



2020 Accounting MOVE Project Report

New Practices Open New Paths

Women are designing and driving firms' expansions into advisory and consulting in a powerful alignment of diversity and growth



Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance
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Accounting MOVE Project Catalyzes Change In a New Decade

In March 2020, just as the Accounting MOVE Project team was concluding interviews and delving into analysis and writing for the report you're reading, the COVID-19 pandemic escalated. In the following six weeks, as the MOVE team analyzed, wrote, edited and fact-checked the survey results and 100+ interviews from 43 firms that comprise the research process for this annual report, the American economy tilted. Workplaces emptied. Homes filled. And by the beginning of May, accounting and advisory firms were realizing that they were not insulated from the economic pain.

The message of the 2020 Accounting MOVE Project is more relevant than ever, as firms will need to draw on seasoned professionals to revive revenues and rekindle growth. At the same time, the statistics in this report reflect the state of affairs at firms as of the first quarter of 2020, in what we now know to be the last stretch of 'normal' for this year, and perhaps several years to come.

Resilient and resourceful firms will, of course, find new opportunities and new ways to retain and develop women through and despite the pandemic. The Accounting MOVE Project team is already on the lookout for the narrative that will frame unexpected gains and insights stemming from this period of unexpected upheaval. ●



Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance
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The Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance promotes the professional growth of women in accounting and finance. Members of the association benefit from opportunities to connect with colleagues, advance their careers, and become industry leaders. For 80 years, the organization has proudly upheld its mission to enable women in all accounting and related fields to achieve their full potential and to contribute to their profession. Visit www.afwa.org for more information.



Wilson-Taylor Associates Inc.
Tools for advancing women in business

Strategic communication firm Wilson-Taylor Associates, Inc., has been designing and managing national research projects that measure the progress of women in the workplace since 1998. Its methodology pivots on factors proven to remove barriers so that women can fully participate in driving business results. Led by veteran business journalist Joanne Cleaver, its current and past clients include Women in Cable Telecommunications, the Women's Transportation Seminar, the Alliance for Workplace Excellence, SitterCity, and many others. Please see Wilson-Taylor's portfolio of work at www.wilson-taylorassoc.com.

Fast Forward



Firms are growing in multiple directions. Women lead much of that growth with unexpected combinations of experience, skills and aptitude

Show and sell: that's how advisory practices grow.

Who better to bring rich, compelling vision to clients than professionals whose own careers prove the point?

In many cases, fast-growing firms are discovering that women are perfectly positioned to lead new lines of business. In some cases, women's historic strengths are aligned with advisory success factors. In other cases, women's personal and career experiences equip them with insights and client-building strategies that are less commonly acquired through traditional career paths.

Fresh faces imply fresh thinking, which is the essence of winning and keeping advisory and consulting clients. When firms claim they bring clients new ideas, they reinforce their authority when the message is delivered by a diverse group of professionals.

The 2020 Accounting MOVE Project found that women are in the forefront as firms rapidly frame and pursue new lines of business. Several factors are converging to create a rare power moment for women:

A high proportion of Gen X and older millennial women are ramping up their pursuit of partnership, having tapped the brakes while starting families. Now, they are eager to jump into new opportunities to build businesses from scratch and, in the process, accelerate their qualifications for partnership.

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Baby boomer women are keen to leave legacies by showing how their investments in rising women have strengthened firms' futures.

Diverse talent is a leading indicator with clients, says Keith Denham, managing principal of CohnReznick Advisory. (CohnReznick, the National Sponsor of the Accounting MOVE Project, is headquartered in New York.) After all, he points out, consulting is all about sketching out a better way forward, and that process starts with the consultants themselves. "If you want people to think differently about technology and the future, you want them to think differently, too, about gender and diversity," he says. "If you want to brand yourself small, go for lack of diversity."

Business creation is the new partner-qualifying experience

MOVE Project interviews found that baby boomer women who left traditional accounting firms 20 years ago to form their own firms are now returning, bringing successful practices and loyal clients with them. The irony isn't lost on anyone: Women who felt they had to leave - typically, to capture better work-life balance - are now highly coveted hires.

Folding woman-led boutique firms into large firms benefits everyone. Female founders capitalize on their decades of work and ensure that the practices they cultivated will continue. In addition to the book of business, firms also gain an infusion of new mentors and executive sponsors who have experience starting their own businesses.

Women are taking the lead with new business launches because they have already built their own firms. Women often blend traditional accounting caution with entrepreneurial insight, intuitively striking a good balance of risk management and ambition, says Laura Mangan, president of the Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance (AFWA), the MOVE Project's association partner, and controller for SV Probe, Inc., a Tempe, Ariz., manufacturer of equipment for high-tech companies. "When you're leveraging your existing skill set, it might not feel as risky as starting something completely from scratch, but women do their homework, so they minimize risk," she says.

Firms also use lateral moves to build talent. This year, 69% of MOVE Project firms report that they have internal incubators for exploring new lines of business, compared to 39% in 2014. Firms are much more open to giving rising professionals short-term, intense assignments that provide hands-on experience. This practice gives firms the talent they need for launching new ventures.

The traditional linear career path to partner isn't being replaced, but, instead, becoming a jungle gym: "It's not either-or. It's both. And young professionals expect to be able to explore career paths within their firm. If opportunities don't exist, they don't wait around."

— Jennifer Wyne, executive director of human resources for Moss Adams

"New practice opportunities are opening up, frequently branching opportunities to develop talent in unexpected directions," says Judy Wright, a partner with Plante Moran, based in Southfield, Mich. These opportunities spark new ways to retain women as they gain altitude with different mixes of technical and business skills.

Plante Moran frames staff exploration with an internal fellowship program that enables audit professionals to cycle through tangential practices on short-term assignments. Additionally, the firm designs events for women at all career levels, by region and by specialty so that women have multiple opportunities to find mentors, sponsors and peers across they might not otherwise meet.

Accelerating early career exploration ripples up through the firm's formal mentoring program. Through this, women pursue strategic connections earlier and, with specific purpose as mentees, are specifically paired with mentors outside of their practice area.

This burst of early-career internal entrepreneurship "has resulted in people saying, 'this is the area that I want to work in,'" Wright says, instead of working toward traditional positions and titles. "When specialization aligns with someone's area of passion - that's where we see the biggest gains."

Women's initiatives are rich and powerful channels for startup talent

This year, 69% of MOVE Project firms say they rely on employee resource groups for exploring new business opportunities, up from 58% in 2019. (Employee resource groups typically create a "home base" for various diverse groups within a firm, such as groups for LGBTQ, Hispanics, and African Americans.) Women's programs are proving to be a vital strategy to develop a strong pipeline of talent. Partners assembling launch teams want talent that can continue to grow and need to leverage the expertise and accomplishments they bring to break new ground.

Cannabis Offers Green Fields Ready for Harvest

For Chris Sing, a self-described risk taker, launching a cannabis practice was taking a leap without a safety net.

A principal at Rehmann, based in Troy, Mich., Sing was early to recognize the potential in a rapid rollout of a cannabis advisory practice. Other accounting and advisory firms in Michigan made overtures in late 2019, after it was inevitable that cannabis would be fully legalized, says Robin Schneider, executive director of the Michigan Cannabis Industry Association.

It was clear that there was plenty of money to be made, and fast, by advising cannabis firms. CPA, law and consulting firms are rushing to get in on the new industry. Rehmann's early and steady loyalty has already positioned it as the go-to firm.

"Companies that interact with the industry first are the ones that our members do business with," says Schneider. "Those that got here first have the advantage of trust and track record. People in this industry are incredibly loyal."

Sing's approach: a pop-up practice designed to work with early-in, early-out cannabis companies designed from the get-go to grow and position themselves for sale as the industry matures.

"The first couple months we decided to move in the industry, we didn't have any clients," Sing says. "Then I spoke at the cannabis association's first meeting. That was in early 2019 and we're still getting new clients as a result."

Taking the podium was a strategic move. The cannabis industry adopted diversity and gender equality early on as a defining characteristic. With Sing as Rehmann's ambassador, the firm signaled solidarity with the new industry's values.

Cultivating relationships was a more intense process than she anticipated, Sing says. "In intense relationship building, as we build this industry, women tend to be more flexible in how they work with people," she says. "And the firm gave me a lot of latitudes, especially considering the reputational and legal risk." Sing won internal commitment from other Rehmann shareholders before going public with the new practice.

The tacit approval of established firms like Rehmann has been a key factor in bringing cannabis to the mainstream in Michigan. "The state needs economic growth," Sing says, "and we're here to help businesses

The traditional linear career path to partner isn't being replaced, but, instead, becoming a jungle gym, says Jennifer Wyne, executive director of human resources for Moss Adams. (Moss Adams, the Founding Sponsor of the Accounting MOVE Project, is headquartered in Seattle.) "It's not either-or," she says of ladder and latticed career paths. "It's both. And young professionals expect to be able to explore career paths within their firm. If opportunities don't exist, they don't wait around."

At Moss Adams, the "office champion" model of local leadership executing on the firm-wide Forum W strategy equips rising women with skills such as influencing change, collaboration and creativity, which are essential for driving new lines of business. Firms report they turn early and often to the leaders of women's programs for internal recruits.

That means senior leaders must be adept at crafting short-term developmental opportunities, especially for new or different lines of business. Moss Adams is exploring a variety of programs and career development support to clear the way for a more customized career experience, such as two-week micro-rotations and providing more visibility to the multitude of opportunities within their consulting practice.

Organizations such as the AFWA provide a sounding board for women exploring ventures outside their traditional comfort zone, Mangan says. Chapters – local and virtual – provide access to professional women who can weigh in on the opportunities and potential risks of investing in a career pivot or new venture. That's invaluable for women who want to get feedback before broaching a new idea or innovation to higher-ups, Mangan says.

Building new lines of business in new ways transforms the entire firm, shifting expectations in every direction. Young staff start pursuing strategic lateral moves early, requesting to be assigned to startups, pilots and launches. Partners who are quick to pivot to break new ground quickly realize that they are in the business of defining success in new terms. Fresh opportunities call for different skills and a new team culture. Word gets around quickly that a rising associate or manager can accelerate progress towards partnership by rotating into, or transferring to, the new team.

Firms often have to hire people with the required skills and then explore virtual work options as they build their teams. OUM, based in San Francisco, hired two women as information technology audit managers to work remotely outside of California to help enhance their capability to work with virtual teams. OUM's assurance division includes a woman audit manager in Southern California who leads her teams' meetings and training sessions virtually.

This sparked leaders' realization that managing virtual teams might be a core skill that could fuel OUM's growth with IT-related advisory, audit and tax services, says partner Doug Pallotta. "The nature of IT, audit and tax services in general, do not require you to be in the office," he says. "It's just a matter of utilizing our communication tools, including video conferencing, and streamlining the processes. We are now embracing the remote culture environment for all our services so we can find different ways to deliver what our clients need."

Rapid Response, Rapid Development

In the past, the accounting profession has measured career risk by the danger of stepping away from the traditional career ladder. Lateral rotations were often short term, both to preserve foundational certifications, but also because firms weren't sure how to test the resiliency and longevity of career paths that deviated from the tried and true.

Rapidly emerging opportunities must be met quickly. Brown Smith Wallace, based in St. Louis, realized that the craft beer industry was, mysteriously, overlooked. "They have the same needs as other businesses, but there is no one focusing on them," says Michelle Howard, consulting manager, advisory services, at Brown Smith Wallace. "We really see a lot of potential there, especially with our experience and passion for this industry." The firm rapidly assembled a team of five to recombine traditional accounting knowledge of the industry "and applying it in a more consultative role," says Jenna Beckmann, director, advisory services. Long-established partners and principals are moving more quickly than ever to anticipate clients' needs with fast launches. They are finding that deliberate diversity helps them build the right teams faster, and many firms are seizing the opportunity consciously to cultivate the new growth dynamic, says Denham of CohnReznick.

It is incumbent on partners to hold each other accountable for actively recruiting diverse talent to startup teams, Denham says. The culture of the team will directly shape how it identifies, pursues and wins those critical first clients for new lines of business. Partners must track their own advocacy of women and the collective effect of their decisions. It's up to partners to infuse new practice launches with career context for staff who are well aware of the long-term value of internal startup experience. "The two things that matter are that people know their work is valued and that they understand where they are and where they can go," Denham says.

Women gravitate to fresh opportunities where they can prove themselves and their leadership abilities, especially abilities often underestimated or downplayed in traditional lines of business.

Women tend to take the longer view of relationships and count incremental progress as wins. At Rehmann, based in Troy, Mich., that means that women are designing launch teams that are both quick out of the gate and that can go the distance, says Sandy Shecter, principal.

“As new alliances with external and digital partners emerge, and new roles emerge, and new ways to work, we need to draw in everybody, including staff,” Shecter says. “Relationships transcend it all.” To ensure that women aren’t overlooked for fast-breaking opportunities, Rehmann uses a Salesforce function to track leaders’ investment in younger professionals – and hard-wire mutual accountability, she says.

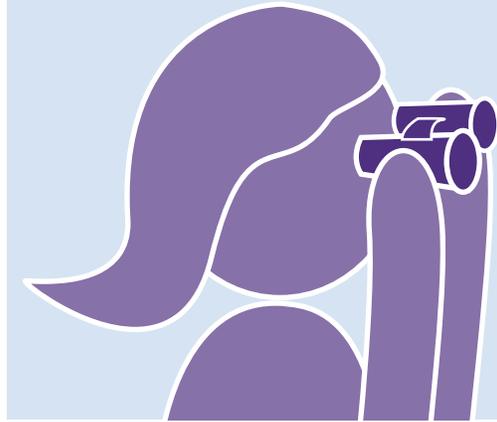
“Staying a step ahead of advisory clients demands a 180-degree shift in perspective and skillset from the defining-the-past perspective of traditional audit and assurance,” says Lori Kaiser, founder and CEO of Kaiser Consulting in Columbus, Ohio. The firm’s revenues grew more than 50% from 2017 to 2019, she says, in no small part because its service expansions are steered by professionals who rapidly acquire skills they perceive anticipate clients’ needs.

For example, some consultants in its new project management practice became certified as project managers, Kaiser says. The formal designation of “Project Management Professional” confirms to clients that Kaiser consultants are adept at managing goals that might become clear only as the project progresses – a key ability for consulting and advisory practices. The designation also is a dynamic that unsettles many longtime accountants. “The process is not mapped out. It’s uncertain, but it’s also exciting, and the possibilities are much larger,” Kaiser says.

“Everyone in the profession will be moving to an advisory role, and it’s an especially good opportu-

Long View, Many Milestones

Women tend to adopt a long-term perspective that helps them steer client relationships past unexpected roadblocks to stay on course.



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— Lori Kaiser, founder and CEO of Kaiser Consulting

nity for women,” says Becky Phillips, an assurance partner with MCM CPAs and Advisors, based in Louisville, Ky.

Citing management consultant research that indicates that eight of the 10 most important emerging leadership traits are more strongly associated with women, it’s likely that advisory growth will be determined by how well firms make the most of women’s abilities, Phillips says. “The way the profession looks in five years will be a lot different from how it looks now.”

The business development script has flipped: internal networking is now the silver bullet for gaining credibility and critical mass for new lines of business.

The old joke calling for introverts to unite, separately, is turning into a business development strategy at CohnReznick.

Women are often attracted to the accounting profession because they hope that their certifications will speak for themselves. But consulting and advisory projects are typically handcrafted and pitched on the basis of the team's prior experience beyond technical prowess. This pernicious dynamic, combined with the time crunch facing most mid-career working mothers, often saps women's interest in pursuing partner-qualifying business development.

Carolyn Vaeth, a benefits consultant with CohnReznick Benefits Consultants, affiliate of CohnReznick, sized up this situation a few years back and realized that internal networking was the mythical business development silver bullet. Though client retention and cross selling are often, at many firms, considered second tier compared to bringing in brand-new clients, which is often considered the premiere mode of business development, it's also a more manageable first step for women overcoming apprehension about sales.

Vaeth's approach is to focus on client motivations first and foremost, and to explain technical qualifications only after learning why clients want to achieve what they envision.

"You want clients to come to you with problems because a lot of those problems come with revenue stream," Vaeth says.

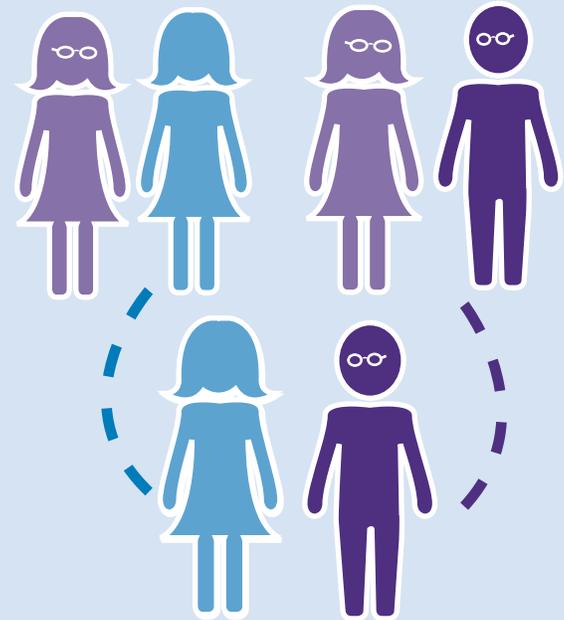
Her approach resonated with CohnReznick women, and leaders of its women's initiative soon incorporated her internal business development training and coaching into its programs. Leading with "why" is just another name for client empathy – a characteristic often ascribed to women.

As a finishing touch, Vaeth positions her internal networking strategies as "business development for introverts," a personality label enthusiastically adopted by many in accounting.

"Introverts can be great salespeople because they get to the point," Vaeth says. "They want to talk not just

All in the Family

The sometimes-underestimated power of internal networking comes to the fore when internal connections seed clients for new lines of business.



to a bunch of people, but to the right people."

That strategy is paying off at Frazier & Deeter, of Atlanta, which recruited Sabrina Serafin in 2007 to launch its risk advisory practice. It was a challenge finding clients when the group started, but it's now one of the firm's fastest growing departments, and women represent half of the department, says Serafin, a partner and national practice leader for the firm's process, risk and governance practice.

She deliberately recruits women to the practice "because our approach to recruiting and client service is less intimidating," she says. "Having more women in the advisory groups could impact perceptions for clients," she says. "A lot of our clients are in information technology and security, which is traditionally a male dominated environment," Serafin says. "Because we have so many talented females who understand IT risk and controls, my hope is that they influence those departments to look outside of the standard image of an IT resource."

As firms acquire specialty practices to gain scale, experience and engagement with new clients, they often find themselves bringing back women who left firms decades ago to start their own companies and to advance on their own terms. Now, seasoned by successful entrepreneurship, these women are stepping into senior positions and into new practice development.

When most people look at a lease, they see only an endless sea of fine print. Jessica Richter sees a gold mine.

A director with BKD, based in Springfield, Mo., Richter realized two years ago that upcoming changes to accounting standards regarding leases were so sweeping and complex that they could comprise a standalone specialty.

And, Richter who joined BKD through a merger in 2016, decided she wanted to run with it. In the fall of 2018, she started looking around the firm for other like-minded individuals and the result was a cross-functional team of experts who collaborated over the next year to launch the LeaseVision tool in October 2019.

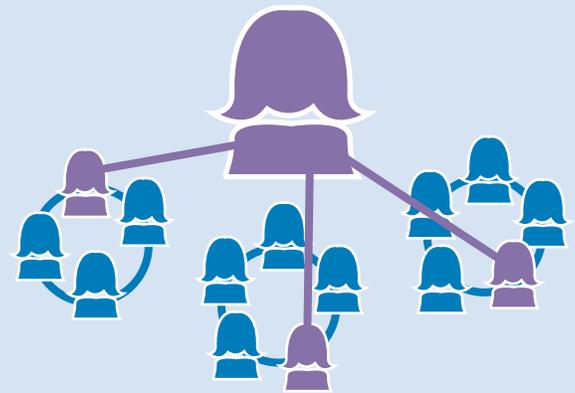
To define and launch LeaseVision, she'd have to pull together technical and marketing talent across the firm. She would also have to win buy-in across nearly every existing practice for referrals to seed the new service.

"We knew how large the potential was for this product and we knew that four of us could be the experts for the firm," she says of her core team. The business had one big factor going for it: changing accounting standards pushed clients to find a way to comply. Richter wanted BKD to be the magnet that pulled in clients who were already motivated to hire expertise.

She tapped BKD's national marketing team and its proven strategy of establishing authority on leases to create a structured cycle of webinars, presentations and content marketing. Equally important, Richter worked with the firm's internal system of equipping other practices with the information they needed to recommend LeaseVision services. A partner who served as Richter's executive sponsor through the firm's SKY women's initiative helped her create essential relationships with practice leaders who coached their teams to keep LeaseVision top of mind.

Each One Reach One

Women's initiatives can be invaluable proving grounds for equipping women for cross-functional, lateral and start-up assignments.



LeaseVision has already gained several new clients and a rapidly expanding list of assignments from ongoing clients.

The platform is perfect for reorienting BKD as an advisor, Richter says, because the lease evaluation process starts with "a million decisions about deciphering this crazy lease before they even get to the actual calculations."

"I sometimes feel, after 20 years in the profession, that as a woman I've had to prove it a little more than a guy," she says. "Opportunities like this let you show your expertise on a fresh platform. It turns 'trusted advisor' from a noun to a verb."

Burr Pilger Mayer (BPM), based in San Francisco, is diversifying through acquisition. When it bought Options4Growth in 2019, BPM got more than a thriving human resources consulting group that, with its progressive HR solutions, complements the firm's virtual CFO services. It also gained a firm founded and run by women, boosting BPM's proportion of

senior women leaders.

It wasn't an obvious fit, says Jill Pappenheimer, co-founder of Options4Growth. To be sure, she and the other senior leaders of the then 14-person firm wanted to execute their exit plan – but not by sacrificing the culture they had built. “We had a unique approach where, we didn't just hire women, but our business model worked for women, through flexible scheduling and through respecting caregiving responsibilities,” Pappenheimer says. The firm's approach is to lead with staff's goals for workload and scheduling, and to plan business pursuit and projects accordingly. “You maintain your life as

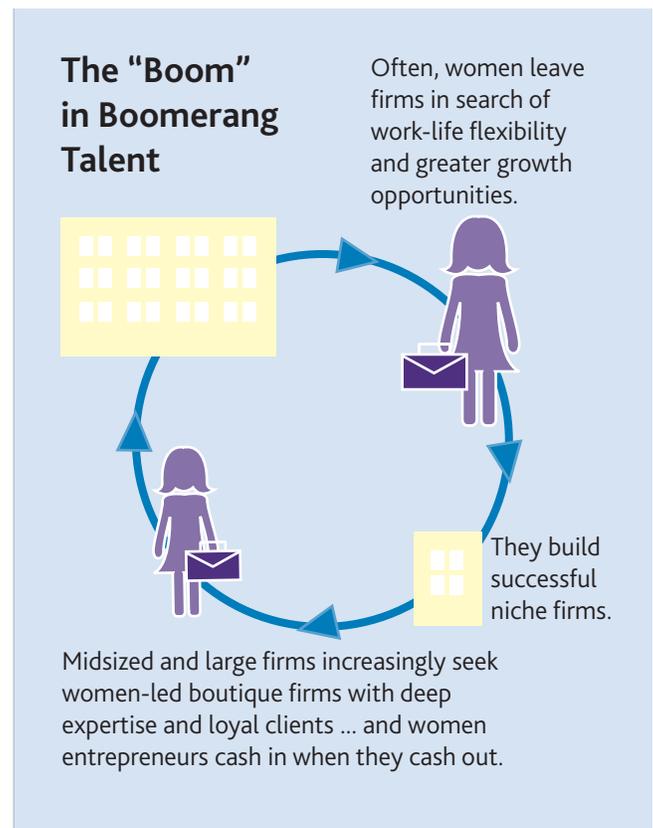
a priority and you tell us how much you want to work,” Pappenheimer says.

As advisory practices shift the balance of revenue within firms, more power will gravitate to women, Pappenheimer says. Given that women usually are advocates for transparency, accountability, and innovation in work-life, chances are good that the practices they lead will tip the scales for firms as they draw talent and drive growth, she says. “Giving an opportunity for women to shine is key, and that is accomplished by ensuring that every person in the organization can see the work that's done by others,” she says. “Transparency is key to accountability.”

This is a moment for women's initiatives to prove their worth. Senior leaders must be able to collaborate with initiative leaders to identify high potential women for launch teams. Initiatives not integrated with talent development must quickly do so, or lose competitive advantage and undermine their rationale for existence.

Bland & Associates, based in Omaha, Neb., launched a leadership development program called Bland's Leadership Institute for the Next Generation (BLING). So far, about 60 staff members – about 50% of them women - have participated in the 18-month program. Key program elements include networking across the entire organization and mastering business development skills through a Toastmasters program. Amanda Pontow, partner, started her career in auditing but moved into consulting, a shift other CPAs are making. “With consulting, you learn new skillsets and you interact more with clients,” says Pontow, who manages the firm's government consulting department.

BKD's women's initiative, SKY, synchronizes with BKD's internal innovation tournaments to ensure that women have a stage to showcase their ideas and that senior leaders are hearing women, says Wendy Henry, managing partner of BKD's St. Louis office. “SKY has elevated our selection dynamics for opportunities throughout BKD. Firm leaders look to SKY to identify ‘who are the rising leaders?’” she says. “There's a conscious effort to broaden who we think about when we assess people for opportunities.”



Firms are rapidly building career bridges and zip lines to connect previously parallel career paths. A mix and match career path designed to support the launch of new practices opens new opportunities for women to scale their workload and career goals with firm growth. The talent pipeline now has many branches, just as the career ladder has sprouted into a lattice.

Laura Srsich moved from a Big Four firm to start a boutique firm. She returned to large-firm life when her firm was acquired by Eide Bailly, based in Fargo, N.D., in 2012. During that time, she gained cross-cultural skills.

Now, she's using those skills to create Eide Bailly's beachhead in India.

Nearly everything Srsich learned about listening "between the lines," being open about what she didn't know, being teachable, and collaborating with business partners, has come to the fore as she manages the firm's investment in India.

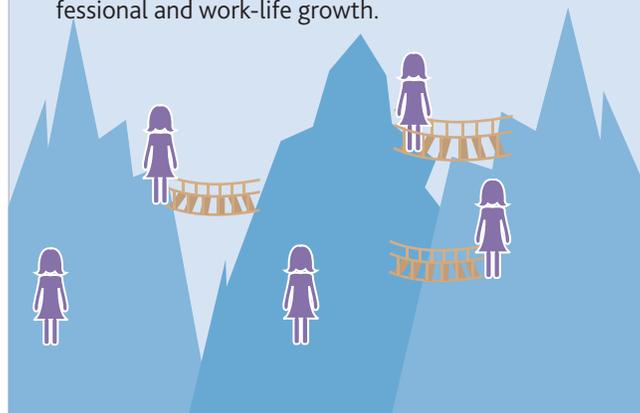
It's a strategic presence, not just to make the most of the technical skills offered by Indian accountants. Eide Bailly's goal is to have 5% of its charge hours accomplished by its Mumbai-based staffers, says Srsich, who just concluded her term on the firm's board. "There's a lot of capacity and a great talent pool, and if this one office can work with a lot of Eide Bailly U.S. offices, it gives you a much different capacity to your firm; you don't have to limit your work to who you have in the U.S. office," she says.

Srsich believes that her years as an entrepreneur directly qualified her for the complex task of setting up an office halfway around the world, in a different culture. Certainly, her ability to handle the time-zone-driven endless flow of questions and decisions stemmed from her decade-plus of running a boutique firm while raising a family. And, she believes that the direct cause-and-effect dynamic of entrepreneurship equipped her to zero in on the most important factors for the Mumbai office and concentrate on hiring staff who can work alongside their U.S. colleagues. "You have to own it," she says. "When you own it, you make sure everything is working."

Working an 80% schedule hasn't hindered Allison Miller from achieving principal at Clark Nuber, based in Bellevue, Wash. To the contrary: time away from

Parallel No More: Career Paths Zig-Zag

Firms are rapidly building career bridges and ziplines that professionals use to transfer between lines of business that used to be in strictly separate silos. Mix-and-match career opportunities offer a greater range of opportunities to craft custom paths for professional and work-life growth.



the office will free up time and attention that she can utilize to research a new niche in the agricultural sector. The effort is furthered by executive coaching that complemented Miller's rotation through the firm's leadership development program. Initial results are promising, says Miller, who believes she can count on ongoing support from firm leadership to cultivate a deep, lucrative niche. "There's an abundance mindset here," she says.

At KWC CPAs, based in Alexandria, Va., new practice development drives mentoring and executive sponsorship and vice versa. Short, intense new practice launches give rising women a chance to work with a cross-section of partners, sparking new sponsor relationships. Manager Resa Wilhite noted that her career coach, one of the firm's female shareholders, recently launched a new client advisory service. "She went to her peers, the other board members, and said, 'I have an idea and a plan,' and they said go for it. I now refer our tax clients to that new practice.

Then, I had an idea for how we could restructure part of our practice's service teams. Similarly, I put together a plan and a proposal, and it worked out. Now I know I have ideas that they might want to hear, too."

And at Lurie LLP in Minneapolis, innovation projects infuse client service, business development, technology with new approaches and new ways to develop talent. Many of Lurie's long-established women leaders have built out new service lines that anticipate the needs of rapidly expanding technologies and technology companies. Lurie specifically recruits new women professionals to lead high-growth opportunity service lines. The firm's Innovation Office gathers creative ideas from the entire workforce, developing avenues for those closest to the work to identify problems and think of possible solutions. The Innovation Office creates opportunities for everyone to play – from senior leaders to new

hires – and the "secret sauce" happens when professionals with varied backgrounds and tenure tackle new ways of thinking together.

"People are less interested in doing things in an old-school way," says Kristen Clark, managing partner of the Syracuse office of The Bonadio Group, based in Rochester, N.Y.. Streamlining work to eliminate tedious chores, such as automating aspects of engagement letters – frees up time, energy and creative insight for advisory and new practices. Bonadio is using a database to help employees find relevant skills to develop and is working with colleges to talk about curriculums and the need to expand beyond traditional accounting. "We elevated the work people are doing to make it more interesting. We want them to use their brains for more creative and higher level things," she says.

2020 Accounting MOVE Project Qualitative Highlights

Money: Pay equity policies and practices

- **48% of firms conduct internal pay equity surveys that include base pay and bonuses**
- **90% of firms, up from 71% in 2014, have partners and principals review the results of internal pay equity surveys**
- **59% of firms, up from 48% in 2019, prepare managers for pay equity discussions**

Pay equity has infiltrated nearly every corner of the employment landscape. From professional sports, to the Democratic presidential debates, pay equity is always in the headlines.

Investor advocates for gender equity used pay equity as a leading indicator of both company culture and of potential risk. Numerous employers, including Big Four firms, are mired in long-running pay equity lawsuits. Meanwhile, evidence continues to mount that higher proportions of women in leadership correlates with stronger financial performance.

Accounting and advisory firms are keeping pace with pay equity transparency and accountability expectations.

In Lincoln, Neb., HBE is maintaining its focus on confirmed skills and accomplishments as the basis for compensation packages at the point of hire, especially for experienced professionals. "We want to recognize those candidates who specifically possess the skills and time investment in our operating systems," said firm

2020 Accounting MOVE Project Metrics All MOVE Accounting and Consulting Firms

The closer MOVE firms get to the tipping point of 33% women partners and principals, the faster they go. “Now that BPM has critical mass, we went from 27% women partners in 2018 to 29% in 2019, and 25% of them are women of color,” says Beth Baldwin, chief people officer with Burr Pilger Mayer (BPM) based in San Francisco.

Academic studies, management consultants, and women’s advocates all agree that when people with a shared identity become at least a third of a group, the group has a dynamic shift. Each person with that identity, once the 33% is achieved, is seen less as representing that identity, and more as speaking on the basis of her own expertise and experience. Three women in a group of 12 are taken seriously as individuals, whereas one or two women in a group of 12 are assumed to be speaking on behalf of all women.

This dynamic is the framing rationale for the Accounting MOVE Project’s dual “best” lists, released every June by the Accounting & Financial Women’s Alliance. The Best CPA Firms for Women list is based on a high and increasing proportion of women leaders, along with proven and innovative programs and practices that advance women. The Best CPA Firms for Equity Leadership recognizes firms whose senior leadership ranks are at least 31% women.

“Our initial program has expanded and is both broader and strategically placed under its umbrella,” Baldwin says. “With the growth of our advisory practice, we are seeing a natural increase in women entrepreneurs who are joining BPM as partners through business combinations. It is an exciting time to be with BPM.”

All MOVE Accounting and Consulting Firms

Women Employees and Executives as a Proportion of ALL Employees and Executives	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
	%					
Women Partners and Principals	29	27	24	24	23	22
Women on Management Committee	32	33	25	24	21	23
Women Directors	49	41	47	47	46	30
Women Senior Managers	47	44	46	47	47	47
Women Managers	50	53	50	50	49	50
Women Supervisors/Senior Staff	52	50	50	50	49	52
Women Associates	51	49	51	49	52	52
Women New Hires	53	49	50	51	50	51
Women Full-Time U.S. Employees	52	50	51	51	51	51

Source: The 2020 Accounting MOVE Project. The Accounting MOVE Project team at Wilson-Taylor Assoc./Charlotte, N.C., surveyed and interviewed 48 accounting and advisory firms representing 30,000 employees from December 2019 through March 2020.

PAR partners with the Accounting MOVE Project to help disseminate Accounting MOVE Project data to the public accounting profession. Wolters Kluwer, publisher of PAR, neither pays for nor receives any fees associated with this survey and did not participate in data collection. Participating firms pay a small fee to Charlotte-based Wilson-Taylor Assoc. for individual benchmark reports associated with this survey. The Accounting MOVE Project is sponsored by Founding Sponsor Moss Adams and National Sponsor CohnReznick.

controller Jennifer Doll of HBE's strategy when hiring qualified candidates and recruiting interns for full time employment.

At HBE and at 41% of MOVE Project firms, compensation offers at the point of hire are evaluated by senior leaders to ensure that hiring managers consistently apply firms' pay equity philosophies. HBE's commitment to pay equity extends throughout the employee's career and into their retirement transition, as well. An increasing proportion of retiring partners are women.

In the past, some MOVE firms have reported that they have corrected inadvertent gender pay gaps for identical positions. Now, those firms are requiring more frequent review of pay equity, and more often, by firm leaders. And, firms have elevated training and coaching for managers who must navigate sometimes tricky conversations about pay equity.

With 69% of MOVE firms conducting pay equity analysis "as needed," the profession still has significant room for improvement. Research conducted by academics and researchers finds that transparency in pay and compensation policies often is the best cure. Employees will take cues from how leaders, and direct supervisors, discuss pay issues. Not only does transparency convey trust, but it also implies permission to inquire about how the firm's policies and internal accountability assures women that they are paid equitably. And, internal communication and coaching of managers by HR professionals, creates a common language for discussing pay equity. Agreeing on definitions of key terms, such as "equity" and "pay audit" creates common ground for discussing pay equity and minimizes misunderstandings.

Firms that hesitate to tackle pay equity head-on might take reassurance from a study conducted by Payscale that was released in March 2020. In keeping with the trend of parsing pay equity data more finely and with better context, the Payscale study found that, adjusted for title, job tenure and job responsibility, the gender pay gap shrunk to 98%. While that is still a gap that can add up to \$80,000 of lost earnings for women across their lifetimes, it is a marked improvement from the current gross pay gap of 19%. (The gross gap is calculated on all earnings by women compared to all earnings by white men. The study may be found at <https://www.payscale.com/data/gender-pay-gap>)

The takeaway for accounting and advisory firms that have been avoiding pay equity analysis is that it might not be as bad as they fear. Ignoring a potential problem is never an excuse, and, according to lawyers, does not diminish responsibility.



pportunities for advancement

- **52% of firms rotate emerging women leaders into client-facing roles, an all-time high**
- **38% of firms offer rotations onto executive task forces, an all-time high**
- **34% of firms offer rotations into operating positions, an all-time high**

It just got serious. Programs that channel rising women into partner-qualifying experiences are escalating rapidly. Women's initiatives and firm-wide projects are the two most common settings for high-profile assignments that connect women with partners and other partner-track midlevel leaders. The trend to deliberately rotate women into profit and loss positions — on a long-term, short-term, or project basis — is consistent with similar efforts across all industries, as employers realize that they must break down traditional career paths to ensure that women have the chance to qualify for senior leadership.

Plante Moran found that its longstanding women's initiative Women in Leadership (WIL) is a readymade platform for acclimating employees of acquired firms. When Plante Moran acquired EKS&H in 2018, adding

700 people – nearly a third of Plante Moran’s employees at the time – WIL proved a sturdy catalyst for understanding respective and mutual strengths. EKS&H had adopted a similar approach, so combining the two programs quickly established common ground for accelerating the new, blended firm culture, says Judy Wright, the firm’s WIL leader.

MOVE firms are seeking new ways to engage male leaders as purposeful advocates for both the overall priority of advancing women and for individual women as executive sponsors. In part, this is a generational shift. Gen X men tend to be more comfortable and conversant with the business case for advancing women and more willing to invest in new ways of including women. As baby boomer men retire, leadership ranks are rebalancing with different perspectives and leaders of both genders with a broader array of life experiences.

The spike of interest in “unintended bias training” has somewhat faded. In its place, MOVE firms are investing in programs with wider, longer-lasting impact, such as helping men navigate through controversial topics such as the “#MeToo” movement and continue to grow as advocates for rising women. The most sustainable way forward is to always focus on business results. The growth of the firm, through a proliferation of career paths and success models, is a sturdy and resilient shared goal for all that offers a framework for orienting discussions and programs for advancing women’s programs and individual women.

Two years ago, Armanino LLP, based in San Ramon, Calif., created an Executive Access Program (EAP) as a primary program of its Women’s Advancement Network (WAN). The highly selective program ensures that midlevel women have an opportunity to build relationships with influential executive leaders. The program creates a channel of advocacy critical to advancement.

A deep-dive analysis conducted in collaboration with the Accounting MOVE Project team found advocacy remains one of the strongest success measurements for attaining partnership, and the EAP was designed to strengthen that factor. The program has helped bring awareness to the importance of advocacy and create a culture of accountability for partners to advocate for women on their teams.

“Our EAP program along with our transparency to partnership program, both WAN sponsored initiatives, have been key drivers to increase women’s desire to consider partnership. We learned through our internal MOVE survey that many women were opting out of partnership because they did not have an advocate nor understood the qualifications, benefits and criteria in becoming partner,” says Ken Coelho, partner and former board member of the WAN and an EAP sponsor. “Having open conversations, providing transparency and encouragement, and advocating for women has shown to make an impact on the number of women wanting to pursue partnership,” he says. “We are delighted to report that three years ago 38% of women reported opting out of pursuing partnership compared to 27% today.”

vital supports for work/life

- **45% of managers trained to manage virtual teams, up from 27% in 2019**
- **79% of firms offer a formal telecommuting practice, an all time high**
- **55% of firms have developed career tracks for telecommuting supervisors, up from 18% in 2014**

MOVE firms are transitioning decisively to more structured, purposeful alternative work arrangements that are enacted consistently and with purpose. With more training for managers, the skill of managing a flexibly working team becomes essential for promotion.

Nearly half (48%) of MOVE Project firms already had telecommuting strategies in place as part of their

business interruption plans, a prescient move given the hugely disruptive COVID-19 virus. Remote work is rapidly escalating, in no small part as an integral element of firms' collective pivot to advisory and consulting services. As several firm managers and partners say, "Clients only want to see us for important meetings anyway. And if we're telecommuting with them, there's no need for us not to telecommute with each other."

As telecommuting has become a strategic tool for winning and keeping employees, firms are also building out career paths specifically around remote workers. Interviews for the 2020 Accounting MOVE Project found that firms are just starting to ponder the possibility of a partner track for remote workers, but meanwhile, 55% of the firms now offer career tracks for telecommuting supervisors, up from 18% in 2014.

In the past three years, firms have added structure and purpose to flexible and remote working policies and practices. In the past, many firms relied mainly on case-by-case, ad-hoc remote working policies. In 2014, 89% of MOVE firms used flex work only on a case-by-case basis and 61% of firms had formal policies. Now, those numbers have reversed with 69% of firms relying on case-by-case approvals for flexible hours and 83% of firms relying mainly on formal practices. (Some firms use both, which accounts for the overlap in numbers.) Still, firms are slow to measure the actual effectiveness of flexible work: only 10% do so, a minimal increase from the 7% in 2014.

"When we share more about our lives, it touches off a wave of conversation. I take a lot of time off in the summer, which sometimes causes stress among the partners, but it shows the others that it is possible to take that time."

— Susan Queary, a principal with Bader Martin

"You have to be willing to let them go for a short bit to keep them for the long term," says Pat Drolet, chair of Councilor, Buchanan & Mitchell (CBM), PC., based in Washington, D.C. The firm's new "Clear Path" career program intersects with an array of flexible work arrangements. The result: a mix-and-match menu of options that enables women – especially parents of young children – to take on work that matches their capacity, and to accomplish that work when and how it best suits them. CBM expects that its virtual work culture will be essential for attracting and keeping professionals for virtual financial leadership assignments – a line of business where women thrive, Drolet says.

Midsized firms are redoubling their commitments to flexible and remote work policies - a move that positioned them to continue work with minimal disruption when the COVID-19 pandemic escalated in late winter 2020:

- At Johanson & Yau, based in Campbell, Calif., more than 30% of employees now work remotely, at least part time, up from 5% in 2018. Shifting all functions to the cloud has transformed how the firm designs and manages work, and how work is tracked. It also has cleared the way for new forms of business development: one employee who mainly works remotely is making inroads with a program that helps Chinese professionals who need to align their U.S. earnings with their lifelong personal finance goals.
- Kerkering, Barberio & Co., based in Sarasota, Fla., also is escalating its investment in remote work by formalizing policies to ensure consistent access to this coveted benefit.
- James Moore, based in Gainesville, Fla., merges flexibility with its career paths; consequently, a high proportion of its women partners attained that rank by mixing and matching professional development with flexible work arrangements.

Transparency equals trust at Bader Martin, based in Seattle. When young professionals express conser-

nation at the hours that partners devote, they often tell Susan Queary, a principal with the tax practice, that they doubt it's worth it. "What young professionals don't see can derail their careers if they make decisions based on erroneous assumptions," she says.

"The people coming up behind us are looking for a sustainable career, and they need to see that in the partner group," Queary says. She and other firm leaders realized that they couldn't just model balanced lives; they also had to talk about their work-life decisions and dilemmas. "After all," she says, "if we can't clearly communicate our own priorities and choices, how can we expect young professionals to understand what they observe?"

"We get a lot of upward feedback – all principals do – and people say they don't know what our lives look like and they'd like us to talk about it more," she says. "When we share more about our lives, it touches off a wave of conversation. I take a lot of time off in the summer, which sometimes causes stress among the partners, but it shows the others that it is possible to take that time," Queary says.

Two years ago, Bader Martin piloted a new maternity and paternity leave policy with the aim of merging new parents back into work as well as allowing generous paid time off. The leave policy is effective as evidenced by the first round of new parents returning to full-time work. "Practices that show employees that the firm is investing in them for the long haul are the secret ingredient," she says. "It's not a male or female question but a human question – how do we maintain a sustainable profession and life?"

MOVE firms report that two strategies convert flexible work and telecommuting from an option to a productivity and retention tool.

Entrepreneurship & Business Development

- **69% communicate internally about employee entrepreneurship, up from 50% in 2014**
- **76% of firms use employee resource groups for internal referrals**
- **83% use employee resource groups for internal networking**

Firms intuitively realize that they must present new types of services with new types of teams. In that, they are taking their cues from clients. As women increasingly are buyers of financial, IT, HR, and other services, they [expect to be served](#) by gender-balanced teams.

MOVE Project firms are scouring their internal networks for fresh ideas and the teams to bring those ideas to market. Employee resource groups are coming into their own as hothouses for rising talent with business connections in communities not traditionally reached by old-school networks.

Life experience is an essential qualifier for virtual C-suite services, a rich advisory category. Whether they work with start-ups or well-established companies, virtual chief financial officers, controllers, human resource officers, risk officers, and the like, bring perspective and deep knowledge of the strategic importance of these functions. When BeachFleischman, based in Tucson Ariz., launched its Strategic Operations and Advisory Resources (SOAR) service line, the firm asked senior manager Tori Meyer to bring her deep experience as a former interim controller and as a widely respected mentor within the firm to help clients through tough transitions.

"You can't be fresh out of college and do this. You have to be really good at accounting and strategic thinking," Meyer says. Running a virtual C-suite service also draws on Meyer's relationships within BeachFleischman, as she's often on site with clients and must draw on firm expertise from a distance.

“The CFO world is more and more complex and it’s outgrowing people who only have minimal accounting degrees,” Meyer says. Often, clients can’t articulate their companies’ financial goals and problems, even internally, much less to external stakeholders such as private equity investors and board members. Meyer detects a wide-open horizon for working holistically with firms that need a “financial translator” more than they need technical assistance. “You’re investing in clients’ future success in a way that accounting typically doesn’t demand,” Meyer says.

Reading for fun and profit has elevated Jones & Roth’s book club from an informal internal program to an ongoing networking opportunity with clients, prospective clients, and local women business leaders. “It’s a good way in a smaller community to get our name out there with women business owners and executives,” says Tricia Duncan, partner and director of operations for the Eugene, Ore.-based firm.

Abbott, Stringham & Lynch ensures rising managers and new partners have context for success through mentoring and coaching: “We make sure they are getting opportunities to get in front of the firm as a leader,” says Laura Mays, director of employee development for the San Jose, Calif.-based firm.

At HM&M of Dallas, everyone at the supervisor level and above is invited to the monthly sales meeting and managers are given business development budgets to manage. “We champion sales as a firm, not one by one. We are out in the marketplace and we are a sales driven culture. We meet monthly to see what’s in the pipeline, but it’s not a sales culture that’s punitive,” says Carmel Wood, managing shareholder.

The firm’s business development culture helped Wood keep her mid-career track on course. At the time, she had two young children and a husband who traveled often. As she rose at HM&M, partners were purposeful about transferring clients to her to seed her own book of business. And as she gained traction with clients and became the main contact for those clients, that client relationship was attributed to her and “counted as a sale. It’s a culture that persists today,” she says.

The national conversation about gender equity in the workplace shows no signs of stopping, creating ever-expanding points of connection for women leaders to bond with like-minded women in the industry. Rebecca Darling, a partner with Novogradac of San Francisco, finds that the firm’s high profile at industry events tees up in-depth conversations about how women fare in the field. While Novogradac has always focused on inclusivity, Darling finds a ready audience for the firm’s proven gender equity strategy. In that spirit, Novogradac continues to transform its career paths to allow for flexibility in a way that aligns with the organization’s goal of providing a platform for all employees to grow and succeed. ●

New Game Requires New Players

By Chris Schmidt, chairman and CEO, Moss Adams
and David Kessler, CEO, CohnReznick

When the next summer Olympics finally opens – hopefully in 2021, as currently planned -- talented women and men will have a chance to play softball and baseball for the first time in 12 years and contend for medals.

Like the Olympics, our profession is adding new ways to play and win. Our success in building advisory, consulting and virtual services expands the competitive arena. New opportunities call out new types of skills and aptitudes, including some that haven't previously been showcased as game changers. In some cases, women have best represented those skills yet downplayed in the absence of an arena for combining many of the things they do best.



Schmidt



Kessler

Softball and baseball players finally get their chance at Olympic gold. So do women at accounting and advisory firms when they get to operate in top form to build new practice areas and to expand current practices in new and interesting ways.

The proliferation of new practice areas gives our profession an opportunity to build new paths to leadership through new playing fields.

New teams, new problems to solve and new ways to collaborate open new opportunities for women.

Firms are seizing this chance to rapidly do business in new ways. Diverse teams ask every member to bring strengths that they might not have had a chance to fully apply in the past. When we start with clean slates, each team member gets to exercise muscles they might not have had many chances to use in the past. New pipelines offer firm leaders the chance to be purposeful about including diverse talent.

Better yet, we are finding at our firms that wide-open advisory growth also invigorates traditional lines of business. We are already seeing new and experienced professionals in traditional lines of business apply collaborative approaches to client service and business development. Powerful new models forged in advisory practices hold promise for streamlining talent pipelines firm wide.

Long-term, open-ended advisory engagements pivot on strengths especially brought by women. Those strengths include a stewardship mindset that aligns the goals of the client with the needs of the team. They also include the ability to orchestrate complex priorities, such as investor reputation and sustainability, when designing projects and defining success. We need these traits to envision a new future for clients and for our firms.

This is a moment of clarity for the profession. Over the decade of the Accounting MOVE Project, things have changed slowly. Now, we have a chance for things to change quickly. Already, women who lead advisory practices are modeling new forms of success that inspire other women.

Our profession faces new and different competitors who see the same market opportunities we do. Some of these competitors, like the tech industry, have their own gender-equity problems. When we deliberately craft gender-diverse teams, we show potential clients that we bring the best minds and fresh approaches to their projects. The more we do, the more quickly women in leadership become the norm across all practices.

Moss Adams is the Founding Sponsor and CohnReznick is the National Sponsor of the Accounting MOVE Project.

Methodology

Since 2010, the Accounting MOVE Project has measured and supported the advancement of women at accounting and consulting firms. MOVE is the only annual benchmarking project that both counts and advocates for women in the profession.

The MOVE Project advisory board includes leaders from association partner the Accounting & Financial Women's Alliance (AFWA); founding sponsor Moss Adams; and national sponsor CohnReznick.

MOVE is made possible by support from its sponsors and by administrative fees paid by participating firms. Firms receive benchmarking reports based on the MOVE Project.

The Best CPA Firms for Women list, sponsored by the AFWA, is based on each year's MOVE results. To earn a spot on the list, an employer must have both a proportionate number of women at most or all levels of management and proven success with the MOVE factors. An employer cannot win by having a rich array of programs but few women in leadership. We believe that if an employer's MOVE factors are effective, it will have a healthy and growing proportion of women in its leadership pipeline.

The Best CPA Firms for Equity Leadership list is also based on MOVE survey results and recognizes firms with at least 33% women partners and principals, as 33% is widely recognized as the tipping point for members of any identity group to have individual impact. The Equity Leadership list recognizes firms that have achieved that milestone through any combination of culture, programs, initiatives and growth.

For more information about the Accounting MOVE Project and to see prior years' results, please visit [the Accounting MOVE Project web page](#). ●

About the Accounting MOVE Project Partners



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