

What it takes to make partner

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Carolyn Mazzenga

Joining the staff of [PricewaterhouseCooper](#) in Melville in 1999, Elizabeth Robinson worked through the ranks to secure a partnership with the Big Four firm, which named her an assurance partner in July.

"Somewhere along the line, I started talking about it, and I wanted to be a partner," said Robinson, noting it seemed like "a good fit."

But, what exactly is a good fit when it comes to partnership? While some industry standards, like CPA certification requirements, have remained intact, the role of partner within public accounting firms has shifted, placing new emphasis on leadership and entrepreneurial prowess in light of a relatively futile economic climate.

"There were a select number of people who used to bring in business: the 'rainmakers,'" said Eric Martinez, a partner in the Jericho office of midsized accounting firm [Grassi & Co.](#) "When the economy shifted, things got more challenging," and more partners are now expected to generate new business.

This is especially true in small to midsized firms, where partners develop more intimate, exclusive relationships with their clients, and where there is generally a heightened desire to expand.

For Tim Sherman, a managing partner at Cohen Greve & Co., a Mineola-based accounting firm with a staff of 20, the ability to grow business can sometimes supersede other qualifications, like technical skill and specialization, when evaluating potential new partners.

"At the base of it, you have to have the proper experience and training for a job like partner," Sherman said. "But to build a firm, you also have to be an entrepreneur."

For candidates coming from a Big Four firm, "you know they would have a lot of talent and that they're a dogged worker, but unless they brought their own clients, it may not be the best fit," he said.

In larger firms, the responsibility of bringing in new business tends to fall on specific partners, and partners with certain technical skills or specializations become more valuable due to the expansive nature of the company.

As firms get larger, the need for specializing becomes more acute, Martinez said.

"It's almost like a different job altogether."

With national and international clients working across time zones and borders, the ability for one partner to wrap his arms around the whole project is next to impossible, he noted.

Bringing in new partners with certain specializations can be an indicator of a firm's expansion plans, said Carolyn Mazzenga, who joined [Marcum](#), a national accounting firm with roots in Melville, in 1992. Since then, Mazzenga, now partner-in-charge of the Long Island office, has watched the firm grow from a small staff of 20 to its current size of 1,200, with about 150 partners nationwide.

"Not every partner is entrepreneurial, but not every partner has to be," Mazzenga said. "If an area [of practice] expands dramatically, you may have to add a partner or two to expand your client base."

Prior to working for PwC, Robinson worked in private accounting, which gave her an advantage within her new firm, where she worked on the audit side.

"Different partners offer different services – that adds to the firm's diversity," Robinson said.

Randy Schwartzman, tax partner in charge of the Northeast region for the national firm BDO, agreed, adding that although technical partners may not have as much pressure to bring in new clients, they do act as representatives of the firm's boutique specialties, which could attract clients from niche markets.

Technical skills and entrepreneurial drive aren't the only sought-after qualities of an ideal partner; regardless of firm size, the ability to exercise strong and responsible leadership, inside and outside the office, is pertinent, as well.

"The ability to lead teams and the ability to develop relationships is probably the core to being a partner," Martinez said. "If we're not establishing trust, we're not going to hold onto our clients."

According to Schwartzman, leadership can sometimes come with experience, working through the ranks of a firm. With longstanding employment within a firm, a partner can develop a rapport and good standing with current firm procedure and employees.

"You're a product of your environment – your past experience carries through to how you're going to perform and how you do in a new environment," Schwartzman said. "We [at BDO] generally promote from within; we know what we have and we know who we have developed." When new partners are brought in from other firms,

it is typically the result of a merger or acquisition, or because the firm is looking to add partner with a particular specialization.

"You have to get to the point where a supervisor looks at you as their trusted adviser – somebody who believes in their people – so [the firm] can offer the best service to our clients," said Mazzenga, who noted leadership within the community is important, too.

"You really have to be an ambassador to where you live. It's incredibly important to be able to give back," she said.

As Robinson acclimates to her new responsibilities as partner, her 14 years of experience as a leader within the firm helps her set her goals.

"I've been a role model before. I try to be cognizant of that, and I try not to lead people down the wrong road," Robinson said. "I love doing what I do, maintaining the relationships – that is truly the best thing that we, as partners, can do."