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Rethinking mentoring

By now, you’ve heard how important it is to have a professional mentor, a colleague who’s already walked the road ahead and can help you to make smart career decisions. But you might be surprised to find that, at this very moment, you’re also in a position to offer a handup to a peer. That’s right—no matter how junior you are in your organization, or how far you think you still have to go, you’ve already amassed a perspective and experiences that other young and aspiring CPAs can benefit from. And you should consider sharing them.

In fact, the NYSSCPA recently launched a program to help you do just that: Mentor Match. As one of the newest resources available through our social networking platform, Exchange (exchange.nysscpa.org/home), it makes it easy for you to both find your own mentor and offer to serve as one to a CPA candidate or student.

If you’re a young CPA, you remember what it was like to be a candidate; if you’re a candidate, you remember what it was like to be a student. At each stage, you had questions—and plenty of them. Now, you can pass on what you’ve learned about taking the CPA exam, scoring internships and powering through interviews. That doesn’t mean you need to have all the answers—in some cases, what a mentee really wants is a sounding board or a sense of where to turn for information. Plus, you stand to gain just as much as you give to the program. Besides building professional relationships with other rising—and soon-to-be rising—stars, Mentor Match is another opportunity for you to hone your leadership and communications skills—two traits that, if you’ve been reading NextGen, you know are in great demand. Once you register for the program, you can also participate in discussions on mentoring topics and track down helpful mentoring resources.

Another easy way to get involved and share your perspective is through the NYSSCPA’s chapter-level and statewide NextGen committees. These groups are like NextGen magazine come to life: fully engaged communities where CPAs can seek answers and advice from professional peers, as well as find resources for scaling career challenges. Email me for more information, if you’re interested in joining.

I can’t leave off without mentioning one of the biggest events for Team NextGen this year: the upcoming NextGen Conference on July 31 in New York City. It’s packed with interactive sessions on everything from getting managing partners to take you under their wings, to the key drivers behind successful CPA firm operations. If you haven’t registered, there’s still time; go to www.nysscpa.org/nextgen15. I hope to see you there!
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You might worry about putting your foot in your mouth during a job interview, but according to a recent survey, you’re not the only one at the table at risk of misspeaking. In a poll of nearly 2,200 HR and hiring managers conducted by Harris Interactive for CareerBuilder.com, 1 in 3 respondents said they had asked a job candidate a question that turned out to be illegal. While, in most cases, the blunders are inadvertent, according to Ryan Hunt, a senior career advisor for the website, they still create tough spots for applicants.
So, what exactly is considered to be out of bounds? Under federal anti-discrimination law, it’s illegal not to hire candidates because of their race, religion, age, sex, nationality, marriage, military status or child status—categories that are referred to as “protected classes.” (Some states have additional laws that include sexual orientation or gender identity as well.) As a result, interviewers generally can’t drill for information related to these subjects—or even dig around them. If government agencies or third-party adjudicators were asked to weigh in on the appropriateness of a question, explained Charles A. Krugel, an HR attorney, they would want to know, “Is this question intended to discriminate, or is asking the question itself going to have a disparate impact, weeding out people of a protected class?”

However, there are some exceptions where asking about a protected class is legit, he said, because it’s considered a “bona fide occupational qualification.” One example: religious schools that might require instructors to share their faith.

For the most part, you’re less likely to encounter an interviewer who openly asks, “Are you gay?” than to be asked a question that seems innocuous, but is actually loaded. For example, if an interviewer asked what side of a particular city you come from, it could be an attempt to figure out your race or socioeconomic background if the area’s neighborhoods tend to be segregated along those lines.

Why would information related to a protected class come up in the first place? The interviewer might ask in an effort to compile as much information on a candidate as possible, because he or she is inexperienced at conducting interviews or, well, because he or she is a terrible person. But seriously, if a potential employer asks you something that feels inappropriate or illegal, you have a few options short of calling a lawyer, which, in itself, is tricky.

While you could always file a complaint with, say, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or the Department of Labor, “proving discrimination—intentional or otherwise—is difficult,” Krugel said. Among other things, if you don’t get the job, you’ll have a hard time pinning it on what was said in the interview alone, because that’s just one aspect of the candidate selection process. Krugel and Hunt offered these three suggestions for a more tactful approach:

1. ASK FOR CLARIFICATION.
   There is a chance that your interviewer may have just phrased his or her question poorly, and there’s a legitimate intent behind it. For example, while it would be illegal for hiring managers to ask, “Do you plan to have children?” they can ask whether you’re available to work overtime. In other words, you might be able to get to their real concern by asking them to clarify the question. Just remember to be polite. “An interviewee probably feels that he or she is not in a position to be too confrontational,” Krugel noted.

2. DON’T FEEL OBLIGATED TO ANSWER.
   Another option Hunt recommends is calmly getting the conversation back on track, by skipping over the offensive question and speaking instead to what’s relevant for the position. This sleight of hand might even signal to the interviewer that he or she has overstepped, without you having to be adversarial.

3. CONSIDER WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE COMPANY.
   If you’re certain that your potential employer is asking a question with discriminatory overtones and it makes you feel uncomfortable, consider it a red flag. “If [the interviewer is] asking a question that’s illegal or unethical, who knows what’s going on in the background?” Krugel said. “You should be seeing the company at their best in an interview.”

Strange, but true

Employers who responded to the CareerBuilder poll admitted to asking these questions that, while not illegal, are downright weird.*

“How would you wrangle a herd of cats?”
(To gain insight into a candidate’s ability to organize and lead colleagues.)

“What superpower would you like to have?”
(To get insight into how a candidate views his or her own strengths and weaknesses.)

“If you were stranded on an island, which two items would you like to have with you?”
(To see if a candidate is open to possibilities.)

“If you were asked in an interview whether you were pregnant, what would you answer?”
(To assess a candidate’s ability to problem-solve.)

“If you were asked in an interview whether you had children, what would you answer?”
(To assess a candidate’s ability to problem-solve.)

*ED. NOTE: WE CONFESSION—WE’RE GUILTY OF THIS TOO.

During his interview, we asked editorial assistant Jason Wong how he would survive a zombie apocalypse. He said he wouldn’t because New York is population-dense and he has no real survival skills. This, he felt, demonstrated that he’s a realist. We agreed—he got the job.
If you’re team NextGen and you’ve got something to say, odds are high that you’ll do it via email, IM or text. A survey of 3,800 workers and 2,200 hiring managers conducted a few years ago found that older employees were more likely than younger ones to engage in face-to-face conversations at work (60 percent of respondents 55 years old and up did, compared to 55 percent of employees aged 25–34.) On the flip side, younger employees are more likely to have keyboard conversations (35 percent of those aged 25–34 said they relied on email, vs. 28 percent of those aged 55 and up).

It makes perfect sense, of course: Younger professionals came of age with smartphones in hand and, as students, most likely had instructors who encouraged contact via email or text, said Hannah Morgan, a job search, career and social media strategist.

Still, if you’re hard-pressed to think of an occasion when you’d dial your boss up or seem to report fewer and fewer instances of one-on-one time, you could be hurting your career progress, introducing inefficiencies and encouraging miscommunications. Truth is, while there are a million and one ways to communicate at work, they don’t all work equally well in every situation.

Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to determine what’s the best mode for the occasion.
You can’t assume that a work email or text will be answered with the same urgency in which you sent it. In a 2013 survey of more than 500 employees, nearly one-third of respondents said they answered work emails within 15 minutes; nearly one-quarter said they responded within a half hour. But if you need a response right this very second, opt to speak face-to-face or get on the phone.

Besides sheer force of habit, some younger professionals make email their default communication method because it can be less intimidating than communicating in person. But in-person meetings, when used correctly, can help you to build a rapport with managers and colleagues. Getting face time with people is powerful, Morgan noted—and email alone won’t “take your relationships further.” It simply doesn’t have the same impact as physically being around your bosses.

“How soon do I need a response?”

“Have people forgotten what I look like?”

“Does my manager have a preference?”

“Is it my second or third stab at getting clarification?”

"Always consider what the preference of the audience is,” Morgan said. In other words, ask yourself, “Is this how they want to receive this information?” At the end of the day, how some or even most companies communicate matters less than how your specific company operates—it all depends on the culture of the company and what the expected norms are. So, for example, if your manager is OK with texts, SMS away. If, however, he or she is irritated by it, don’t.

We’ve all seen those group emails that go back and forth and round again without ever answering the question that inspired the communication in the first place. If you’re not getting the answers you need via email, it’s time to reach out and touch someone, Morgan advised. Simply picking up the phone and calling your boss or colleague to clarify is often the best way get to the heart of the matter.
If there's anything that needs to be documented—whether it's tracking the developments in a project or, for example, chronicling any workplace issues that you may have been experiencing—get it in writing, Morgan said. The written word will almost always trump the spoken word when you're building a case. If you do have a face-to-face conversation or phone call that you want on the record, follow up via email to confirm or document your takeaways.

Am I building a paper trail?

Emails are particularly good for simple correspondence. “Stopping by someone’s office 20 times a day would be annoying,” said Rex Huppke, a syndicated columnist who writes about office culture. “Email’s a tool that allows you to not pester people for relatively minor issues.” What you don’t want to do, Morgan said, is drop any kind of bomb via email or text—for example, that you’re taking a position at another company. It might be easy, but “it doesn’t gain you the respect as an individual [that] you want.”

Could my tone be misunderstood?

All those celebrities who write cringeworthy posts on social media that they later have to apologize for? Let them be your lesson. If you’re not sure how what you’re about to say will be perceived, don’t put it in writing. “We think our quick little message is being taken in the tone we intend, but it may come off differently to different people,” Morgan explained. The saner choice, in this instance, would be to dial up your boss or, better yet, have a face-to-face meeting, which gives you the benefit of facial expressions, vocal inflection and body language.

The Boss: These are good rules of thumb, but always take your audience’s preferred communications style into consideration.

You: You’re right. I should consider the company’s corporate culture, too.
If your approach to making new professional contacts sounds like an old-school infomercial, you’re doing it all wrong. Here’s how you can better cultivate meaningful, career-boosting relationships.

BY JASON WONG AND CHRIS GAETANO
We don’t blame you if the thought of chatting up strangers at a professional event, like a conference or a career fair, brings on cold sweats. But if you’re job hunting, or trying to get to the next level of your career, face-to-face networking is still one of the best ways to inspire people who are in a position to help you.

We asked CPAs and career coaches to share their top tips for doing it well.

OFFER HELP; DON’T JUST SEEK IT
You don’t want to simply approach your networking contacts with your hand out; you should also be demonstrating your value by offering them a little something in return. “Networking is a two-way street,” said Michael F. Rosenblatt, CPA, founder and president of The Quest Organization, an executive search and business advisory services firm. “Unfortunately, people don’t realize that, when making a networking contact, you need to be on the lookout for how you can help that person even before they offer to help you.”

You might think that, as a young professional, you don’t have much to leverage, but that isn’t true. You can always recommend an interesting article or book you’ve read, a TED talk you’ve watched, or an app or gadget your new contact might appreciate. “The ones who give and take—the ones who think about how they can help others—will be the ones everyone thinks of when they have an opportunity they want to share,” Rosenblatt added.

DO YOUR RESEARCH
It’ll be easier to make conversation if you’re up-to-date on big developments in the profession and know a little something about a function’s speakers and attendees. For example, Ivan Misner, Ph.D., founder and chairman of Business Network International and coauthor of Truth or Delusion: Busting Networking’s Biggest Myths, said that when he had the opportunity to meet Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson, he researched Branson’s interests before their talk, and found they included corporate sustainability.

By bringing the topic up during their discussion, Misner was able to secure a video interview with Branson for his blog. If you’re headed for a professional event with a roster of speakers, said Michael Giglio, the CFO and operating principal of the Kaufman Organization, research them well in advance. Check out any recent articles or books they may have written, their areas of expertise and their individual or company websites. The same goes for your fellow attendees—sometimes, conferences or other events will list those who’ve registered and their companies.

LEAVE THE SALES PITCH AT HOME
Ignore any networking advice that makes you feel like you’re training to be a door-to-door salesman. If you lead with a sales pitch that’s too overt, you’re going to turn off whomever you’re speaking to, plain and simple.

“Instead of taking a step back from selling ourselves and engaging in a normal conversation with a professional contact, a lot of people go right in for the kill,” Rosenblatt said. “They start the conversation with, ‘I’m an accountant and I work in trusts and estates and could really use more work.’ But that tends to rub people the wrong way and hurts your ability to really benefit from your relationships.”

What’s key, according to Misner, is to remember that networking isn’t so much about promoting yourself as it is about relationship building. “Networking is about farming, not hunting,” he said. That means you should think in terms of planting seeds and tilling soil, rather than identifying prey and clubbing it over the head. In other words, as Rosenblatt advises, “get into a personal and friendly conversation and go for the soft sell.”

What’s more, there’s no need to be nervous about approaching someone who’s much more established or is a big name in the profession. “If you genuinely admire someone for whatever reason, and you have something to say that is sincere and a compliment, go ahead and say it,” said John Corcoran, an attorney, founder of the Corcoran Law Firm and former aide to former President Bill Clinton, who teaches entrepreneurs how to market themselves. “Just taking an interest in people is a good way to build relationships with them.”

Quick Tip!
Not sure how people are responding to you? Misner recommends trying the “eyebrow test.” If people raise their eyebrows in excitement or interest, that’s a good thing. But if they furrow them, you’ve lost or confused your audience, and it’s time to change the topic or your approach.

NIX THE BUZZWORDS
Yes, you want to appear professional and knowledgeable. But when you fill your sentences with one too many buzzwords like “innovative” and “paradigm shift,” you end up sounding like a robot that’s been programmed with stiff, canned responses. “When you’re meeting someone for the first time, just try and have a human conversation with them,” Corcoran said.
DON’T IMBIBE (TOO MUCH)
You’ll encounter alcohol at some professional events, and while it’s OK to partake in a glass of wine or two over the course of the evening (if you’re of age, of course), proceed with caution—you want to be remembered in a positive light, and not as the lush camped out at the bar. There are also advantages to not partaking at all. “I prefer to eat or drink beforehand because I like to have the use of both my hands,” said Philip Whitman, CPA, president and CEO of Whitman Business Advisors LLC. “You’re coming there to connect with people, to have conversations, not to eat or drink.”

BE KIND TO THE PLUS-ONES
If you can’t get a hold of a speaker or a high-profile attendee at an event, you might be able to talk to someone who has his or her ear. For instance, a professor might bring along Ph.D. students; a CEO might have brought an assistant or one or more company representatives. While these folks won’t have as much reach as the speakers themselves, they may have useful information to share and are worth having in your contacts list.

DON’T MISS THE AFTERPARTY
Conferences and professional events are great opportunities for networking, but don’t limit your relationship building there. “You can network anywhere,” Misner pointed out. That includes at the event afterparty, whether it’s planned or sprouts up organically. Inexperienced professionals have a tendency to be either stiff or too pushy while networking, and the afterparty can be a good place to meet people in a more relaxed social environment.

AVOID STICKY SUBJECTS
You generally want to steer clear of any talk about religion and politics—along with racier subjects like sex and drugs—when networking. The latter may seem obvious, but the former can be just as treacherous: Even a brief discussion can lead to a colleague taking offense or developing hurt feelings and derail your relationship-building efforts. “Unless you’re at the DNC [Democratic National Committee], or your own house of worship, don’t bring up politics or religion, respectively,” Corcoran warned.

FOLLOW UP...
Instead of just vanishing with a contact’s business card, it’s important to go that extra step and write an email after you’ve exchanged information,” notes Somya R. Munjal, CPA, the CEO and founder of the social enterprises Youthful Savings and CPA for the People, LLP. “Be direct and say, ‘Hey, it was great meeting you—want to get a cup of coffee?’ and come up with a time and place to meet, so you don’t go back and forth over details.” Munjal said she’s seen the good this can do. “Someone I met at an event followed up with me and now he’s working for my company.” If you’re more of a caller than emailer or card-writer, that’s fine. “Almost any follow-up method will work, if you use it well and consistently,” Misner suggested.

...AND STAY IN TOUCH
Networking at a conference or seminar is only half the battle. The real work comes in consistently reaching out to those new contacts who need to be maintained in order for them to be of any help to you. That means, according to Stephen T. Surace, CPA, CFO, and vice president of Adjusters International, “You want to keep in touch—not just when you need something, but to say hello and catch up.” If you don’t, he added, you’ll find that it will be much more difficult to leverage your networking contacts into something beneficial.”
...INSTEAD OF WORRYING THAT YOU HAVE TO MAKE A BILLION CONNECTIONS, FOCUS ON A FEW PEOPLE YOU DO FEEL COMFORTABLE ENOUGH APPROACHING. THEN, ASK THEM TO INTRODUCE YOU TO PEOPLE THEY MAY KNOW THERE. “BE CANDID,” MISNER RECOMMENDS. “SAY, ‘I DON’T KNOW ANYONE HERE; CAN YOU INTRODUCE ME TO SOMEONE YOU KNOW?’ IT WORKS!”

...YOU OPENED WITH A POINTED QUESTION, AS GIGLIO SUGGESTS. FROM THERE, DIG DEEPER INTO RESPONSES THAT RESONATE WITH YOU. AND TRY TO REMEMBER, MISNER SAID, “THAT YOU HAVE TWO EARS AND ONE MOUTH.”

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We think you should listen.

SID KESS has something to say.
Remember, no matter how junior you are, your voice counts

I started my career at what was then LRB & M (Lybrand, Ross Bros. & Montgomery), one of the Big Eight and an early predecessor of PricewaterhouseCoopers. Even though I was a junior staffer, I had lots of ideas, which I suggested to my superiors. I told the managing partners, “No one knows what the firm’s initials mean,” and they actually ended up changing how the receptionists answered the phone, from “This is LRB & M” to “Lybrand.” They also changed the title of the firm’s journal from *LRB&M Journal* to *Lybrand Journal*. Around that time, I started dreaming up ideas of how to run the NYSSCPA and wrote a letter to the then president. I didn’t know the first thing about the Society, but I offered suggestions about what it could do to help young accountants get interested in the profession. The point is, don’t ever be afraid to share ideas or think that because you’re young you’re not going to be listened to. If you’re thoughtful and your ideas are well considered, they can be helpful.

You do, however, have to follow up. Say, for example, you send a memo or proposal to someone, and he or she never gets back to you. It doesn’t mean the idea is bad—it’s just that they’re so busy with their own things. If you have an idea that you think is great, push it and follow up.

Credentials open doors

My father was an accountant. He was terrific—brilliant—but at the same time, he didn’t have a degree and he was always being taken advantage of. That’s why he always stressed the importance of getting your credentials. It’s still good advice today. I always tell young professionals: Focus on developing special skills, consider getting a master’s degree and going on for advanced work, and take CPE courses. Remember that no matter how able you are, without formal credentials, the doors don’t open.

You also have to get these things completed as soon as you can, no matter how hard it is. Don’t put it off. Your responsibilities in life only increase as time goes by—you get married, you have children, you’re working. Ultimately, going for the CPA exam is like making a business investment, in terms of time and the commitment to study. But being a CPA is still one of the best opportunities anyone can have, and there’s a tremendous need for capable, conscientious people that’s even greater than before.

Recognize those who help you get started

When I was at Lybrand, my office mate became the head of the CPE Committee at the NYSSCPA. He asked me to create, teach, and market a CPE course. At the time, nobody was going to courses—CPE was still in its infancy. But I did it, and to everyone’s amazement, we had hundreds and hundreds of people turn out. Afterward, the AICPA recruited me to teach the same course for the institute, nationwide. To make a long story short, I said, “Look, the New York State Society of CPAs gave me a chance and I can’t forget that. If I teach the course for you, I want you to continue to let the State Society hold it for no fee.” Don’t hesitate to recognize the people who help you become successful. Whether it’s the doorman in my building, a bell captain at my hotel, the sky captain at the airport, I make it a point to remember everyone who has helped me.

For more than half a century, Brooklyn-born Sidney Kess has been the expert’s expert—the man CPAs go to when they need advice. Between his review courses and seminars, his audio “Kess-ettes” and books, he’s estimated to have taught more than a million certified public accountants since he joined the profession in 1952. After six decades, he has no plans to slow down or to sit silent. Kess, who still maintains his own practice, serves as counsel to the tax controversy law firm Kostelanetz & Fink, LLP. He also created and will moderate a personal financial planning conference that takes place later this summer at Baruch College in New York City. We recently spoke with him about staying power and his advice for young and aspiring CPAs. Here are his lessons for making it in the profession.
Learn leadership skills that will one day propel you to the helm of your firm at NextGen Conference 2015—The Conference for Young CPAs. After attending this can’t-miss event’s jam-packed program of interactive sessions, you’ll return to work with the confidence and tools to best guide your early career and its promising future. REGISTER NOW!

WWW.NYSSCPA.ORG/NEXTGEN15
Take advantage of regulatory shifts

Another very important lesson for young professionals: When there are changes in the law—when there are any major new developments, like the Affordable Care Act or the new Repair Regs—every professional is at the same starting line. That means that a young staff person can be on the same starting line as someone who has been in the game a lifetime. I’ll give you one example: A young CPA came to my firm when I was the national director around the time that the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) took effect. I told him that there had been a major change in the law for pensions provisions and suggested that he master the new rules. He started to read all about the new legislation and became so knowledgeable about the subject that I asked him to talk about it at a conference the firm was conducting.

The other partners were resentful that I had asked a young staffer just out of Harvard Law School to talk about pensions at the conference. They said they wanted to do it. So I had to take him off of the speaker list. During the conference, the partner who was supposed to make the presentation didn’t show up. So the young CPA who was in the audience substituted for him, without any prior preparation. He was a master. Do you know what happened next? He ultimately became the editor of a column on pensions for Practical Accountant magazine.

It pays to help others

When I passed the CPA exam, Lybrand gave me a week off, which I was very grateful for. So I told the firm that I would help out other staffers who were studying for the test at night. I had analyzed 20 years’ worth of exams and used the material to create a set of self-study guides for the four sections of the CPA exam. I gave those to Lybrand and they ran off the copies, distributing them to staff members.

I was not paid for writing these guides. I considered it my way of thanking the firm for giving me a week off to prepare for the exam. It’s important to show your appreciation and gratitude when people have been decent to you. But good things started to happen to me as well. For one, my former teacher, who ran one of the best CPA review courses in town, heard that I was conducting a course at night to help the staff at Lybrand prepare for the tax part of the CPE practice exam. He asked me to help the staff at Lybrand without getting paid. I was impressed. The following Monday, my former teacher passed away unexpectedly. His widow asked me to take over. I reluctantly agreed.

I worked day and night preparing for each class. The course was so successful that it became the biggest CPA cram course in New York. The next year, I had so many people attending that the fire department stopped by and said it was a violation. The bottom line is that developing the most successful CPA coaching course came about as a result of my having volunteered to help the staff at Lybrand without getting paid.

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Hear Sidney Speak

Join Sidney Kess on July 15 at the Personal Financial Planning Conference, jointly sponsored by the NYSSCPA, the Foundation for Accounting Education and Baruch College. For more information, visit cpe.nysscpa.org.
The profession is in the midst of an unprecedented and dramatic shift—and for young and aspiring CPAs it could mean new opportunities and a chance to rewrite at least some of the rules.

BY CHRIS GAETANO
Go to any CPA firm—small, medium or large—take a good look at the partners, and you’re bound to notice some similarities. On average, they’re baby boomers and, for the most part, they’re male. But they may not be, in the next decade. The CPA profession is in the middle stages of a profound demographic shake-up that promises to hollow out top firm leadership and leave behind a new frontier filled with both challenges and opportunities for younger professionals.

It all has to do with who’s been making their way toward the exits and why. The number of CPA managing partners either approaching or arriving at retirement age has grown—a phenomenon often referred to as the “graying of the profession.” In 2013, 63.5 percent of partners in CPA firms nationwide were at least 50 years old, according to the 2014 Rosenberg Management of Accounting Practice Survey, a nearly two-decade-old benchmark study. Considering that, according to the survey, a majority of firms have a mandatory retirement provision that kicks in, on average, at age 66, the profession is facing an impending exodus of its most senior leadership in the near future.

At the same time, the regulatory environment has been tightening and putting a greater strain on accounting firms, making the skilled eye of a CPA more important than ever before. As a result, said Adam S. Lilling, a 35-year-old partner from Long Island, while there will be a need for talented CPAs to step up, there are going to be fewer of them to do so. And that, he says, could mean “very good opportunities for people in the field.”

But what will these opportunities look like, and how can young professionals prepare to take advantage of them? Moreover, what other changes can CPAs expect, if aging partners are replaced with younger leaders who may think differently from their predecessors? When those 63.5 percent of partners are perfecting their golf swings in sunny Florida, what will the landscape look like for their younger counterparts left behind?

For one thing, if you’re an attractive candidate with leadership potential, you can expect to be wooed: Experts are predicting that competition for new recruits will become much more intense, as CPA firms work to fill the vacuum created by the mass exodus of older professionals. That push for new blood will be further exacerbated by a smaller pool of talent to draw from, given that today’s accounting grads have a wider array of career options than their predecessors did, according to William F. Ezzell, a retired Deloitte partner who served on the Path-
ways Commission on Accounting Higher Education. The commis-
sion, a joint effort of the American Accounting Association and the
American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, was created
to study and develop recommenda-
tions for the future structure of
accounting education.

A generation ago, Ezzell said, it
was generally assumed that new
accounting grads would go into
public accounting, transitioning
into industry after a few years, if
they wanted to. But today, they’re
as likely to be poached by major
corporations who are often com-
peting shoulder-to-shoulder with
accounting firms, as they recruit
on campus.

Firms may also try to make
themselves even more attractive
for younger professionals as they
try to fill the gaps. Frank Kurre,
the national managing partner for
Grant Thornton’s metropolitan
New York and New England areas,
offered up his own office as an
example of what firms might look
like in the future: team rooms
with state-of-the-art technology
to enable collaboration and, on
the more personal side, amen-
ities like pool and pingpong
tables, popcorn and frozen yogurt
machines. “When you walk in, it
doesn’t look like an accounting
firm, and I think that’s a compli-
ment,” he said. “I think it’s more
of a Yahoo or Google look we’ve
been building.”

Another enticing theory
is that hours might
come a tad more
flexible than they
are now. Kurre
noted that younger
people entering the workforce
today, across all industries, are
placing a greater emphasis on
work–life balance than previous
generations did. As a result, the
culture of regularly working late
into the night could lose its hold—at
the very least because firms
won’t want to relinquish potential
recruits to the competition.

“Firms are desperate for good
people, and so that mindset will
have to change,” he said.

Ezzell, however, was a bit more
circumspect in this area. While
he agreed that firms will probably
become more open to flexibility,
he noted that the nature of the
work—and the demands that it
can bring—will largely remain
the same, and that while there would
be some change in this area, it
won’t be too dramatic.

“At the end of the day, we
are a service business. We can’t
lose sight of the fact that if a
client needs something and it’s
a time-constrained situation, we
need to be responsive,” he said.

“We can be smarter about it and
innovate and use technology, but
at the end of the day—if you want
to use a parallel with the medical
profession—if it’s time to
have the baby, it’s time to
have the baby.”

Another area in
which competition may
have an impact, according to A.
Rief Kanan, director of the Business
Institute at the State University of
New York at New Paltz, is com-
pensation. Firms that are vying
for a smaller pool of talent, he
explained, will need to step up
what they pay their new hires, if
they want to grow.

According to a 2014 salary
survey conducted by the National
Association of Colleges and Em-
ployers (NACE), students gradu-
ating with a bachelor’s degree in
accounting can expect to pull in
$52,900 a year. The salary-tracking
site PayScale.com puts the salary
of an entry-level certified public
accountant in New York City at
$59,752 per year.

In the past, a firm in, say, the
Hudson Valley area that might
offer a significantly lower starting
compensation than a firm in a
major metropolitan setting, could
count on locals who wanted to
stay closer to their families, have
a shorter commute and live in a
more relaxed environment to fill
the gap, Kanan said. Nowadays,
though, technology has made
physical distance less relevant.
What’s more, Kanan added,
younger people today seem more
willing to commute into cities
anyway, if it means making more
money. As a result, he said, even
smaller regional firms will need
to start offering more money in
order to stay competitive if they
want to attract and retain good
workers, though some will have a
difficult time doing so.

“It won’t be so easy anymore
to say, ‘We offer a $15,000 less
annual starting salary, but we
have this wonderful environment
and this wonderful commute and
this wonderful lifestyle,’” he said.

“That used to be a tremendous
selling point, but it’s not as pow-
erful a tool as it once was.”

“WHY NOT ACCELERATE THE
PATHWAY TO PARTNER?”
Larger firms are notorious for
what many perceive as a bottle-
neck on the road to partner: Top
management typically needs to
retire before up-and-comers can
elbow their way into the firm’s
leadership. In essence, it can take
as long as 10 to 15 years to get
high up on the ladder, even if
you’re next in line for a position.
The concept may be a relic, but
it’s remained intact until now.

“The 10- to 15-year range
has been around for as long as I
remember,” Kurre said. “In 1975,
people were talking about waiting
10 to 15 years to make partner.”

“It’s a lot of work and a lot of
politics,” said Mark M. Ulrich,
director of the Center for Account-
ing Research and Technology at
St. John’s University. “You could
give 10, 12 years of your career to
a firm, only to have them kind of
knock you out the back door if they
don’t let you into the partnership.”

But in the new landscape, Kurre
predicts that firms will start to
If you want to lead tomorrow, here’s what you have to do today:

- **Do things that develop leadership ability, like taking highly visible positions on professional committees or in community organizations.**

- **Get comfortable with—and good at—public speaking. You can start by volunteering to deliver a presentation or sit on a panel at a conference.**

- **Focus on developing a particular skill or specialty that will be depended on.**

- **Learn how to navigate group dynamics by participating in team-driven activities.**

“..."If you have an industry-specific skill—for example, working with broker-dealers, hedge funds, or employee benefit plans—and a partner leaves, the firm will need someone who knows how to do industry-specific work, and there will be an opportunity for a promotion," he said. “If you don’t have these industry-specific skills, though, you’re really fungible, and anyone else can do what you do.”

In the end, Kanan said, future leaders will have their work cut out for them—which is why it’s so important to develop the relevant skills as soon as possible. If you haven’t yet, get started!”

**FUTURE LEADERS WILL HAVE THEIR WORK CUT OUT FOR THEM**

Because the demand for new talent is driven largely by a desire to eventually fill vacant leadership roles, Hoffman said young professionals can better position themselves and boost their attractiveness to employers by doing things that develop leadership ability. That means, for example, assuming leadership positions in community and professional organizations—helming a committee, delivering a presentation at a professional event or taking the lead on a project. If you’re just starting out, it also means taking advantage of mentorship programs and other training opportunities at your firm.

Along these same lines, Ezell advises young professionals to develop their communication skills early, as these will be vital the further up you climb and will help to distinguish you from others. He’s not alone in his reasoning: Kanan noted that he often tells students to “do a lot of things not accounting-related but success-related,” like public speaking. Moreover, Kanan added, since so much of the work today is team-driven, it’s to your benefit to learn how to navigate group dynamics and work well with others.

Lilling, meanwhile, felt that it will actually be rare for a CPA to get by as a general practitioner in the future. As a result, he said, people at the start of their careers should focus on developing a particular skill or specialty that firms and clients will depend upon—especially considering that there is so much more regulation that demands a knowledge of increasingly esoteric rules.
I wanted to make sure I passed all of the sections before I started working last September, because I’d always heard how difficult it is to study for the CPA exam and balance a full-time job. I took my first section, Financial Accounting and Reporting (FAR), while I was still in grad school getting my master’s degree, and finished the remaining sections last summer. My decision to take FAR first was strategic. Not only is it an area I felt comfortable with—I also wanted to get it and Regulation (REG) out of the way immediately, since they cover the most material.

I think the best way to prepare is to have a plan in place, as much as you can. There’s an overwhelming amount of information to go over, and if you just look at it as a whole, you’ll wonder how you’ll be ever able to stay on top of it. Breaking it down makes it more manageable. I studied for FAR over a period of two months, mostly on the weekends, for about six to eight hours a day. For the remaining sections, I studied about four to five hours a day, maybe four or five days a week. When you’re studying for the tests, it’s important to try to realistically evaluate what your strengths and weaknesses are. I knew I wanted to spend more time on areas I was less comfortable with, so I budgeted my time based on how I felt about various sections.

You’ll come across a lot of advice about preparing for the exam, but the same strategies don’t work for everyone. For example, some people find taking practice exams useful, but I don’t. I found it more helpful to go through practice questions one-by-one on my own schedule and check the answers immediately, rather than trying to simulate the exam environment. I also used an online review course to help me structure my studies.

It’s a three- or four-hour-long exam, but you can’t bring in a bottle of water or a snack. I definitely wasn’t prepared for that!
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