

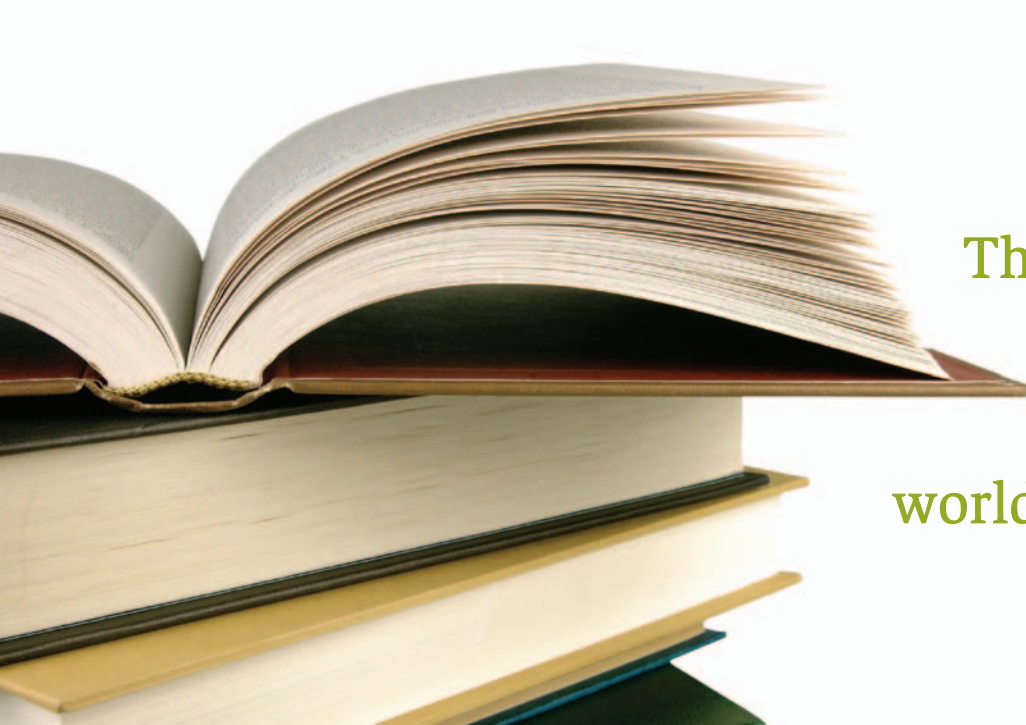
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IN-HOUSE U.

How our accounting firm uses a comprehensive training program to improve productivity, reduce turnover and build morale

BY RONALD TRAMAZZO



The competition for top-notch talent is fierce in the world of CPA firms right now.

To help in hiring and retaining employees and to keep our workers at peak performance, our firm, the Manhattan-based accounting firm of Citrin Cooperman, has devised a number of training and employee retention programs. These have been developed with the input of our staff and are designed to teach our workers the variety of skills they need to succeed, both at the firm and in their professional lives.

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Citrin Cooperman has had some sort of continuing professional education programs for the firm's accountants and other professionals for many years. But in 2005, the top management decided the firm needed to expand its scope in this area. Our industry was more competitive than ever, and we realized we had to fully invest in employees to reap rewards in the future and ensure that the firm not only survived, but thrived.

Thus was born Citrin Cooperman University (affectionately known in the halls as "CCU"). While the firm's professionals already received many hours of technical training above and beyond what was required to maintain their professional designation, the firm leadership saw the opportunity to develop staff in new ways.

CCU focuses on the "soft skills" that lead to well-rounded professionals. That includes coursework on networking and marketing, business writing and consulting, rainmaking and effective presentation skills. Employees are encouraged to "think outside the box" when it comes to seeking better ways to provide client service. The courses are taught off-site in a collegial setting, where blue jeans are the rule. Every professional in the firm must attend the four-day training, and support staff are also invited to take relevant courses.

By popular demand, many of the technical courses are given by partners and other professionals in the firm who make their practice areas come alive for young staff — many of whom have never worked with a forensic accountant or understood what an internal controls project entails.

Some seminars are conducted by outside experts. The twice-yearly CCU program strives to train the staff to develop the skills necessary to be good, well-rounded consultants and business advisors to our clients.

The firm has also retained a professional business coach whose services have been offered to all professional employees as well as partners in the firm. The coach helps employees with skills such as new business development or networking. The firm subsidizes half the cost of coaching services for these staff members. The objective is to aid anyone who wants to develop business skills that will help them achieve their career goals (such as becoming a partner or expanding and improving their practice).

Sabbatical Program

Shortly after starting up CCU, the firm took another leap of faith and started a sabbatical program. The sabbatical offers professionals a four-week oasis of paid time off after working for the firm full-time for at least six years. The sabbatical can be taken for any reason the employee chooses, whether it's to study at the Sorbonne or lie on a Hawaiian beach. This is in addition to the employee's accrued vacation time.

The firm recognizes that CPAs work long, hard hours and can get burnt out. This four-week interlude was designed to help them refresh and recharge their batteries.

The only requirement? All those taking a sabbatical must submit two 1,000-word essays upon their return. One should focus on where the professional sees his or her career going in the next few years, and the other must offer advice on how the firm can improve.

We see this program (which has already been taken by a number of our staff to rave reviews) as an important recruiting and retention tool. But there is also an educational component in encouraging employees to contemplate their career path and redefine their career objectives. Additionally, the essays provide the firm with critical feedback on how to both improve the work environment and retain our best and brightest.

Employee Mentoring Program

Once an employee starts work at Citrin Cooperman, he or she is assigned a mentor to help guide and train him or her from day one. The mentor serves as a critical helpmate and guide to new hires, helping them acclimate to the Citrin Cooperman culture, offering advice and counsel on how to succeed at the firm and in their careers, and generally acting as a sounding board for any issues that may come up.

The firm is currently upgrading its mentoring program to better incorporate input from both the professional and administrative staff. Along with a consultant, a task force made up of staff and partners from every level of the firm is forging new processes and benchmarks to help mentors and their mentees measure goals and track each individual's progress. It is worth noting that a foundation for this new incarnation of the program will be the training of the mentors themselves. We feel that our mentors cannot effectively give guidance for growth without knowing how to best communicate with their mentees.

Employee Incentive Program

Many of our professionals love the idea of networking and business development, but just haven't had the training to get out and practice what they're learning in CCU and through sessions with the firm's business coach.

So the marketing department dreamed up the idea of an incentive program that would give employees a definitive guide to all of the marketing and business development skills they should develop to succeed. To ensure that they tried them out, the firm offered exciting incentives to motivate them.

Citrin Cooperman has a list of approved activities that earn employees "credit" and a chance at monthly rewards — for instance, calling up a client to say hello and to see if there is anything he needs, or scanning news clippings about a client's industry and forwarding them to the client, or sending a handwritten note to someone the employee has met at a networking event. (And of course they get credit for attending the networking event, too). Citrin workers (all employees, not just professional-level ones) can also read a list of approved business books or magazines (including NY REPORT), and write up a short summary of what they've read and how it's relevant to them or the firm.

These credits are entered into a customized database by the staff members themselves, and monthly prizes are awarded to the teams and individuals who have excelled at the game. But beyond the monetary rewards, the managing partner doles out praise to the staffers who are putting effort into the game, recognizing that they are learning and exercising the kind of business development and client service muscles that will serve both them and the firm well. At the end of the year, the top team and the

top individuals at each staff level will win a weekend trip for two to Las Vegas. The teams are also being mentored by firm partners, whose role is to help motivate and guide them to reach their goals.

The year-long game was rolled out at the firm's holiday party at the end of 2006, and since that time more than 150 of the firm's staff have actively participated, logging more than 4,000 activities into the game's database and bringing in more than 55 new clients or new business from clients.

How well do these training initiatives work? I've seen dramatic proof of their value in the past two years. I was a partner in another accounting firm, and a group of us moved to Citrin Cooperman together, including some of our more junior staff. This group of employees had been successful and happy at the old firm, but since joining this firm, I've seen a new level of professionalism from them. They've had the opportunity to develop their careers, and have shown a level of commitment to growth — both their own and the firm's — that has been impressive. I think the credit for this is directly attributable to the training, mentoring and education they've received at Citrin Cooperman. □

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