

Leading the Charge to Build CPA in BC

CA, CGA, and CMA leaders have no difficulty finding common ground for the common good.

The unification initiative has been unfolding since May 2011, and, as with any complex undertaking, there have been many twists and turns along the way. However, it is safe to say that after much hard work and consultation, the accounting profession has reached a watershed moment, with CPA ready to launch across the country. Here in BC, we are fortunate to have three dynamic and forward-thinking professionals lead our legacy bodies as we begin the transition to the Chartered Professional Accountants of BC (CPABC).

“This can work!”

Over the past few decades, accountants across Canada have seen several attempts to unite under a common designation. Karen Christiansen, FCA, president of the ICABC, Candace Nancke, FCGA, chair of CGA-BC, and Tammy Towill, FCMA, chair of CMABC, each understood very early in the current process that the accounting profession in BC—and around the world—had evolved greatly since those earlier attempts, and that unification not only could be achieved now, but needed to be achieved.

Their confidence was due, in part, to those who laid the preliminary groundwork for unification.

“I was optimistic when I saw that they had taken on the big roadblocks and addressed those first,” explains Towill. “That was really smart, and I thought it was a much more strategic, more thoughtful approach.”

Towill also credits the Quebec government for passing legislation to create a single accounting designation in the province.

For the CAs and CGAs, optimism also grew after extensive consultations with members. Like their CMA counterpart, both organizations conducted “town hall” meetings across the province, where they discovered that the majority of attendees understood the rationale for unification by the end of each meeting.

“As soon as people heard the facts, considered the impetus of Quebec legislation, and weighed the merits of continuing to be a self-regulating body, they understood why unification made sense,” Christiansen says.

Nancke pinpoints the moment when success seemed achievable: “Early this year, our board met with our counterparts who were working on advancing the CPA profession, and they shared their progress and vision with us,” she says. “I remember thinking: ‘It’s going to work this time.’”



Left to right: Tammy Towill, FCMA, chair of CMABC, Karen Christiansen, FCA, president of the ICABC, and Candace Nancke, FCGA, chair of CGA-BC. Photo by Albert Normandin.

The right people to make it happen

A successful transition to CPABC requires the right leadership, and Christiansen, Nancke, and Towill certainly fit the bill. In addition to volunteering as leaders of their respective legacy organizations, each is a leader on the job as well. Christiansen works as a partner with MNP LLP in Kelowna; Nancke is the managing partner and co-founder of Loren Nancke & Company; and Towill divides her time between working as an instructor at Capilano University, serving as vice-chair of the University's Senate, and consulting as a founding partner with the Peppertree Group.

They share many professional attributes—most notably a desire and ability to problem-solve.

"Most of the work I do is about figuring out what's not working," Towill says. "People bring me in because they're looking to figure out how to fix things."

Moreover, all three say they derive most of their professional satisfaction from helping clients.

"It's terrific to be part of a client's advisory team—to help them grow and change," Christiansen says. "You really become a part of their thought leadership."

Finally, they share a drive to succeed. Take Nancke, for example—with more than 20 employees and offices in both North Vancouver and New Westminster, Nancke has extended her role as managing partner far beyond simply doing client work. She has been instrumental in the rapid growth of her firm.

"I've always been the kind of person who figures out how we do things and what resources we need," she says.

A defining moment

"What's in the best interests of both our members and the public?" This was a defining question, say all three leaders, as it required the three bodies to make choices about strategy, people, and resources. It also forced everyone to delineate their strengths and weaknesses in order to assess where they stood in the competitive landscape—the global landscape.

"When you consider the global pressures and our structure in Canada with more than 40 regulating bodies, it made so much sense to have a stronger, unified voice provincially, nationally, and globally," Christiansen says. "If I consider my business, it's clear that my world doesn't stop at the corners of my office, or my firm, or even my community. It's a global business world, and the more international recognition we can gain is terrific for our members."

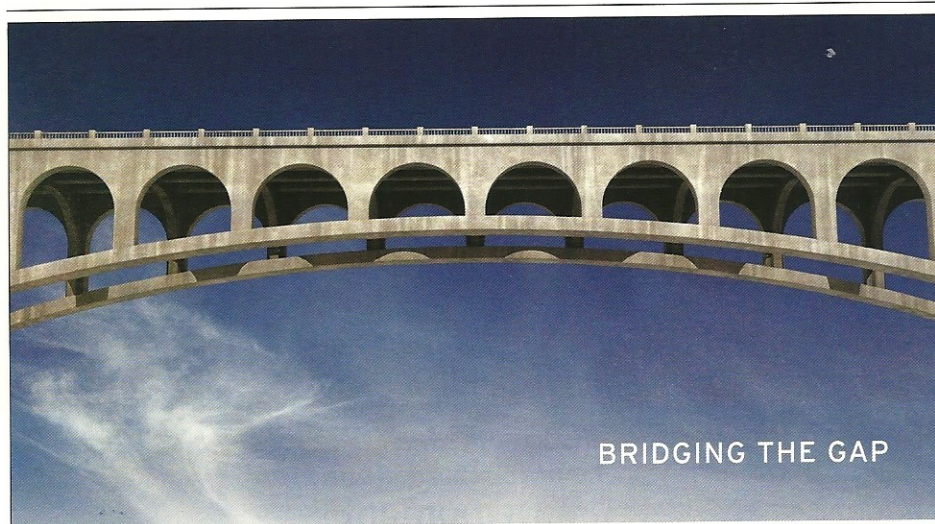
While the challenges posed by global pressures were daunting, the challenges closer to home were even greater.

"Trying to articulate a clear and meaningful distinction between the three designations was increasingly difficult," Nancke recounts. She says there is little doubt that competition affected resource allocation, and believes unification will strengthen the profession. "Instead of spending time and effort explaining how we're different, we can refocus our energy on making sure the public understands the difference between a professional accountant and a non-professional."

For Towill, this is the defining moment for the profession in BC.

"This process has required all three bodies to really examine what we did, and take what was great in each," she explains. "It forced us to come to the table and hammer out one program."

"There seems to be a natural cohesion, and the groups are working well together."
—Christiansen



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Towill says her optimism is rooted in the fact that the prospect of unification compelled everyone to focus on best practices: "It is such a rare thing to have an opportunity to pull best practices from three great organizations and build something new."

Managing change

Even when the right leadership team is in place to make a merger work and there is a compelling case that the merger will have synergistic benefits, mergers can be complicated. They involve people and processes, both of which can easily become entrenched into an organization's cultural and operational DNA.

Nevertheless, the process in BC has gone exceptionally well, and it's a testament to efforts of the entire leadership team.

"A significant amount of due diligence had to be done quickly, and it goes to show the commitment to making it work this time," Nancke says. Adds Christiansen: "There seems to be a natural cohesion, and the groups are working well together."

It helps that all three women have a natural, collaborative leadership style. They understand that a good decision is made with valued input from all constituents.

"I would never think that I have the only answer in the room," Towill says. "I'm a big believer that there is something to be had from the discussion and buy-in of everyone involved."

They also point out that the three bodies have worked hard to achieve not only strategic fit, but cultural fit as well.

"We all have brand loyalty—there's absolutely no question about that—but it's also about recognizing the greater good of the bigger brand," says Christiansen. Adds Towill: "For people to be excited enough and positive enough about something new to let go of that much pride really speaks to the work done by the leadership to get people to this point."

The next milestone

All three leaders agree on what they would like to see during the next 12 to 18 months: legislation.

"It's the last piece of the equation," says Christiansen.

As professional accountants, she and her colleagues understand the value this would bring.

"I would love to start using CPA right now," Nancke says, "and to link the new branding to the membership."

In the interim, managing change will continue to be a critical part of this unification process. Each organization's employees are working hard towards operational integration—a fact that is not lost on the CMABC chair.

"Our staff members are doing a great job, but it would be great to have more stability," Towill says. "It's easier for us because we go back to our day jobs, but they are living it every day."

"I'm excited because there are very few opportunities in life where you have a chance to build something from scratch." —Towill

Believing in CPA

While Christiansen, Nancke, and Towill each had a different journey to their respective volunteer positions, the creation of the CPA designation allowed them to meet at a crossroads of opportunity and status quo. They chose to embrace opportunity, and they're excited about the future.

"We are building the best business school that is available," Christiansen says. "I truly believe that by bringing all three designations together, the accounting profession is going to be recognized as one of the premiere business development tools in terms of education."

Towill values the opportunity to start with a blank canvas.

"I'm excited because there are very few opportunities in life where you have a chance to build something from scratch," she says. "What we had before was great, but we now have a chance to build something that will be truly amazing on a national scale."

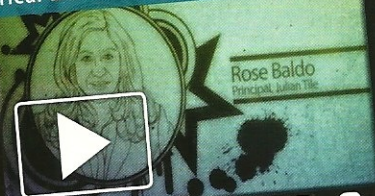
Nancke is even more succinct: "I've never been one to settle for the status quo. Just because 'that's how we always did things,' doesn't mean there isn't a better way. CPA is a better way of doing things."

The accounting profession in Canada has historically been well served by the many important contributions of British Columbia's CAs, CGAs, and CMAs. There is little doubt that Christiansen, Nancke, and Towill are continuing this legacy by leading the charge to build CPA. ■

Patrick Schryburt is the communications manager for CGA-BC.

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