

# Changing Face of the Profession

## Working to Make CPA the Coolest Profession Around

Once thought of as a “green eyeshade” heads-down profession, the CPA today lives in a dynamic world of change with AI, IT, client service and highly professional standards that goes well beyond providing tax services.

The following are excerpts from a recent CalCPA Los Angeles Chapter Management of Accounting Practice (MAP) panel discussion on the changing face of the profession and what CalCPA Chair Tayiika Dennis calls the “Coolest Profession Around.”

### Panelists:

Moderator **Mark H. Fowler (MHF)**:

President, Stowe Management Corporation  
**Tayiika Dennis (TD)**: CalCPA  
Chair; Principal, Nonprofit Services,  
CliftonLarsonAllen

**Alex Medina (AM)**: Accounting Student, Cal  
State University Northridge; CalCPA Industry  
Influencer

**Jason Melillo (JM)**: CEO, Krost

**Scott Donnelly (SD)**: Partner, PDM CPAs

**MHF**: Ty, could you start us off with an introduction and how Coolest Profession Around came to be?

**TD**: I’m honored to be the 2022-23 Chair of CalCPA. I thought long and hard about my theme and I came up with the idea of rebranding the initials CPA. Why not make it stand for Coolest Profession Around. I’m big on acronyms so that came naturally and I’m happy CalCPA embraced this theme. And my firm, CLA, is using it in our recruiting of high school and college students.

I’m looking at it as a movement for our profession to better promote the positive aspects of being a CPA. We have interesting clients; opportunities to travel; and we are part of a well-paying, well-respected career with job stability. We’re almost recession-proof!

**JM**: When I think about what this profession means to so many people, it’s the diversity of what we do. I’ve never been bored because of various projects that I’ve had the opportunity to work on and the people I worked with.

We’re going to practice very differently over the next 10 or 20 years than the previous 50 to 60. With data analytics, artificial intelligence, chatbots, machine learning—all that’s coming into play in our work life. We are going to require people with different skill sets, not just accountants. Such skills will require people with data science backgrounds, computer programming

I believe, if your clients are happy with you, you’re doing the right job; if you’re communicating properly, they’ll stay with you. If your employees are in the right jobs and you’re providing what they need or want, they’ll stay with you. We encourage each other and help each other grow. I’m a big advocate of learning from our mistakes. I think a great part of our growth has been openness and support.

Many CalCPA chapters have focused on the Coolest Profession Around theme to build the new pipeline by planning events that cater more to students and our young professionals

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or software engineering backgrounds and more—all to bring different viewpoints to the profession.

Obviously, we have to attract those people into the profession; we have to make our profession interesting; we have to showcase our profession. Ty has started a movement to highlight how cool our profession is and it’s our opportunity to showcase that—helping bring into the profession students and young workers who may be trying to figure out where they want to go with their degrees and showing different opportunities that exist within our profession.

**SD**: When we started our firm, one of the premises was to pay attention to what we did not like about our careers, jobs and the firms we were at—and how to avoid those things. We went down the road of encouraging family life and encouraging family involvement. This was extremely important.

and to try to impact and change the narrative on what a CPA is.

**MHF**: Where does it start? Where do you put the stake in the ground?

**SD**: I teach at Cal State Long Beach and we often bring speakers in from our firm, plus we speak at a number of events. We would only speak to accounting classes and it struck me that people in the accounting classes probably want to be accountants already. We need to start talking to some undeclared people or people who are in business law or engineering to spread ourselves around at the universities and community colleges.

We’ve been successful at hiring sophomores and juniors to work part-time, helping them develop, and sometimes, helping them with their homework.

It’s about people developing relationships. Starting in high school is where we begin

considering our careers. How many people don't even know what CPA means?

**AM:** On jump-starting the Coolest Profession Around, I've noticed how powerful social media is; seeing nostalgia, rebranding and reintroducing ideas to the younger generation—even before high school. I was thinking: Isn't there anything accounting related? Also, maybe firms could help start accounting clubs. There was no accounting club at our school. My friend and I ran around looking to find instructors (we needed two), and eventually, we became ambassadors for Rotaract.

**JM:** We need to start young. It's part of the education process of helping people understand what we do, what our role is and



If you're employees are in the right jobs and you're providing what they need ... they'll **STAY WITH YOU.**

how we help people. It would be valuable for high school students to learn about accounting. I took a couple of semesters of accounting in high school, and it helped me. There should be thorough introductions at elementary school, junior high school and

high school, maybe starting with personal finance and going from there.

**TD:** I think we start at high school. It's more about planting seeds. It's more about giving people exposure to this opportunity.

In addition, we're consultants; we step in as personal advisers for clients—there are many aspects to what we do. I'm very happy to say that my firm is piloting a high school internship program this summer. What Jason said is exactly right on point in terms of getting people involved: the

earlier the better.

When we look at the Coolest Profession Around, we want a positive perspective that really defines the true nature of what CPAs do. It's about seeing our unique personalities and bringing our whole self to work.

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**MHF:** How do we engage each other so this collaborative **Cooldest Professional Around** gets traction?

**SD:** We start with engaging other business professionals, attorneys, investment advisers and bankers. It's important for us to clarify what we do, how we do it and what we want to work on. That way, we can really be of service.

I also feel we have to inform our staff. Sometimes, firms try to do everything possible to retain them but, in the end, limit team members' opportunities. It's important to make sure that you are engaging your staff and making sure that they're in the career that they want. To accomplish that, move them around in different departments to work with other team members.

We had a receptionist become an enrolled agent. I noticed and listened to how well she interacted with clients. There was so much more to her. That's just about awareness, listening to people around you and not pigeon-holing them into what they're currently doing.

We need to **START YOUNG.**  
It's part of the education process of helping people understand what we do, what our role is and how we help people.

When I'm meeting with a senior partner of a law firm, real estate professionals or other business advisers, I'll bring along someone with less experience so they can learn and participate—and I ask

the other person to bring someone younger along as well.

**JM:** I think the question should be, *how* should we engage? Many of the people coming into the profession learn about it through their professors primarily. I don't know many who are in school that are getting a lot of 1-on-1 contact with people in the profession.

**AM:** In my experience, my Accounting I and II professor would talk a lot about his experiences as an auditor. He would share his experiences based on our lecture.

**JM:** Because there are so many different areas we're involved in, we have to educate people about the diversity of our practices: valuation, mergers and acquisitions, business management, tax audit—all the things that they don't necessarily teach in school.

Our job is to make sure—when we go to meet the firms events or meet with department chairs at universities—that we



remind them about all the different things that we do. That's going to draw more people into the profession. They don't understand the million other things we get into. We need to broaden the spectrum of the people we're trying to help get into the profession.

**MHF:** How are you dealing with engagement? As things grow and constantly change, how do you help people feel like they're part of it?

**TD:** I love CLA's coaching program. Each team member can pick the coach they want. I have the pleasure of coaching four ladies. We meet throughout the year and I encourage them to express their thoughts about what's going on with them and their departments. This allows coaches to be an advocate when it comes to review meetings to help get the person into different experiences. We are a large firm and this helps solidify connections. Having that advocate helps us navigate the process. I've really enjoyed coaching and helping team members with their careers.

When we look at the Coolest Profession Around, we want a **POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE** that really defines the true nature of what CPAs do.

**AM:** I have been able to see how some firms and accounting clubs recruit. They would set up a table and sit in one position for people to approach them. I suggested we expand across campus so others could attend. Considering we're the ones interested in them, however, we don't know whether they're interested in us. They need to reach out as well.

One place to start might be a transition executive at a local community college

who assists people to transition to four-year universities. That might be a great place to start an engagement process and develop a relationship with those people. It could be a point where CalCPA could come up with a plan for that and ask firms to come in and do it with them.

**MHF:** Where does Coolest Profession Around belong? It needs a home, but where?

**JM:** It's up to each of us to get involved. It's up to the leadership to promote involvement and to give opportunities to younger firm members to get involved, be engaged and to network. It's about involvement and it doesn't matter where it starts as long as it starts. As leaders, we need to support this to ensure that it continues to happen.

We can't just push the ball forward and hope it goes somewhere. This profession is too big for one organization to take responsibility for it, but we each can contribute to the movement that Ty talked about.

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**TD:** When you were asking where it should be housed, the first place I thought of was CalCPA. CalCPA represents everyone and all firms. We're all in this profession together. I'd like the messaging to come from our state society or national society—we've got to get AICPA on board, too.

We have CalCPA leadership that believes in this and a supportive staff to help make it happen. Actually, the main place where it needs to be housed is within ourselves; that way, we're always promoting our profession.

**MHF:** Is remote going to advance or be a deterrent to continuing Coolest Profession Around?

**TD:** Hybrid is here to stay. The younger you start networking, the more you grow. I'm not sure how that can be done completely behind a

**HYBRID IS HERE TO STAY.** The younger you start networking, the more you grow. I'm not sure how that can be done completely behind a computer screen.



computer screen. It's about soft skills, building

relationships and managing clients.

**JM:** More collaboration is going to happen in person. It's going to be very hard to get noticed by anybody if you're not around each other. If I were starting today, I would want to spend as much time as I could around the people who are teaching me and helping me to get to the next level.

**AM:** It's a lot about image as well as being a role model and showing how to be successful. I see it as a college student, representing my family, representing where I come from. It's a great idea to be able to see this image of what a cool profession this is.

**Mark H. Fowler** is chair of the CalCPA Los Angeles Chapter MAP Committee and president of Stowe Management Corporation. You can reach him at [estowemanagement@aol.com](mailto:estowemanagement@aol.com).

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