

The Path to Partner: Six Women's Success Stories

The path to partner in a CPA firm is different for everyone. For some, it is clear-cut. Others take a more circuitous route. We've interviewed six women partners to get their thoughts on what it takes to become a partner. Some of these women are trailblazers who achieved partner when there were few women CPAs, others became partner more recently, and one is not yet a partner. Nevertheless, all of these women have some things in common, including an excellent work ethic, encouragement from their mentors and commitment to their goals.

Nancy Blumberg, CPA/PFS, CFP, has been a tax partner at **Master, Sidlow & Associates, P.A.**, Wilmington, DE, for 20 years. The firm has six partners and three principals, five of whom are women. When Nancy began her career, women didn't work in public accounting or tax. She was not encouraged to even pursue a CPA. Instead, she began her career in audit working part-time while raising her children. In 1980, Nancy got her CPA, winning the **Elijah Watt Sells Award** for merit on the exam in the process. She became a partner in 1987. Nancy credits her tax expertise, goal-setting and self-confidence for that achievement.

One of the defining moments of her professional development occurred when she stepped out of the back office and joined the Wilmington

Rotary. There, her knowledge earned her the same respect as a professional as her male counterparts, and her visibility gave her entry into Wilmington's legal and business community—access she may never have gotten had she stayed at her desk. She notes that becoming well-known in a city of 400,000 is a lot different than it is in a larger city. That suits her just fine.

Leena Ritchie, CPA, joined **Isdaner & Company, LLC** in 1989 and became a member in 1997. Leena has more than 20 years of experience in all aspects of tax planning and compliance. She is an active member of a variety of civic and other non-profit organizations serving in various roles ranging from board member to volunteer.

Leena, who grew up in Finland, never felt the effects of a "glass ceiling." Instead, she always believed in what her father told her when she was a little girl: you can do anything you wish as long as you worked hard to meet your goal. While Leena is not sure whether the cultural differences in her upbringing contributed to her self-confidence, she is sure that the challenges of being a single parent has given her the ability to easily adapt to unexpected situations that arise professionally.

Scott Isdaner, Managing Member of the nine-member firm located outside of Philadelphia, in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., noted that he is "gender-

blind" and that it is a person's ability to add value to the firm that puts them on a partner track, not whether the individual is male or female.

Barbara Lane, CPA, a tax partner at New York City-based **Citrin Cooperman & Company, LLP**, knew she had met her personal goals when she was offered the opportunity to set up the tax department at the firm's Westchester office. Barbara, one of four women partners, came to the firm as a manager through an early merger. She feels that a combination of professional expertise and making oneself visible throughout the firm are the key elements to becoming a partner.

Barbara believes that her firm, which has 43 partners, works hard to make professional staff feel they are important and have the opportunity to advance. Extra support, such as access to an outside business coach, is available to staff who wish to take advantage of it.

Barbara is also in charge of the firm's tax continuing education program. However, she believes that mentoring is important and holds frequent lunchtime tax talks—informal brown bag lunches at which attendance is voluntary and CPE is never mentioned. Anyone who attends can bring up an issue they are concerned about. Barbara comes prepared to talk about a general interest topic, such as trusts, just in case no one raises a specific issue. The room generally

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is full, and the occasion brings partners and staff together in a casual atmosphere.

Roberta Bernhardt, CPA, also is a tax partner at **Citrin Cooperman & Company**. Public accounting is her second career: Roberta was a teacher before she became an accountant in the early 1980s.

When Roberta came into the profession, few women were in the field and it was very difficult to become a partner. She feels that things have changed and that the barriers are not what they used to be. She believes that in certain circumstances being a woman can even be beneficial. For example, after SOX, she was asked to be a Director at a bank that wanted a woman CPA on the Board. "It is up to you to prove yourself," she says. Still, she is convinced that it is one's personal drive that is the main force behind becoming partner. Personal mentoring is one of the ways a younger woman can move along the partner track. At Citrin Cooperman, women with partner potential are assigned a mentor, who can nurture them and help them

discuss the issues and problems they are facing. Roberta, who serves as a mentor, finds that women coming out of school now are mature and sophisticated enough to know they can become partner.

NSBN LLP, formally known as Nanas, Stern, Biers, Neinstein & Co., has been in practice in Beverly Hills, California, for over 50 years. The firm has 18 partners, eight of whom are women. **Shar-ey Wang**, CPA, audit partner, has been in practice for over 15 years, 12 of them with NSBN. She counts two women managers at her previous firm and two partners at NSBN among her mentors.

Sharey emphatically states that "being a partner is about being an adviser to your client, a mentor to your staff and a 'partner to.... well, your partners'." Her firm encourages that by its culture of tolerance and recognition of individuality. She feels that being in a smaller firm has been advantageous because she can concentrate on her work and client service, rather than on firm politics.

She strongly believes that it is easier to excel and be recognized for your contribu-

tions when you are comfortable in your surroundings. Nevertheless, those who wish to become partner should be able to demonstrate technical competence, excellent communication and managerial skills, and last, but definitely not least, personality.

NSBN LLP Senior Manager **Chris Fults**, CPA, whose specialty is real estate, has been with the firm for nearly 20 years. She believes that accounting, like life, is all about relationships. Perhaps that is why a major part of her responsibilities revolves around staff development and training.

Chris, who would like to become a partner one day, has been able maintain a flexible schedule while she raises her four children. She is "thrilled" that at her firm, "it's about getting the work done, not punching a time clock." Although Chris doesn't work a standard on-site schedule, she uses e-mail and voicemail regularly to keep in contact with her clients and ensure that they feel they are getting the same excellent client service as clients who are assigned to CPAs with a more traditional work schedule. +

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Overson also found that firms with experience in a particular area are very willing share and act as sounding boards. In fact, he is now finding himself in the position of mentoring other firms as they

embark on the process of creating IT departments.

BHZ's recruitment and retention successes can be emulated by accounting firms willing to adapt the traditional firm culture, invest in current technology, recognize the need for IT management and

search for help from others who have had success. +

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