

# THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF YOUNG AUSTRALIAN WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper briefly examines some of the gender literature as it relates to young women progressing to senior and managerial roles in accounting. It then reports on a pilot study of five young female accountants and evaluates their perceptions of factors such as networking and mentoring in their career progression. Overall, it appears that young women see few impediments to their careers in accounting, although the evidence of limited women at the top suggests otherwise.

## INTRODUCTION

Research conducted over the past decade concerning the numbers and positions of women in accounting and management roles provides very discouraging information that the status of women in business is poor. There are very few women in management roles and few are staying to move up the ranks. This paper reports on a pilot study which looks at the perceptions of some young women accountants about career progression in the workplace.

Women have achieved gains and made some levels of progress organisationally, but there is still some way to go. Statistics of females enrolling in universities over time provide positive information about the change in status of young women. The percentage of female enrolments has improved from 27.40 % in 1966, to 41.70 % in 1976, to 48.80 % in 1986, peaking at 55.04 % in 2001 but reducing to 54.82 % in 2003 (3). A point of interest is the difference in the graduate starting salary for males and females. The graduate starting salary for female accountants was 94.3 % of the male graduate accountants for the year 2002 (3). In the accounting profession, new graduates are 50/50 male/female, but at management and senior levels 73 % are males with an average age of 34 years and 27 % are females with an average age of 37 years (8). O'Neill (13) found that in accounting, 'females were under-represented in senior positions and... less likely to attain top management positions' (p. 397). Only a small percentage of women achieve senior management roles. Women need to build the right experience into their careers to achieve seniority. Career aspirations, planning, choices and strategies (6), and career management (2) have been identified as necessary for progression into management roles in accounting and business. Mentoring (7; 5), sponsorship (9; 11) and networking are important aspects to the development and progression of women in their careers. Men appear to have easier access to these three career development tools than women, possibly due to the structural and dominant composition of the majority of organisations. A negative influence for women is the lack of a role model or a mentor (1). Mentoring does not have to be formal, the mentor may simply have a strong belief in the mentee's capacity (10, 4). Some senior women state that their relationships with mentors and "great bosses" have been instrumental to their progress (10).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

How do young women accountants view their current role within their organisations? What are their future plans and goals within the accounting profession? Do they perceive limitations? What is the role

of networking and mentoring? To answer these, structured interviews were conducted with five female accountants aged between 24 and 26 years. Interviews averaged one hour fifteen minutes and were recorded and later transcribed. Open questions were used to elicit in-depth responses.

## RESULTS

Job satisfaction is largely positive, although one stated that she felt both comfortable and negative in her role. This was due to her recent promotion to Team Supervisor, responsible for the budgets, staff workloads, reviewing junior accountants' output and making progress with the job turn around. Four of the accountants are achieving results that they expected in their current roles. Another expected her role to be challenging and difficult but has found that "it came pretty easy" but "the Accountant refuses to delegate work to me, knowing that I am not busy." A third is very comfortable in her role but when a new graduate had no idea what to expect and was not prepared for her role as a Junior Auditor, lacking knowledge of the practical skills, including people skills, which are required for auditing.

All the interviewees wanted to complete CPA/CA qualifications, and three are considering further study (masters). They are all looking at ways to achieve growth, whether by starting their own businesses, working in a different area of accounting, moving to a different but allied field, or taking on management-type duties and roles. There is also a belief that it will necessary to specialise to move up. They are all pro-active and positive when it comes to their study and careers. They have evaluated their future plans and goals whether they be short or long term. They are aware of what is required of them for the next stage of their careers. The two accountants who work in the chartered firms could see promotion in the future. One expected "senior status, when my CA is completed" but "cannot ever see myself being promoted to manager in this firm." Another "can see promotion and progression and the next step would be management in a few more years" and that her promotion to supervisor shows that she is moving upwards. The three industry accountants had diverse responses. One found herself in a position that is different in practice to the role that she applied for. Her solution was a decision to travel overseas. Two others cannot see a way for promotion into management roles within their organisations. The three in industry accepted that tenure in their current organisation was limited and progression would require a move to another organisation. All of the female accountants interviewed are working in male dominated management structures.

These accountants did not perceive major limitations to their careers, with unexpected issues of health being mentioned by two, but having children is not perceived as career limiting. This may be due to them not having children yet. One believes that there will be more flexibility about the approach to work/life balance issues by the time she has children and this will enable her to work part-time. This belief belies the current status of this issue for professional women with children who want to work part-time. Another felt that the 'boys club' in her previous position was a limitation to her career, but she has now moved into a more responsible position within an open and relaxed atmosphere and structure.

The two studying the CPA program were the only respondents who had a mentor in a formal sense. One noted that a male was her mentor for technical support and encouragement. The other noted her manager acts as a mentor and will help her with personal and professional development if needed." A third said her manager assists her if she is having trouble or needs information. The others felt that it might be of benefit to their professional growth to have a mentor who can provide positive support. One is currently involved in introducing a mentoring program to assist staff to develop their personal skills. An informal process, individuals need to find someone to share problems in an informal manner and to be a guide. Another view is that it would be good for some to have a mentor, but it is "not relevant to me as I am

self motivated and challenged: I do not need a personal trainer.” One woman mentioned a manager who developed her growth by giving her more and more responsibilities and encouraged her to go back to university to qualify for the CPA Program. Only one of the interviewees participated in a network group, an IT User Group external to her organisation. The other accountants felt that it may be a benefit later on to join their professional membership networks, when they have completed their studies for the professional membership programs. Mentoring and networking were not seen as important to career development for these female accountants. This is despite support and guidance received from the first manager of one woman which demonstrated that having a mentor who can advise, guide and provide support for career development is an invaluable resource for career and study. Such a resource is not valued as highly as it should be by young people.

## CONCLUSION

These young female accountants are at the beginning of their careers. They are all positive in their views about their current roles, careers and future goals and do not foresee any limitations. Organisations invest in the development and training of young female accountants who in turn add diversity and value to the business. Structural changes are required by some of these organisations to promote and encourage young female accountants to senior levels. There is a limitation to the sample size of five female accountants. The participants in this research group were chosen for their age group and for their experience working in industry and practice since graduating from university. They constitute a convenience sample, selected on this basis due to the difficulty of accessing a random sample for a pilot project. The results will be used to inform a larger study based on a random sample.

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