



# Public Accounting Report

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## EXECUTIVE FORUM

### Executives Rely on Strong Communications Plans to Drive Firmwide Goals and Create Inclusive Cultures

Communication is key to managing a successful firm. Firms with embracing and applauded cultures recognize that effective communication is essential to keeping everybody in the firm focused on their tasks, goals and priorities. This month, firm executives share and describe the systems and policies they have in place to ensure that everybody within their firms stays informed about issues and concerns firmwide.



**Michelle Loyd Thompson**, *managing partner, audit and assurance services, and firmwide CEO-elect, Cherry Bekaert/Raleigh, N.C. (FY17 net revenue: \$175 million; 125 partners; 1,000 total staff; 12 offices):*

**Michelle Loyd Thompson** Communication takes many forms in a professional services firm—digital (email, intranet, social media), virtual (meetings, videos) or in person. Communication is two-way. In managing a professional services firm, you should actively solicit feedback and input. You should not view communication as a top-down exercise. You must take into consideration that the same message needs to be heard at least seven times before it's fully received, and that each person receives information differently. This is complicated in matrix-managed organizations where there are multiple avenues or people communicating. I find that effective, frequent and honest communication often removes many of the barriers to the implementation of programs and initiatives that otherwise might falter. Conspiracy theories abound when people are left to wonder about the reason for many decisions. While all the details of the decision cannot and should not be shared, honest proactive communication of the process will often neutralize the conspiracies. People may not totally agree with the decision,

but the talk will be about that, not motives. Because of the nature of our business, there is a need for formal and predictable communication to match the cadence of technical, policy and business matters that impact the day-to-day performance of employees' jobs. However, it is the informal communication, where there is an opportunity to listen, that creates trust. Trust is the foundation of managing and leading a professional services firm. Trust is built through transparency, which is achieved through honest and open communication.



**Rob Dutkiewicz**, *president, Clayton & McKervey/Southfield, Mich., (FY17 net revenue: \$13 million; nine partners; 75 total staff):*

**Rob Dutkiewicz**

The flow of information within an organization rarely moves in a linear fashion, so leaders have to use a variety of channels to gather and share information and set and achieve firm goals. As president, my No. 1 communication priority is reinforcing the importance of Clayton & McKervey's core values, vision and mission throughout the organization. When we have a key initiative we want to introduce, we communicate and discuss on multiple levels. For example, in 2016, we set out to permanently establish a women's network. The network offers training, development and networking opportunities for women in the firm to connect to one another, and to link female role models and mentors together. With our shareholder group comprised of 45% female CPAs, we understand the importance of providing equal access to ownership both now and well into the future. Yet, our high percentage of women in management required a greater level of communication as to why we felt we needed a women's network now. Wasn't that counterintuitive? We didn't think

so—we saw it as a talent issue, not necessarily a gender issue, and communicated it as such. The Women’s Network started as a conversation with a few staff members and expanded into a small committee before being rolled out to the shareholder group during an annual offsite planning session. Once vetted, the plan was presented to managers and principals in a separate meeting to allow for questions and conversation. We then presented this key initiative to the entire firm in one of our town hall meetings. At each step of the way, stakeholders had the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification about our plans. One of the ways that we ensure full firm engagement in communication is to offer remote access to conversations through our investment in technology called LifeSize, which allows offsite employees to be both seen and heard. As programming, events and initiatives of The Women’s Network continue to unfold, firmwide communications include email, our internal newsletter, live meetings and regular staff updates, as well as a comprehensive staff survey of participants to make sure we weren’t missing the mark. Externally, we shared our progress with clients, friends and the profession through our newsletter, press releases, and social media. The Women’s Network is a good example of how multi-pronged communication often must be in order to be effectively received by intended audiences.



**Craig Savell**, *co-managing partner, Margolin, Winer & Evens/Garden City, N.Y. (FY16 net revenue: \$41 million; 26 partners; 203 total staff, two offices):*

Regular, frank and open communication among the firm’s shareholders and the staff is one of the key reasons why Margolin,

Winer & Evens has been so successful for more than 70 years. The firm’s culture has long embraced a collegial “open door policy” where partners are always available to answer staff questions and provide professional guidance. Employees are empowered and encouraged to bring any work-related concerns they might have to their managers or to the firm leadership. The firm’s official mentorship

program is also a crucial two-way communication tool. As part of their orientation, younger staff are paired with an experienced mentor. This pivotal program, which includes regularly scheduled meetings, helps forge deep and long-lasting relationships at all levels of the firm. Mentors closely guide our staff in both the hard and soft skills they’ll need as they develop in their careers. Additionally, staff are able to give management crucial insight into day-to-day issues. Our annual review process is also a key communication tool, giving staff and their supervisors the opportunity to reflect on the prior year, assess performance and give constructive feedback to help staffers grow into the future leaders of the firm. The partners also meet on a monthly basis to discuss the business of the firm and to strategize on ways to keep MWE as an employer of choice. In addition, the firm’s marketing department regularly sends out an internal newsletter highlighting charitable and business development activities which had recent staff participation. This inspires younger staff to get more involved in taking part in activities that help grow the firm.



**Chris Millias**, *managing partner, OUM & Co./San Francisco (FY16 net revenue: \$17.6 million; 11 partners; 68 total staff, two offices):*

**Chris Millias**

At OUM, we are constantly working to enhance our communication with all staff. Starting with our inter-office website, when you turn on your computer, it’s the first thing that comes up. Today, I posted a fraud alert that impacted two of our clients. We post daily, both serious and fun stuff. This year, we’ve implemented real-time automated performance surveys for timely feedback. Our performance coaching program includes meetings during the year with a mentor. This has proven to be really effective. We also hold staff-level meetings throughout the year to discuss topics that are top of mind and collectively agree upon action items. Last year, we initiated a firmwide wellness program that includes a monthly wellness newsletter and ongoing fitness challenges. To share firmwide information, we hold

monthly departmental meetings and an annual State of the Union event. Our most popular gathering spot is our beautiful kitchen (large table, TV, and great snacks) because honestly, that's where everyone shares information on a daily basis. My office is right next to the kitchen, so it's where I get my best information!



**Jim Proppe**

**Jim Proppe**, *managing partner, Plante Moran/Southfield, Mich.* (FY17 net revenue: \$468.6 million; 292 partners and entity members; 2,200 total staff, 24 offices):

At Plante Moran, we have several systems in place to ensure a culture of open communication and transparency, including (1) a communication structure where management team members speak to the firm's five-year vision, industry and service group leaders share information specific to their practice groups, office managing partners deliver a consistent message throughout their offices, and team partners meet with individuals or small groups to reiterate the message and answer questions; (2) quarterly financial updates on our intranet where we share information about our financial performance and give staff the opportunity to respond with questions; (3) associate meetings (managers and up) led by management team members and designated to share information and answer unfiltered questions; (4) a "Speak up! If something's not right, we'll change it" model that includes formal and informal outlets to encourage staff to ask questions and provide feedback; and (5) an annual firm conference

where all staff come together to celebrate and learn more about our culture, new initiatives, promotions, financial performance, and staff awards. With an organization of 2,200-plus people, this interconnected network of communication ensures everyone has the opportunity to share information and be heard.



**Heidi LaMarca**

**Heidi LaMarca**, *president and CEO, Windham Brannon/Atlanta* (FY17 net revenue: \$25 million; 13 partners; 160 total staff):

Successful communication at any firm starts at the top and needs to go beyond emails sent to employees periodically updating them on the state of the business. It needs to be a continuous, interactive flow of information and ideas that empower employees to be a part of the evolution and growth of the firm. At Windham Brannon, we utilize several points of engagement to ensure our employees are involved and actively working toward our business goals. In addition to regular firm updates, monthly newsletters, a feedback program and a bi-weekly update to our partners, I hold monthly informal small team breakfasts to allow employees to ask questions and share ideas or concerns. We also do "temperature checks" through surveys on internal benefits and perks. Finally, one of the most important pieces of communication comes through development and our coaching program. Every employee at Windham Brannon is assigned a coach to help guide them through their professional development. ■