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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Katie Tolin – 2014 Most Powerful Women in Accounting

What advice would you give to female college students about the opportunities for women in the accounting profession?

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1. What advice would you give to female college students about the opportunities for women in the accounting profession?

The accounting profession is full of bright and talented people. If you like to work with smart people who challenge you to continually improve, this is a solid profession. And accounting isn't just about sitting behind a computer screen crunching numbers. Working in a CPA firm will also give you opportunities to train others, recruit employees, build relationships with business executives and obtain new clients. Look at what it means to be an accountant in its entirety and begin to think about how you'd create your perfect accounting position – then work on a plan to get you there.

2. What advice would you give accounting firms on things they could do to better retain and advance more qualified female staff?

Firms need to continue to focus on career paths. Unfortunately, I've overheard comments in this profession about whether or not a female should be promoted based on whether or not she would be returning after an upcoming maternity leave. What people don't consider is how their decisions, actions and openness can help encourage and retain top talent whether those employees are male or female. Continue to focus on treating people fairly and recognize that the way you built your career is not how your new hires will build theirs. Someone gave you some freedom to get to where you are today. Be open and give your staff the same opportunities. They want to be successful. And if they are, your firm will be too.

3. Do you think that there is still a glass ceiling in accounting firm senior management and partner levels, or that the profession has moved to a mostly gender neutral state?

Some firms have a glass ceiling and others don't. We are beginning to see more women in leadership roles, but it's not proportionate. I believe this is a result of women taking alternative career paths. The issue is whether or not a firm penalizes for alternative paths. The good news is that things are changing for the positive. And when you look around and see the number of females in staff and manager positions, firms have no option but to adapt their way of thinking if they want to have enough staff to serve their clients. These younger professionals will need role models and firms will need to provide them. Kudos to those firms that have already recognized this and have broken any glass ceiling they may have had in place.

4. How have you managed to balance your professional and personal life obligations, whether that includes family, etc?

In today's world of mobile devices, social media and instant responses, I believe it's getting harder to maintain a work-life balance. Part of the answer is self-awareness and setting boundaries. For example, I realize that I'm a workaholic. I have more ideas and to-dos than can be managed in even a 60 hour work week. So when I'm in the office until 7:00 p.m., I don't let myself take my laptop home that night. On a recent vacation, I limited myself to checking my email once daily, and I turned the data off on my mobile the rest of the day so I didn't get pulled into email. Know yourself and set rules for yourself that will let you enjoy your personal time.

5. How mobile are you regarding your work? How have mobile devices and apps impacted your productivity and work-life balance?

Being mobile is part of the job. Having smartphones and tablets makes it easy to edit and develop documents, respond to messages and research anything. And apps can make that even easier. Plus, they put answers and news at your fingertips. Not to mention that people can now remain connected and work on most airline flights. Know when to draw the line and turn off your mobile devices. You control the flow of information, data and communication. Don't let it control you. Also, watch the standards you set for yourself, even if they are not intentional. For example, if you answer email three weekends in a row, it's now expected that you'll do it every weekend. Don't start something you don't want to be part of your regular routine.

6. What single piece of technology could you absolutely not live without, and why?

My smartphone! It's saved me so many times from troubleshooting an issue at work to helping me find directions when I get lost. It even becomes part of social conversations to look up facts or show friends something interesting. While I remember what it was like before cell phones and smartphones, I appreciate what it provides today. It's become part of my wardrobe – you wouldn't leave home without it being on your person.

7. What is your favorite professional mobile app, and why?

LinkedIn and Twitter are my go-to apps. They are a great way to see what is happening in the industry and with people I know. I often scan them when I have downtime or am looking for news headlines. To me they are more than social devices that allow me to stay connected, they are valuable as news sources.

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