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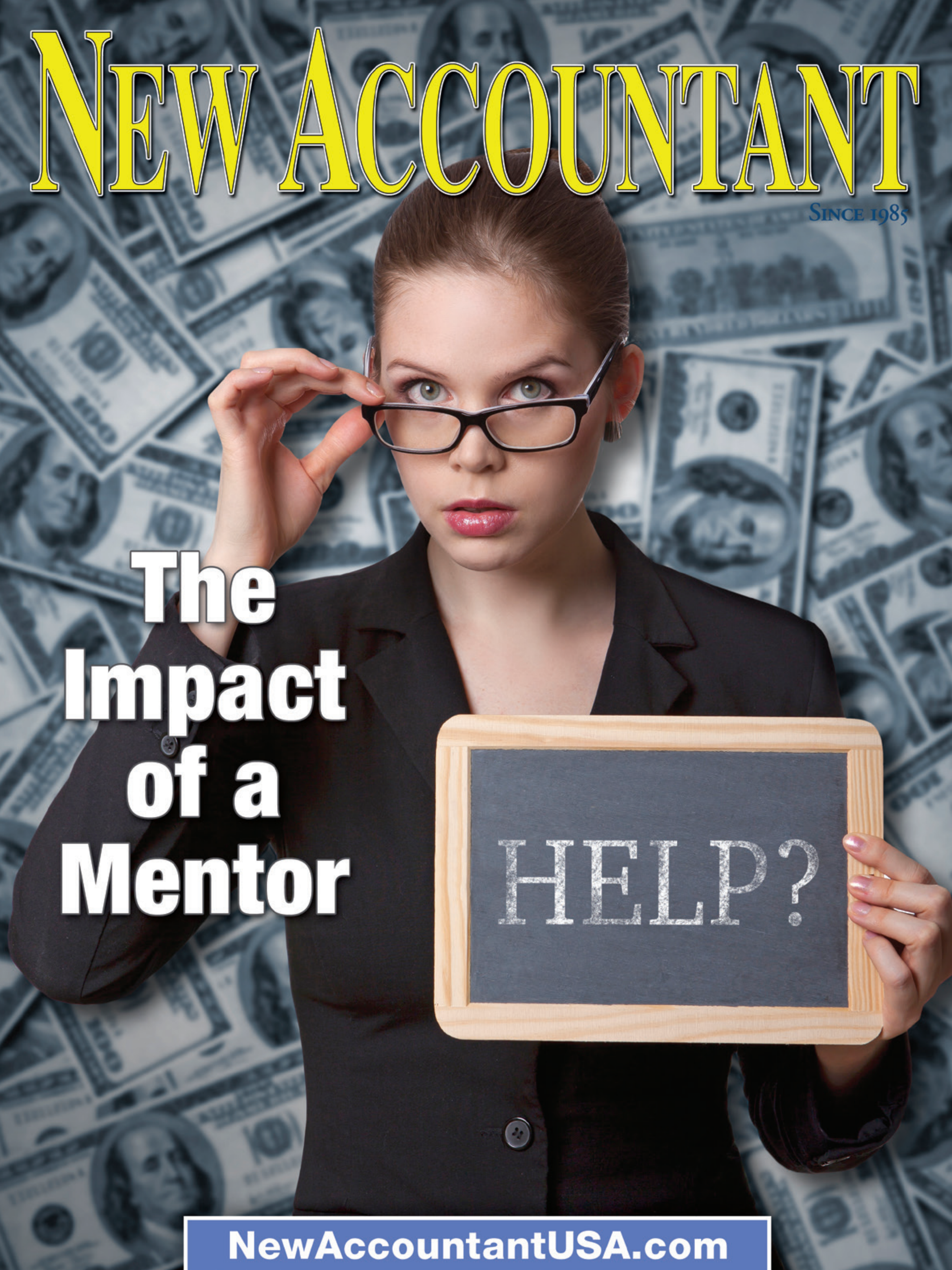

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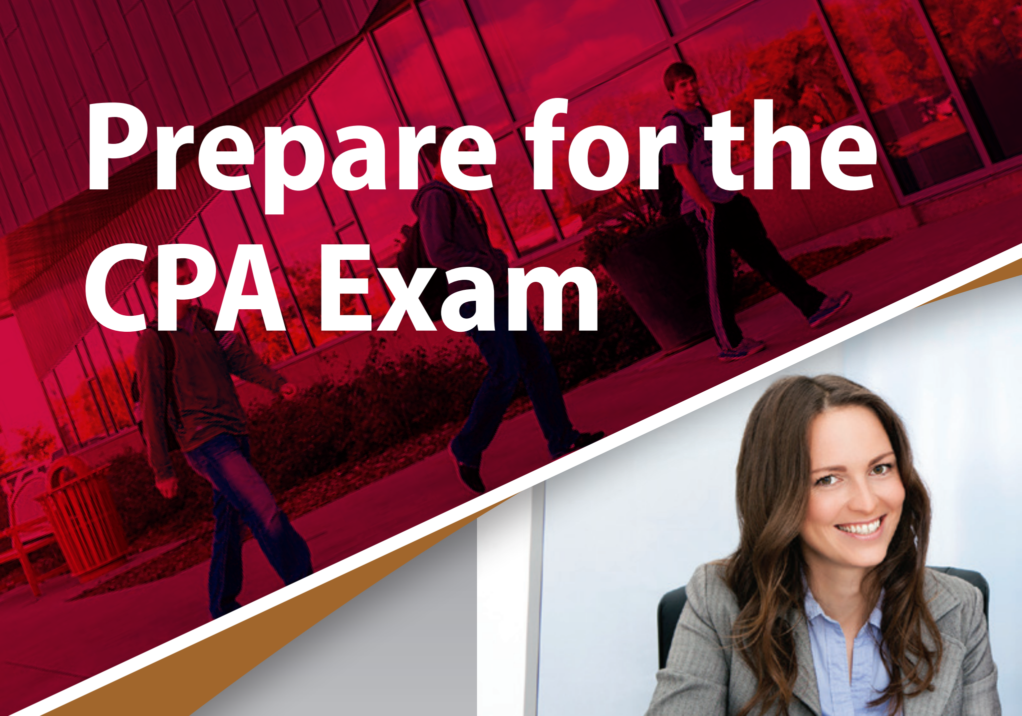

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FEATURES

COVER STORY PEER REVIEWED

14 The Impact of a Mentor

By Denise Dickins, Ph.D., CPA, CIA, Associate Professor of Accounting, East Carolina University, Audrey Scarlata, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Accounting, Middle Tennessee State University, Jones College of Business, Rose Bailey, LLM, CPA, Associate Professor of Accounting, East Carolina University

PROFESSIONAL OUTLOOK

4 Auditor's Insights Regarding U.S. GAAP – IFRS Convergence

By Hannah Roggemann, Alumni, Department of Accountancy and Business Law, Cameron School of Business University of North Carolina Wilmington

Susan D. Hermanson, Professor and Dixon Hughes Goodman Faculty Fellow, Department of Accountancy and Business Law, Cameron School of Business, University of North Carolina Wilmington

William A. Kerler III, Associate Professor, Department of Accountancy and Business Law, Cameron School of Business, University of North Carolina Wilmington and

James D. Whitworth, Assistant Professor, School of Accountancy, College of Business, University of South Florida

PROFESSIONAL OUTLOOK PEER REVIEWED

6 Enhancing Your Career with the Prestigious CGMA Certification

By G. Richard French, PhD, CPA, CGMA, Professor of Accounting in the School of Business, Indiana University Southeast and Richard E. Coppage, DBA, CPA, CGMA, CMA, CFM, Professor of accounting in the School of Business, University of Louisville

EDUCATIONAL OUTLOOK PEER REVIEWED

10 Accounting Acronyms Accountant-Speak Using 3 to 5 Letters

By Douglas K. Barney, Ph.D., CPA, CMA, CFM, Professor of Accounting, Coordinator of Accounting and Business Law, Indiana University Southeast

The Impact of a Mentor

Many studies have found that mentoring relationships are beneficial in terms of job satisfaction and reduced turnover, particularly for individuals in lower-level accounting positions (e.g., staff or seniors in public accounting firms).[1] Organizational commitment and turnover intentions are subjective measures of success that benefit employers which may or may not be indicators of more objective measures of career success such as salaries, promotions, or positions attained – measures that are likely more important to new accountants. Further, it is unclear whether early-career turnover intentions negatively impact an individual's ultimate career progression.

While evidence exists that mentoring may be associated with salaries and promotions in careers other than accounting,[2] this relationship has not been extensively explored in terms of accounting careers, and there is a strong possibility that salary and promotions may not be indicators of long-term career success. In some cases, an individual's salary is a better indicator of tenure than it is of career progression; and salary and promotions vary considerably among types of organizations. Larger and more highly-structured organizations, such as financial institutions, are more-likely to have multiple levels of position progression than either smaller organizations or public accounting firms.

To shed more light on the relationship between mentoring and success in accounting careers, we sent surveys to 5,026 individuals holding key accounting positions (i.e., Chief Financial Officer, Controller, Treasurer, VP Finance, or Tax Director) at Fortune 1000-listed companies. Nearly 300 individuals responded to our questions about their career progression and mentoring relationships. Discussion regarding the survey participants and the implications of their responses follows.

The Study Participants

Of the 288 respondents completing the entire survey, 19 percent described themselves as a CFO, 21 percent as a Controller, 9 percent as a Treasurer, 11 percent as a VP Finance, 19 percent as a Tax Director, and 17 percent as holding an "other key accounting position." Consistent with prior reports concerning women in key accounting positions at very large companies, women comprised only a small percentage of the respondents (20 percent). Further, our data suggest that women are typically older than their male counterparts when they achieve a key accounting position.

On average, respondents averaged 50 years of age (range from 31 to 64). They first achieved a key accounting position at age 40 (range from 21 to 59); and it took them approximately 16 years (range zero to 38) from the time they completed their undergraduate degree to achieve a key accounting position. Participants typically reported having three previous employers, including an average of five years with a large public accounting firm.

In terms of education, all of the respondents reported having earned at least a bachelor's degree, 43 percent reported earning a graduate-level degree, and seven percent reported having a terminal degree (e.g., JD or Ph.D.).

Approximately 70 percent of the respondents reported having at least one mentor.

The Relationship between Mentoring and Career Progression

Relating two measures of career progression, "age of achieving a key accounting position," and "years to achieve a key accounting position," to three measures of mentorship, "presence of a mentor," "number of mentors," and "type of mentor," we found no support for the idea that mentoring has a positive impact on long-term career progression. With a mentor, the average "age to achieve" and "years to achieve" is 39 and 16, respectively. Without a mentor, it is 38 and 15, respectively. Statistically speaking, the presence of a mentor, multiple mentors, career development mentors, or psychosocial mentors has no impact on long-term career success.3

We further analyzed the data for the possible moderating impacts of gender and education on the relationship between mentoring and career progression, finding none. However, of our respondents, 56 percent were at one time employed in public accounting. Additional analyses suggest that working in public accounting significantly reduces the age at which a key accounting position is achieved. As one participant indicated in the comments section of the survey, "Large firm public accounting experience supplemented by industry has significantly contributed to my exposure and growth." This opens up the possibility that, in terms of career progression, higher turnover intentions while employed in public accounting – whether or not related to mentoring – have no long-term negative impacts on an individual's ultimate success.

Discussion

Our survey results of nearly 300 individuals in key accounting positions at Fortune 1000-listed companies suggest that career progression and mentoring relationships are unrelated. Having a mentor neither contributes to, or detracts from, long-term career success. This is not to say mentoring of individuals entering the workforce is unimportant. Mentoring likely positively impacts job satisfaction, particularly in the early stages of an individual's career, it just does not appear to make a meaningful difference in terms of an individual's ability to achieve a key accounting position.

It may be that the benefits of mentoring are short-lived. That is, once social communication skills and behavioral strategies are learned, mentoring may no longer contribute significantly to career progression. It may also be that environmental changes such as widespread use of the internet and social media platforms have fundamentally changed the manner in which career paths are managed, reducing the impact of mentoring.

Beyond our conclusions about the impact of mentoring on career progression, two additional findings are of interest. First, our data suggest that individuals under age 50 are more likely to achieve a high level position earlier in their career than are their older counterparts. This may speak to the speed of change, in general, but it may also be an indicator that younger individuals are more prepared in terms of their technical and psychosocial skills than were their predecessors.

Second, our analyses suggest that gender is not a significant predictor of career progression. This is good news for women – at least for those choosing accounting careers – but it does not address other issues like pay-parity. As the study's respondents were all employed by Fortune 1000-listed companies, which tend to be more closely followed by analysts and other external market participants, it may be that this observation is not applicable to smaller companies.

Additional research is needed to more fully understand these issues.

Denise Dickins
Ph.D., CPA, CIA*
Associate Professor of Accounting
East Carolina University

Audrey Scarlata
Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Accounting
Middle Tennessee State University, Jones College of Business

Rose Bailey
LLM, CPA
Associate Professor of Accounting
East Carolina University

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