramped individuals are to re-join your organization when they are ready. Building an effective off-ramping program is all about keeping those off-ramped employees engaged so that their intent always is to return to the workforce and specifically, to your organization.

Offer Training

In the public accounting industry, the ability to maintain a CPA license as well as other professional credentials is crucial to a professional's ongoing membership in the ranks of those eligible to progress within their careers. For many who have chosen to off-ramp in the past, this has been one of the single most difficult challenges to finding a way to remain a viable candidate for on-ramping. One of the best ways we can ensure a qualified pool of professionals is available to us in the future is to ensure we are helping these people with the appropriate amount of ongoing training opportunities.

By keeping these people on your distribution and invitation list to these sessions, they will continue to feel that they are a part of your firm.

Options for providing training to off-ramped employees are varied and truly can be tailored to your firm or to your off-ramped employees' needs. In many cases, the extent to which you are able to provide training opportunities is dependent on your willingness to support the technology needs of your off-ramped population.

Live Training in the Office
These opportunities are an outstanding way to bring off-ramped employees back to the office to obtain CPE credits and also to maintain ties to the people and resources of your organization. By opening up your general training sessions to your off-ramped employees, you will be building the loyalty and sense of inclusion these individuals feel at a point when they would otherwise begin to lose connection to your organization.

Conference Calls and Updates on a Regular Basis
Although individuals are not able to obtain CPE credit for participating in conference calls and informational sessions via the phone, these sessions again provide your off-ramped employees the opportunity to stay connected to your organization and to network with other professionals. By keeping these people on your distribution and invitation list to these sessions, they will continue to feel that they are a part of your organizations.

Web-Based Training
If you are willing to provide your off-ramped employees with technology in the form of a laptop or, at minimum, access to your firm's network, you may be able to include these individuals in your web-based training sessions. These sessions are even more appealing to the off-ramped employee in many ways, due to the flexibility of participating from home or another location. Although the personal contact of live training may be lost, the convenience and flexibility of web-based training is ideal for off-ramped employees.

Project or Part-Time Work Assistance on Special Projects or Busy Season Scenarios
Some individuals are interested in keeping a closer connection with occasional part-time work or project assistance as needed by the firm. This is an ideal way for an organization to tap into additional seasonal or specialty knowledge and allow an individual to stay connected and current.

Self-Study Courses
Many organizations offer access to web-based self-study courses. Again, access to these courses may be reliant on an organization's willingness to provide access to technology, but again the ease and flexibility of such a resource is ideal for an off-ramped employee who is concerned with maintaining his or her CPE credits. These courses may be taken at any time and from any location in segments or all at once, providing the ideal variety of options necessary to meeting the personal needs of these individuals.

Financial Support or Discounts for Training Provided by a Third-Party Provider
Although organizations may be hesitant to make heavy financial investments in an off-ramped employee, there are some opportunities that may work very well both for the employee and the organization. For instance, if a women's financial organization is hosting a seminar or training opportunity that will provide both peer and client exposure, why not book a small number of tickets and invite both current and off-ramped employees to attend together? The networking opportunities will be tremendous both in light of client exposure and in building loyalty with your high-potential off-ramped employees.

In general, the ability to maintain the critical set of technical skills that are necessary for an accountant to function in this profession is the single most important way that organizations can build an effective off-ramping program. By ensuring that off-ramped professionals keep current on industry trends, pronouncements and regulations, organizations will be ensuring their own future population of partners and leaders.

Communicate Via Different Channels

Communication is the key. Without communication and the willingness to take the time to maintain a relationship with an off-ramped employee, all other aspects of an off-ramping program are meaningless. Off-ramped employees leave the workforce for a variety of reasons, and whether it is to care for small children, older parents or to pursue an advanced degree, the needs and availability of these individuals are as varied as the reasons they choose to off-ramp. Therefore, organizations must be astute in choosing the methods used to communicate with these people.

Outline Accountability
Who is responsible for maintaining contact with your off-ramped employees? Ideally, during the employee's tenure, he or she will have developed personal relationships that are too valuable to leave by the wayside. However, as unfortunate as it may be, these relationships often are weakened by the distance and the growing difference in daily routine these individuals face. The only way to ensure that you are truly maintaining effective ongoing communication with your off-ramped employees is to build in responsibility and accountability.

Some companies have chosen to dedicate roles and responsibilities of specific personnel to the development and maintenance of off-ramping programs and initiatives. Others have chosen to include it as a part of the role of their human resources professionals. Still others have blanketed it under their women's initiatives, generational initiatives or alumni programs and supported their off-ramping

efforts through their interested line partners and professionals. Whatever option is chosen, the process of building accountability for communication with off-ramped employees will only serve to enhance the success of your program and ensure that this crucial element of the relationship is not lost.

Choose Your Modes and Vary Them
In order to ensure you are reaching all of your off-ramped employees in their respective situations, it is essential to vary the modes and timing of your communications. Use of the telephone, Internet, intranet, email, regular mail, social media and even in-person contact and events should all be used at various times to ensure that you truly are reaching these valuable resources. The need to vary modes of communication is a strong argument for enhancing the technology you provide to your off-ramped employees. However, most off-ramped employees will have at least some access or availability to use many of the above-listed methods of communication.

Create Opportunities for Personal Contact
Although there are innumerable choices for how you keep in touch with your off-ramped employees, never underestimate the power of personal contact. Seeing and relating to these people on a one-to-one basis will remind both of you how valuable your working relationship has been in the past, as well as how mutually beneficial it will be to pursue the possibility of working together again in the future. Create opportunities for personal contact through lunches, training or CPE events, networking events, etc. Regardless of the reason for getting together, the power of personal contact is what will build a valued continuing relationship with your off-ramped professionals.

Use Leverage Technology in Every Way Possible
Technology will most likely provide you with your most effective means of keeping in touch with your off-ramped employees. Websites, social media, email communications and technology-based communications will be able to reach your targeted people when and where they are generally available. As mentioned above, the flexibility and reach of technology allows your

organization maximum access to your off-ramped professionals and their varied schedules, thus making a strong argument for providing technology resources to these people.

Provide Networking Opportunities

The opportunity to maintain relationships both with your organization as a whole and with the individuals in your organization is the key to keeping your off-ramped employees feeling as if they are a part of your organization. By providing regular networking opportunities, you will ensure that these off-ramped employees relate on a regular basis to your people, your culture and your opportunities. Although there are unlimited possibilities, here are just a few of the approaches you may consider:

▶ CPE opportunities both internally and externally

▶ Firm holiday parties and departmental events throughout the year

▶ Alumni events and outings

▶ Women's program/initiative events

▶ Community service events

▶ Business development and similar networking events

▶ Opportunities to meet and network with other off-ramped employees (see next section)

▶ On line live meetings and updates via webcast platforms

▶ Social media chat rooms, Twitter accounts, LinkedIn groups, Pinterest and more

Again, the key to sustaining an effective relationship with an off-ramped employee is to maintain open communication and personal contact on a regular basis. Your efforts to include off-ramped employees in networking opportunities will reinforce the fact that your organization wants to keep that relationship alive and that you value your continued relationship, therefore increasing the chances that it will be productive.

Provide Support Circles and Networking With Other People Who Have Chosen to Off-Ramp

Similar to providing networking opportunities, the ability to provide your off-ramped employees with a new network of peers is a best practice. Making the decision to off-ramp in and of itself may be one of the most difficult decisions a professional may make in his or her career. When dealing with the adjustment to life outside of your organization, it will be helpful to your off-ramped employees to have the ability to reach out to one another to discuss the personal and professional challenges, ways to overcome these challenges, and next steps in their personal and professional lives. If you are able to network your off-ramped employees with other off-ramped employees from your organization rather than from another organization or competitor, the process of "comparing notes" will continually be tied to the culture and context of working with your organization and within the accounting profession, thereby reinforcing those strong ties already established.

Again, similar to other best practices, there are a variety of ways you can network your off-ramped employees with one another:

▶ Create a shared contact list of those interested in networking with each other and keep it current

▶ Host monthly or quarterly conference calls or webcasts that focus on issues and topics of concern to off-ramped employees

▶ Build a website or web-based networking platform for off-ramped employees that may include contact information, a shared calendar, links to resources or interesting articles, and potentially blogs or chat capabilities

▶ Use multiple social media channels to build specific support channels that meet individualized needs

▶ Host networking luncheons or evening events that involve only your off-ramped employees

▶ Create an off-ramped employees' newsletter

▶ Regular check-in opportunities to gauge potential readiness to return to work

Use of just one means of encouraging your off-ramped employees to network with each other may make a tremendous difference in the effectiveness of your off-ramping program. In many instances, the most support any off-ramped employee needs is the ability to feel as if they are not the only one who has chosen to exit the workforce. Peer networks of off-ramped employees will also build loyalty to your organization as one off-ramped employee rejoins your organization and continues to maintain contact with those he or she has networked with while out of the workforce.

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Facilitate the On-Ramping Process When Employees Choose to Return to Work

Statistics show that the average amount of time a woman spends out of the workforce is, on average, about 2.7 years. The more organizations are able to facilitate the on-ramping process for returning professionals, the more likely we will be able to shorten that time period. Likewise, the smoother that process is, the more pleased off-ramped employees will be with their decision — as well as feel convinced that it was the right decision. The first few months back on the job are a particularly vulnerable time period, one that merits special attention to the needs of your on-ramping employees to ensure that the efforts made during the off-ramping process are not lost in a rocky re-entry.

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Following are best practices in ensuring that the on-ramping experience you provide for your people is as positive and effective as possible:

Set Clear Expectations for On-Ramping Employees
In comparison with most newly hired employees making the transition between one organizations and another, on-ramping employees are making the transition from their off-ramped lifestyle to one of being a part of your organization and your organization culture. Just as when you hire entry-level professionals from colleges and universities and there is the expectation that it will take these employees a while to adjust to the life of a working professional, on-ramping employees are returning to the workforce after what usually is an extended period. The expectation should be in place that it will not take a few days or even weeks for this adjustment to take place. At a minimum, it will take at least two to three months. During this time, it is up to you as an organization to

manage your expectations accordingly, and then to set and share those expectations with the on-ramping employee. Be flexible; discuss both your organization's needs as well as the needs of your on-ramping employee on a regular basis, and you will find that the expectations on both sides may be easily met.

Provide Mentoring and Coaching Opportunities
Based on the unique challenges that may be faced by employees returning to the workforce, it makes sense to provide your on-ramping employees with a coach or mentor who has either been through the on-ramping process personally or who is trained to help in the readjustment process. By ensuring that your on-ramping employee has someone she can seek out for guidance, coaching or questions, you will be providing the most basic form of support necessary to someone readjusting to corporate life. These coaches or mentors should not only be focused on the readjustment process, but on the employees' professional development and mapping out career guidance and plans for the future.

Offer Flexible Work Arrangements — Allow for Stages of Readjustment
A Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) policy will allow your on-ramping employees access to a variety of ways to structure their on-ramping process. Be liberal in your interpretation of your policies in the first few months so that on-ramping employees feel they are able to find a suitable balance between their personal and work commitments, especially during this fragile readjustment period. Although you may be ready for the "same old employee" to rejoin your organization, it is essential to keep in mind the need for flexibility and understanding during the readjustment phase. Flexibility programs have evolved tremendously, particularly in organizations that have embraced flexible work cultures. There are no limits to the flexibility options seen in public accounting firms. Some firms still report a slowdown in career progression from flexible work programs however many other firms have seen women and men progress to partner while on these arrangements. Some individuals remain in flexible schedules while at the partner level, others return to full time. The continuum of "normal" is very broad.

Offer Benefits Such as Back-Up Child Care, Child Care Subsidies and Elder Care

The more you are able to support your on-ramping employees with support for what may have been the "pull-factors" that convinced them to take time away from the workforce, the more successful the on-ramping process will be. If you can provide services that support child care or back-up child care and elder care, you will be easing the burden of on-ramping employees and allowing them to focus on themselves, their readjustment and their full re-entry into the workforce within your organization. Although many of these programs may require a significant financial investment on behalf of your organization, by offering them, you may be able to draw on-ramping employees from other industries and organizations to join your firm based on the culture you build in support of the needs of on-ramping professionals. In the competitive market for talent, these investments are trivial in comparison with the ability to draw on a significant pool of off-ramped employees seeking re-entry into the workforce.

PRACTICAL IDEAS TO KEEP IN MIND

In choosing how to implement an off-ramping program in your organization, there are some practical steps to keep in mind to ensure that you are providing the best experience possible for your employees:

▶ **Design a process for identifying those who may choose to off-ramp.** Don't wait until the exit interview to find out that a working mother is leaving your organization because she cannot manage the pulls between her work and personal commitments. Build a process for encouraging dialogue with these people. Whether it is through a women's program or initiative or some other process, devise methods of identifying those at risk of leaving the firm and address their issues and concerns sooner rather than later. Online resources with policies and application information should be available and easily accessible. Organization newsletters and intranet should "market" these programs and their successes regularly.

▶ **Ensure you have options other than off-ramping.** Do you have a flexible work arrangements policy or program? Is your organizational culture flexible and supportive to those who choose to work one of these arrangements? Do you have coaching and mentoring opportunities so that those who may otherwise choose to off-ramp have a variety of role models? Providing more options for your people with varied needs will help you keep a strong and committed workforce and encourage those who may otherwise choose to off-ramp to stay within the ranks of your organization.

▶ **Put some resources behind your program.** Commit to the purchase of technology to maintain your connections with these people. Add a role within your organization for someone passionate about the program to develop and run it. Be open to new ideas about how you can shape your future workforce. It may seem like a significant expense at first, but in comparison with the ability to attract talented and qualified professionals, these

investments will ultimately prove to be minor. Probably reductions in recruiter fees would easily pay for the investment in a qualified individual to design and run a program.

▶ **Set clear parameters for your program.** If you are willing to provide technology to your off-ramped employees, set clear guidelines for what you need in return. Do you want a commitment that the employee will maintain contact with your organization on a regular basis? What kind of administration will your program require? Do you have someone to monitor the program and compliance with your expectations? Whatever you choose as your parameters, keep your focus on the needs of the off-ramped employees at heart. If you are concerned with the needs of your organization over these employees, they will surely seek support elsewhere. Consider adding regular touch points to ensure communication lines on specific arrangements are always open.

▶ **Be committed to making your program work and building a culture that supports that commitment.** Much of what prevents those who have off-ramped from wanting to return to their former employers is the belief that the culture or leadership is not supportive, flexible or committed to its people. Take steps now to show your employees you want to build an environment that will support and sustain them throughout their career. *Your commitment to their varied needs will help you ensure their commitment and loyalty to you.*