



The R Words

A Look at Recruitment & Retention

Recruitment and retention are the backbone to the longevity of any successful organization—CPA firms included. When checking in with the state of those renowned “r” words amongst CalCPA firms, we discovered the focused effort of a few firms to offer specific internship slots to community college students. We dug a little deeper and asked questions about these efforts, as well as general recruitment and retention best practices. In doing so, we spoke to:

- **Keith Hamasaki**, Director, KROST; CalCPA LA Chapter First Vice President (**KH**)
- **Michelle Lee**, Pasadena City College Professor (**ML**)
- **Sara Gregor**, National Campus Recruiting Manager, Armanino LLP (**SG**)
- **Johanna Sweaney Salt**, CPA CGMA; Partner; Gray, Salt & Associates, LLP (**JSS**)

What is the biggest recruitment obstacle your firm encounters?

KH Finding the right talent. This is more than just finding people to do the work. We’re looking for teammates who support each other and can grow and develop into the CPA profession. Finding those types of teammates is difficult because it requires more than just the GPA.

ML At the community college, our biggest obstacle is firms seeing us as a worthwhile recruiting pipeline and therefore making a commitment of time and finances.

SG It’s very much a candidate market, so we’re competing a lot with other firms. A big obstacle is the competition.

JSS Finding well rounded, qualified staff—there seems to be an ever-growing gap of students lacking the soft skills that are necessary for client interactions that go along with working in a small firm.

Community colleges are not traditionally schools that firms focus on when it comes to outreach and internships. Why is your firm involved here?

KH When I was in college, I started recruiting with accounting firms late because I worked 32–35 hours per week. I found myself struggling to catch up, and my classmates struggled because they were transfer students. I had a mission that just because these students started later, doesn’t mean they have to miss out on the opportunities that four-year university students are afforded. Since I’ve been with KROST, we’ve had this community college program, in partnership with professors Michelle Lee and Barron Yanaga, designed to help students understand and get to know the profession so, when they do start recruiting, after they transfer they can hit the ground running. What’s different about KROST’s community college internship and externship is that we don’t expect to give these students full-time offers—our goal is to provide them

with the skills to be able to find their right fit within the CPA profession. If it happens to be with our firm, wonderful!

SG In California there are some community colleges from which the credits transfer really well into some of our target schools, so that’s been helpful. We can also recruit more diverse students—people who may be going back to school to obtain credits at community college because of the lower cost before moving on to get their bachelor’s degree.

What benefits have you seen for the students, schools and firms through this effort?

KH Our program helped community college students gather the right skills to pursue internships with other firms, leading them into careers as a CPA. A lot of these students weren’t aware of what a CPA profession could be. Community colleges that partner with local CPA firms will find that students are more engaged and want to learn more. Further, firms that participate can identify top students who want to do this work and want to learn. Decades ago, firms sought students who had experience in their accounting classes, but with internships these days, students haven’t even taken audit or tax classes prior to starting their respective internship.

ML For many students, it is their first exposure to the profession. The visits, interviews and internships give students

a view of what accountants do, what their career options are and ways to build their soft skills. For the schools and professors, it gives students a tangible goal and reason to work for solid foundational knowledge and good grades.

SG I think folks who go to community college right out of the gate may not know right away what they want to specialize in. Being on campus helps us educate people as to what their career path looks like—and we might inspire people to go to school for accounting.

What obstacles and challenges has your firm encountered with this program?

KH You need a team that is willing to be educators—that is patient and willing to teach basic concepts. However, this is no different from what we do on a daily basis in terms of communicating complex concepts to our clients in a manner that's easily digestible. It's part of our firm's culture and we believe that it's for the greater good of the community that we empower these students to strive for more.

SG Community college attendees don't necessarily start thinking about internships until they reach a bachelor's program at a larger, four-year institution. Community colleges could do a better job of informing students that you can absolutely get an internship earlier.

What advice do you have for firms considering moving into the community college space?

KH At our CalCPA chapter, we've started to incorporate other firms into our CalCPA Summer Leadership Program that introduces community college students to a variety of firms. One very noticeable challenge is that the students can be a little more raw in their interviewing and soft skills. For most, this is the first office job that they've had, and it takes patience to train and teach. Even with the added challenge, we would absolutely advise them to pick a local community college and start a dialogue with them, because this is where a lot of the next generation of accounting students are coming from.

ML Give students the space to use these opportunities and time for exploration. Understand that some students may choose a different track and firms should be OK with that.

SG Please be patient. The infrastructure in career services at some community colleges aren't set up the same way as at four-year universities. It takes a little bit of time to build trust, relationships and get to know the professors. And, some professors at community colleges are also working professionals elsewhere—it's not their full-

time job. A communication gap can exist unless you're active and making relationships with them.

Where and how else is your firm engaged in entry-level recruiting?

KH At KROST, we participate in meet the firms, mock interviews, special presentations and CalCPA student and young emerging professional events.

SG Armanino has 14 recruiters placed across the country. We all cover schools where we go to all their events and are actively engaged. Each recruiter will also have two or three schools where we might just do one class talk or a job poster event there.

JSS We attend meet the firm events at local colleges/universities and the local CalCPA scholarship events.

Research indicates that strong onboarding programs, the creation of communities within your organization, manager training to lead diverse teams, robust mentor programs, and transparent growth promotion and retention plans are highly effective in attracting and retaining diverse talent. What strategies are you or your firm supporting (or planning to implement) in these areas?

KH We have buddy programs, mentorship, learning ladders, stay meetings and 360 feedback that is done throughout the year for our full-time staff. We also include the community college internship and externship program as part of our strategy because it helps us keep in touch with the community and identify people early on who we believe will help us make that community better. This year our firm, along with 10 others across the nation, participated in the selection of the George Willie Ethnically Diverse Student Scholarship and internship program.

ML I've seen KROST bring back interns for a second/third rotation for students who have a gap of time between graduating and beginning their full-time positions. KROST also has built strong loyalty ties with their former interns as seen in alumni events, etc.

JSS We have a transparent growth plan; our team knows what it takes to make partner and the steps required to get there. Because we are a smaller firm, relationships make a huge difference in our office environment. We utilize one-on-one training and try to get our team members up to speed in a variety of tasks. We want our team to be well-rounded advisers who can meet client needs while gaining an understanding of what they really enjoy doing so they can pursue more work of that nature.

Does your firm offer a mentorship program? If so, what does that look like?

KH The short answer is absolutely. Every new hire is given a buddy to introduce them to the firm and the basics. After a period of time when they feel like they've become part of the firm, they're asked to select a mentor. The mentor is from a different department and helps align and develop their goals on an at least quarterly basis.

SG All of our new hires get a buddy—their mentor—and they also get a performance coach. The buddies assigned have to apply. It's selective because we want strong, committed people. We introduce the buddies to new hires well before they start so they can ask questions before they get in the door. Once here, that support might look like a periodic coffee, a lunch or maybe meeting every couple of weeks just to check in, as well as being there on Teams.

JSS Our partners directly mentor our team members; we have monthly lunches where a team member meets with a partner and any topic is fair game (the team member sets the agenda) as well as a quarterly meeting with a different partner that is more performance oriented. Our partners also have open door policies and our team knows they can come in with anything and we'll make the time to help them.

Does your firm take into consideration DE&I concerns when recruiting?

KH Yes, absolutely. As I mentioned above, we are one of the 10 firms participating in the AICPA's George Willie scholarship program, which helps to support diversity in accounting students. Our commitment to diversity is another reason we try to get involved with students still in community college, because we are trying to promote the CPA profession to students who may not have thought they would "fit in" to the profession and show them how valuable their contributions can be. Additionally, we have partnered with local community colleges to award scholarships for diverse students.

SG We're actively participating in diverse events on campuses across the nation. We also have the IDEAL team (armaninollp.com/company/who-we-are/ideal), which is a whole group that is passionate about DE&I.

JSS Our firm tries to find the most qualified candidates. We do seek out a diverse team in all respects to create a more well-rounded and capable core group. The more diversity within our ranks, the better decisions we make. 

Contributing work by **Damien B.M. English**, CalCPA's managing editor. You can reach him at damien.english@calcpa.org.