



THE BEST FIRMS FOR YOUNG ACCOUNTANTS

The 10 top places to start an accounting career

Places to grow

Meet 2020's Best Firms for Young Accountants

By Sean McCabe

This year has been especially taxing for accounting firms of all sizes. Besides all the technological, demographic and business challenges that were already sweeping over the profession, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of firm life, including the onboarding of new employees and the fostering of young talent.

For Schellman & Co., the No. 1 Large Firm on *Accounting Today's* 2020 Best Firms to Work For and one of only 10 to make our Best Firms for Young Accountants list, the unique challenges of the year had to be faced head-on.

"Our top priority became keeping our employees safe, and that demanded a complete switch in protocol," said president Avani Desai. "Before, our employees might have spent over 60 percent of their week out of town, servicing our clients, but when that was no longer the best option, we implemented work from home. ... We also began sending little surprise gifts to everyone as tokens of our appreciation for their flexibility and continued hard work."

It's this sense of empathy that Schellman conveys to younger staff members from Day 1. "We consider collective morale to reflect the soul of our firm," Desai said. "Above all else, we know our value system is worthwhile when our employees are motivated to serve our clients, and our clients are proud of the services we provide."

This compassion extends to the firm's recruiting process as well. "We understand that this industry is very demanding, and so we look for opportunities to set us apart as an employer," Desai said. "That means helping our [young] people manage their individual work-life balances and continuously honoring diverse perspectives in all the different aspects that make our firm successful. We build our culture around our people, and as they evolve, so will we."

"Our people also have a constant voice within the firm," Desai added. "Every year, we send out a survey to ask team members what they want, and then we listen. Personal health and growth are a constant and important theme in that feedback. For instance, we know that our employees are on the road often for work, so we introduced a wellness program, as well as technological reimbursement for those expenses incurred. We also want to provide opportunities professionally, so to go with our firm mentorship program, we have several on-site annual training opportunities on emerging technology, certification and soft skills to keep everyone's education ongoing and to make sure everyone is put in a

position to succeed."

To find out what makes the Best Firms for Young Accountants successful, we polled the members of this year's list on what strategies are best for the recruitment and retention of the profession's future leaders.

What particular programs do you have in place to keep young professionals successful in your firm?

Walter & Shuffain: We have a leadership development program, which allows young professionals to create and follow their own career path.

GRF CPAs & Advisors: Our younger team members appreciate benefits like flexible work schedules that support caring for children and family members. Those hoping to get their CPA license can take advantage of complimentary CPA Exam review courses and continuous training and development aimed at improving their soft skills. They also have opportunities to participate in firmwide initiatives like the diversity, equity and inclusion committee, Women on the Move (the firm's women's leadership initiative) and the GRF employee engagement committee.

Sweeney Conrad: We offer peer advisors that help our young professionals develop the skills they need both technically and non-technically. Sweeney Conrad has an open-door policy that allows our young accountants to work on a daily basis with team members with all levels of experience, including our shareholders. In addition, we have developed a group called Sweeney Conrad Young Professionals where we offer skill training and events that help young accountants begin to build their own network.

WilkinGuttenplan: We pride ourselves on our culture of continuity and transition, so the path is clear for the next generation. A few of these programs include: 'NexGen,' which is an initiative that has partners and managers taking staff out on prospect meetings, client meetings, etc., so they get those experiences early on; the Future Council, where various members of the firm from different levels are asked for their thoughts about the future, what a role model partner looks like and does, and what training they need to meet the future; [and] the Professional Growth Academy, an online learning platform for CPE offering to advance their areas of expertise.

Henry+Horne: We have started seeking the involvement of young accountants in the hiring process, including the recruitment of interns. Some of our estab-

lished young accountants become part of the firm's innovation committee. They communicate directly with the firm's executive committee on ideas and plans to make young accountants and, in turn, the firm more successful. After a year with us, our team members are invited to participate in our mentor/advisor program.

Holtzman Partners: We have a well-established coaching and mentoring program that functions as both an avenue of development and a support system for new hires. We provide all new hires with a buddy, a coach and a mentor. A buddy serves as a "safe space" for the new hire, where they can ask any question without fear of consequence or negative perception. ... Coaches walk side by side with the employee throughout their career at Holtzman. ... Mentors are partners that focus on the employee's long-term development and success, whether at Holtzman or in a completely different occupation.

Navolio & Tallman: We utilize a proprietary tool that surveys, collects and applies essential information about motivational and workplace behaviors, which helps identify and understand the unique talents of the firm's employees and uses that information so that employees are more effective in their role at the firm. This improves both employee satisfaction and productivity for the firm. Every month, each partner also has lunch with a staff member with the intention of building relationships and fostering greater communication.

Windham Brannon: To embrace our digital environment and to play upon the strengths of our younger professionals, the firm has created an environment for people to work with clients digitally. This includes things like electronic uploading of information, digital exchange of contracts that can be signed electronically, and virtual audits. Even before COVID-19 hit, we were performing major portions of audits virtually, but this hit all new levels as, suddenly, all our audits became virtual.

What challenges have you encountered this year in creating a positive work culture for young accountants?

WilkinGuttenplan: [We've] always believed in and promoted a flexible anytime, anywhere work environment. Moving to fully remote work was seamless due to that policy in place and with the support from our technology department. ... In addition to these events, we encouraged all our partners/managers/supervisors/coaches to check in with their teams frequently to ensure they are all feeling connected and engaged. We hold frequent virtual staff meetings and group-level meetings as another touch point for our staff to feel connected and discuss any concerns or suggestions they have while working completely remote.

GRF CPAs: With everyone working from home, the firm created a number of ways for team members to participate virtually in firm activities. Highlights include the GRF

The 2020 Best Firms for Young Accountants

Rank	Firm	Headquarters	Staff	No. of staff younger than 30	Percent of staff younger than 30	Voluntary turnover (%)	Paid holidays	Chief executive
1	Walter & Shuffain	Boston	64	28	44	6	10	Jonathan Yorks
2	Windham Brannon	Atlanta	163	38	23	19	8	Heidi LaMarca
3	Sweeney Conrad	Bellevue, Wash.	82	30	37	8	10	John Forrest
4	Navolio & Tallman	San Francisco	32	12	38	3	9	John Navolio
5	WilkinGuttenplan	East Brunswick, N.J.	124	37	30	5	10	Edward Guttenplan
6	Henry+Horne	Tempe, Ariz.	141	33	23	5	9	Chuck Goodmiller and Chuck Inderieden
7	GRF CPAs & Advisors	Bethesda, Md.	116	38	33	8	8	Jacqueline Cardello
8	HBE	Lincoln, Neb.	90	21	23	15	9	Scott Becker
9	Schellman & Co.	Tampa, Fla.	251	106	42	10	15	Chris Schellman
10	Holtzman Partners	Austin, Texas	92	34	37	10	9	Chris Perkins

All firms are members of the 2020 class of the Best Firms to Work For; to qualify for the Best Firms for Young Accountants, they needed to have at least 15 employees who were under the age of 30, or have employees under 30 constitute at least 10 percent of their total, and the response rate for employees under the age of 30 to the anonymous employee survey had to be at least 40 percent. Firms were then ranked according to the average positive response rate to the survey of employees under 30.

Team Fitness Challenge, co-worker knowledge challenges, lunchtime virtual games, monthly working parent forums and Zoom happy hours. Unfortunately, this year also included civil unrest and protests that deeply affected our staff. To create a space where team members can discuss their feelings about racial inequality and possible solutions, GRF is holding regular virtual forums where everyone can participate and be heard.

Henry+Horne: We may not be able to be in-person, but we are taking everything we did in the past and, if it makes sense, making it virtual. We have kicked up the communication from our managing partners to assure our team they can continue to work in a fashion that is most comfortable for them. We remind them to take time off for their mental health and well-being.

HBE: Over the past several months, we have continued to provide training and best practices on how to collaborate using Zoom, screen sharing, and physical distancing. It is, and will continue to be, a learning process that we tweak and adjust as we go, but overall our staff has been incredibly resilient in adapting to learning and working in different ways.

Holtzman Partners: We made two commitments: We will do everything in our power to retain each employee. (To date, we have been successful in doing that.) And we are going to provide frequent, clear and concise communication to our employees.

What are your strategies for recruiting and retaining young accountants?

GRF CPAs: Our CPAs regularly present to accounting students, support scholarship programs, and work with our state CPA societies to address the current shortage of

CPAs. GRF also maintains a popular internship program (virtual in 2020!) to begin cultivating our next generation of leaders while they are still earning their degrees. Retaining our young team members is also a top priority, and we have designed mentoring and coaching programs to complement the professional development to help them obtain their CPA license.

Holtzman Partners: Employees naturally desire a sense of belonging, and they want to know that their contributions have meaning. Keeping this in mind, before their first day, we send them once a month, at the beginning of each month, one of our weekly newsletters, which we refer to as "In the Loop." Additionally, over the course of several weeks or months, until their start date, the candidate also receives multiple check-ins from HR, partners, and their buddy.

HBE: Recruiting recent college graduates, or accountants with less than five years of experience, is an area where we continue to focus. We recognize that individuals at this point of their career may not be actively seeking new employment. Our strategy with these 'passive' candidates includes personal outreach by our existing young professionals to their college alumni networks, professional networks, and community connections.

WilkinGuttenplan: We focus on listening to their needs. As a new staff member, we help them discover which department or discipline they are most interested in and help them establish themselves as experts in that field. We also understand their need for a work-life balance and are able to provide them with that balance. We have an open-door policy that encourages all staff to provide feedback and/or suggestions to help us to improve internal processes or policies.

What advice would you offer to other firms to become a Best Firm for Young Accountants?

Walter & Shuffain: Remain flexible, embrace technology, and listen to the needs of your employees.

HBE: Treat your employees the way you want to be treated. Really listen to and value their input. You may not always be able to make the changes they are looking for, but if employees feel they are being heard, it goes a long way toward their engagement and career satisfaction.

Holtzman Partners: First, you need to listen. Your young accountants are valuable members of your team, and they have good ideas, and they are willing to share them. ... Second, you need to be flexible and willing to change.

Windham Brannon: Listen to your team members — after all, they are the ones who know best what they want from their employer. Yes, you want to ask them what they want but, more important, be ready to think outside the box with them.

Henry+Horne: Communicate and listen. Young accountants have so much to offer the profession.

Sweeney Conrad: Talk to your newest young hires and ask them what attracted them to your firm in the first place. And do some research: See what other firms are doing, what tactics they are using to recruit, and implement those strategies with a twist that stays true to your brand and your firm culture.

Navolio & Tallman: First and foremost, focus on your people. They are the fabric of the firm, and a positive employee culture is imperative to success and growth as a firm, and as individual accountants.

GRF CPAs: The generation entering the accounting profession today craves involvement and connection in many forms. Don't hesitate to try new things. [AT](#)