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Women CPAs: Why Do They Leave Public Accounting?

A Study By The Chicago Society of Women CPAs

By Melaine Walkup
and Debra Fenzau

The Chicago Society of Women CPAs was formed in 1977 to promote the interests of women in the accounting profession.

The Chicago Society of Women CPAs¹ recently surveyed 1,052 women accountants in the Chicago area regarding their reasons for leaving public accounting, their attitudes toward their public accounting experiences, and their suggestions about steps the public accounting firms could take to alleviate the problems women encounter in the profession. A clear pattern emerged in the relationship between feelings of discrimination and number of years of public accounting experience. The three most significant reasons given by respondents for leaving public accounting were long hours, lack of development for future responsibilities, and better professional opportunities elsewhere. Marriage and family plans were much less significant in their decision.

Marriage and children are widely believed to be the primary reasons women leave public accounting. Although studies in other fields have indicated that work-related reasons are more significant in job changes of working women than family considerations, the belief persists that women leave public accounting for

family reasons. Another belief is that sexual discrimination causes women to leave the profession.

The Chicago Survey

In an attempt to settle this debate, the Chicago Society of Women Certified Public Accountants surveyed women who had been employed and who were currently employed in public accounting (see Methodology). The survey gathered data on the reasons both groups chose public accounting as a profession, the reasons they left or stayed in public accounting, and their attitudes toward discrimination and their public accounting experiences. Both groups also answered questions about CPA status, age, education, years of experience, type of firm, and marital status.

Survey participants were identified by 19 international and regional CPA firms with offices in Chicago. Although all the firms were asked to supply the names and last known addresses of all women accounting professionals who had worked in that office since its opening, not all firms were able to comply. The firms identified 1,088 women, of whom 36 were not traceable. Of the 1,052 known to have been contacted for this survey, 380 returned a question-

naire, for an overall response rate of 36%.

The 152 respondents who had left public accounting were primarily CPAs (73%), with a median age of 25 years, married (57%), and had two to three years of public accounting experience (48%) with an international CPA firm (79%).

The 228 respondents who were employed in public accounting at the time of the survey were primarily CPAs (70%), with a median age of 23 years, single (58%), and had two to three years of experience (41%) with an international accounting firm (72%).

Because of the Society's inability to define the sample as all women who had been employed by public accounting firms within a certain time period, the results of the survey are not projectable to all women CPAs. The portion covering women who had left the profession may be biased toward those who had left the firms in recent years, because of their traceability.

The survey indicates, however, that for a majority of these women CPAs, personal and professional career considerations outweigh family considerations as reasons for leaving or staying in public accounting.

Because reasons for leaving or staying cannot be evaluated without some understanding of the reasons the profession was chosen, the survey asked both groups of women why they had chosen public accounting.

Two factors accounted for the majority of answers about the choice of public accounting as a profession. More than seven in ten of both groups of women chose the profession because they considered it "a stepping stone to future opportunities" or "interesting and challenging".

Not surprisingly, those who had left the profession gave somewhat greater weight (38%) to the profession's training capabilities than to its interesting and challenging aspects (34%). Proportions were reversed for those employed in public accounting—45% chose the profession because it was interesting and challenging, while 34% saw it as a stepping stone.

Reasons for leaving the profession

Those who had left the profession were then asked to identify which factors were very important, important, considered, or not considered in their overall decision to leave public accounting. Respondents were also asked to write in the one most significant factor in their decision.

Table I shows that most women left public accounting for work-related reasons. Slightly more than three-quarters cited a personal preference or a professional consideration as most significant in their decision to leave. (Personal preferences include long hours, the pace of accounting, excessive travel, desire to relocate, and the life-long commitment of too much hard work to attain partnership; professional considerations include not being developed for future responsibilities, better professional opportunities elsewhere, never intended to stay in public accounting, lack of appreciation for effort, unsure of chances for promotion, and higher salary offered elsewhere.)

Only one in 15 (7%) mentioned family plans and one in 25 (4%) gave spouse or family pressure as their main reason for leaving public accounting.

Little correlation existed between personal preference and family factors. For example, those who ranked long hours, pace, or excessive travel as important or very important did not give much weight to such factors as planning to have children or pressure on the home front.

Significantly, seven in 10 of the women who had left public accounting said they might have stayed if conditions had changed in the year before their departure. Among the changes that would have influenced a significant number of respondents to stay were better counseling and development (32%), a change in job assignments (30%), fewer hours (28%), more responsibility (24%), promotion (17%), an increase in salary (14%), and changes in firm policy (13%). Most of the latter policy changes concerned marriage between staff members.

The majority (55%) said a change on the date of notice would not have influenced them to stay. The remain-

TABLE I
QUESTION: HOW IMPORTANT WERE THESE FACTORS IN YOUR OVERALL DECISION TO LEAVE PUBLIC ACCOUNTING?

Factor	Mean Weight of Importance on Four-Point Scale	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Factor as Most Significant in Decision*
Long hours	2.85	16.5%
Better professional opportunities elsewhere	2.38	9.2%
Not being developed for future responsibilities	2.23	13.2%
Could no longer take pace of public accounting	2.14	7.9%
Unsure of chances for promotion	2.10	3.3%
Lack of appreciation for effort	2.09	5.3%
Excessive travel	1.94	6.6%
Never intended to stay in public accounting	1.94	7.2%
Higher salary offered elsewhere	1.87	2.6%
Partnership requires life-long commitment of too much hard work	1.74	0.2%
Personality clashes	1.59	—
Firm policy (e.g., marriage to staff member)	1.44	5.9%
Planning to have children	1.41	6.6%
Pressure on the home-front	1.30	4.0%
Desire to relocate	1.29	4.6%
Peer pressure	1.23	0.7%
Met CPA certificate requirements	1.21	1.3%
Husband transferred	1.17	2.6%
Did not pass CPA exam	1.08	—
Didn't enjoy work	**	4.6%
Professional life dominated personal life	**	3.3%
Marriage	**	2.0%
Asked to leave	**	2.0%
Returning to school	**	1.3%
Other	n/a	5.9%
No answer	n/a	5.9%

* Some respondents wrote in more than one answer.
** Not listed on questionnaire.

ing 45% might have stayed at the last minute if work hours had been reduced (15%), salary had been increased (13%), job assignments had been changed (12%), a promotion had occurred (12%), or better counseling and development had been offered (12%).

These responses tend to support the statistics in Table I, that women leave public accounting for work-related reasons. The clear majority of respondents also reported that they did communicate to the firm their true reasons for leaving.

To provide a comparison, women employed in the profession were

asked to explain why they do or do not intend to stay in the profession. More than half (52%) stated they intended to stay in public accounting, giving such reasons as challenge, interesting and enjoyable work, and opportunities to learn. One in five (19%) intended to stay "for a while" until she gained more experience, found something better, or reevaluated the situation. Of the one in seven (14%) who said she did not intend to stay in the profession, only one in 50 (2%) cited family pressure or motherhood as the reason. The remaining respondents either gave no answer or were uncertain.

TABLE II

QUESTION: DID YOU FEEL THAT DURING YOUR TIME IN PUBLIC ACCOUNTING YOU WERE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST?

	Total Respondents	Number of Years in Public Accounting				
		0-1	2-3	4-5	6-20	Over 20
Women Currently Employed in Public Accounting						
Percentage of Respondents						
Yes	28%	15%	26%	36%	50%	(a)
No	70%	83%	72%	64%	44%	(a)
Did not answer	2%	2%	2%	—	6%	(a)
Number of respondents	228	66	95	33	35	9
Women Who Had Left Public Accounting						
Percentage of respondents						
Yes	41%	29%	40%	52%	55%	(a)
No	51%	68%	55%	40%	36%	(a)
Did not answer	8%	3%	5%	8%	9%	(a)
Number of respondents	152	28	73	25	22	4

(a) Not statistically meaningful

Discrimination

Both groups of women were asked identical questions about discrimination and their attitudes toward their public accounting experiences. Table II shows that the majority of these women CPAs did not feel that they personally were discriminated against during their time in public accounting. (Since the questionnaire asked only if respondents felt discrimination against themselves, survey results do not indicate whether respondents believe the profession discriminates against women in general.)

More of the women who had left public accounting reported some feeling of discrimination (41%) than those who were employed in the profession (28%).

A clear pattern emerged, however, in the relationship between feelings of discrimination and number of years of public accounting experience. The more years of experience a woman had, the greater

her feelings of discrimination. This trend was true in both groups.

Several explanations may account for these statistics about discrimination:

- *Public accounting firms do not discriminate against women.*
- *Discriminatory practices are not perceived at the entry levels.*
- *Discrimination occurs at higher levels of responsibility than the majority of respondents had achieved.*
- *Discriminatory practices have lessened since women began entering the profession in large numbers about four years ago.*
- *Subtle discrimination against oneself may not be readily perceived.*
- *Women tend to blame themselves rather than discrimination for job problems.*

In describing discrimination they had experienced, respondents cited lack of prestigious and developmental assignments, lack of acceptance by clients and superiors, unequal pay, not being taken seriously, and sexual harassment. Recurrent examples of discrimination in job assignments included:

- *Being assigned automatically to audits in banking, insurance, and not-for-profit organizations because they are "good fields for women".*
- *Not being assigned to SEC engagements or clients in heavy manufacturing.*
- *Being assigned as the in-charge accountant on only small audits with no staff accountants to supervise.*

Some women blamed themselves for discrimination in job assignments. They attributed it to their not being as assertive as male staff members in requesting particular assignments. These women believed that, having been conditioned to be supportive and courteous, they were more apt to accept an assignment without questioning whether it was beneficial for their career development.

Other specific incidents of discriminatory practices were described by respondents. In one case, a woman CPA and her superior were introduced as "Mr. John Doe and a girl". In another, a partner of an international firm refused to assign women CPAs to large commercial engagements because "women are more likely than men to leave". Traveling with a female colleague bothered one male auditor so much that he took his wife and children on an out-of-town engagement to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

A clear pattern emerged in the relationship between feelings of discrimination and number of years of public accounting experience

Several women reported a decrease in discrimination in the last few years. They noted that in the earlier years of their career they were limited to "quality control" functions in the office and were not allowed any client contact. Several women also indicated that their firms once asked clients if they objected to a woman on the audit, but that this practice has been discontinued.

On the other hand, a few respondents described examples of "positive" discrimination. They were placed on high visibility engagements because few women were on the staff.

Although 70% of the respondents denied feeling discriminated against, slightly more than 60% did report specific problems associated with their being women. Lack of acceptance or support was most often cited as a problem both by women who had left the profession (28%) and by those employed in public accounting (34%). Only about one in seven in each group reported no problems. The remainder did not answer.

More than half of all respondents also volunteered suggestions about actions that public accounting firms can take to alleviate these problems. Among the recommendations were these:

- *Make job assignments on the basis of qualifications only.*
- *Strengthen commitment to equality in hiring and promotion, especially by involving top management throughout the process.*
- *Promote qualified women to management who can serve as effective role models for younger women.*
- *Include fairness to women and minorities as a criterion for promotion of men.*
- *Exercise balanced judgment in the hiring process.*
- *Provide sensitivity training for male staff members.*
- *Provide support for counseling or seminars for women staff members about handling difficult work situations, dress strategies, and other special problems.*

Some respondents noted that male recruiters sometimes give greater

Women leave public accounting for work related reasons

weight to appearance in hiring women and lesser attention to their probable effectiveness in an audit situation. They pointed out that this practice can reflect poorly on *all* women.

A number of women believed that there was little the firms could actively do — that only time and an increase in the number of women in public accounting would bring change. As one respondent summarized, "Most discrimination is subtle; policy and procedural changes mandated by the hierarchy will not change attitudes. Unless attitudes change, the women's situation will not improve."

While this survey will not settle the debate about why women leave public accounting, it does show that work-related reasons predominate. Family pressures, marriage, motherhood, and discrimination were factors in a few terminations, but the women themselves indicate a great career orientation. It is probably that a similar survey of male accounting professionals would show a similar concentration on career considerations as decisive factors in choosing to leave or stay in the profession.

METHODOLOGY

Nineteen international and regional public accounting firms with offices in Chicago were asked to supply the names and last known addresses of all women accounting professionals who currently worked for the firm in Chicago or who had worked there in the past. If unable to go back to the office's opening, firms were asked to go back five to ten years. Some of the firms were unable to locate complete lists. The mailing list was supplemented by, and cross-checked against, names from the directories of the Chicago Society of Women Certified Public Accountants, Illinois CPA Society, and the American Women's Society of Certified Public Accountants.

Two questionnaires were developed—one for those currently employed and another for those who had left the profession. The sample was separated into the two categories. If a woman's status was not known, she was sent both questionnaires and asked to complete the appropriate one.

To respect respondents' anonymity, the Society included a numbered postcard with the initial mailing. Respondents returned the card separately. Second requests were then sent to non-respondents and post office returns were researched to obtain current addresses. The mailing was made in 1978.

The questionnaire for women who had left the profession covered CPA status, age, years of experience, marital status, education, race, information about the respondent's first employment in public accounting, and information about her experience since leaving public accounting. The questionnaire for women employed in public accounting covered the same material, except that it specified current employment in public accounting and omitted the latter section.

Copies of the questionnaire with tabulated responses are available at \$10.00 each from the Chicago Society of Women CPAs, P.O. Box 3043, Chicago, Illinois 60654.Ω

NOTE

¹*Melanie Walkup and Debra Fenzau, both CPAs, led the Chicago Society of Women Certified Public Accountants committee that conducted this survey.*

Other members of the Statistics Committee were Richard Abrams, Arlene Dahm, Vickie Doebele, Sandra Hresil, Karen Jacobson, Roberta Liebovitz, Nancy Pinney, Kathleen Rayle, Joan Richards, Gail Schnakenberg, Joan Scholl, Doreen Sevcik, Carol Sussenbach, Myra Swick, and Belinda Wades, all CPAs.

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