

GENDER EQUALITY

2021 Best Firms for Women: Mastering the new balancing act

By [Danielle Lee](#) October 07, 2021, 10:00 a.m. EDT 25 Min Read

Flexibility in (and outside) the workplace has become a baseline expectation for many employees since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the 2021 Best Firms for Women had already been providing an adaptable environment appealing to all staff, but especially their female professionals, for years. The No. 1 Best Firm for Women, Wakefield, Massachusetts-based Tonneson + Co., for example, instituted a reduced-hours option back in the 1980s, according to president and CEO Rick Mastrocola. It was initially tailored to primary care providers, who were historically women.

"We offer reduced hours to a significant amount of our mothers raising families," he said, introducing tax shareholder Amy Phelan as someone who successfully took advantage of this policy to advance in the firm where she has worked for the past 27 years. "Amy is one of them. Reduced hours is one thing — the reduced hours did not interfere with career advancement. The value you bring to a company is not in the hours you bring, it's the value, and that value is what has made Tonneson successful."

Phelan is one of the female leaders who make up 40% of Tonneson's executive team, which is significantly higher than the industry average.

"Twenty three years ago, I had my son and I was able to work a reduced schedule," Phelan shared, "and I was able to go to doctors' appointments, able to not miss hockey games and tennis matches, and still do my job and was respected for what I brought to the table... I never once felt like I was being held back because of my need for work-life balance, and as it tied into the women in the company being viewed and respected."

Instituting these work-life balancing policies and establishing a culture of respect have benefitted all of Tonneson's 77 employees – and enticed many of them to stay, given the firm's low 9% turnover rate. These types of programs and practices that both support and advance women are universal to all of the 2021 Best Firm for Women honorees. In addition to No. 1 Best Firm for Women, Tonneson, we also spoke to the No. 2 and 3 firms, Springfield, Pennsylvania-based Brinker Simpson and Co. and Liberty, Ohio-based HD Davis CPAs, respectively, about how they have fostered award-winning, female-empowering cultures.

What makes you a Best Firm for Women?

Marcy DeLorenzo-Rosci (manager, accounting and advisory services, Brinker Simpson):

Brinker Simpson believes in a workplace that allows for a balanced life – with time for family, creative pursuits, and community involvement. The firm promotes proper work-life balance by allowing a great deal of flexibility for where and when our work gets done. This enables employees, mainly working women and mothers, to be home and present for their families.

Brianna Buchanan (supervisor, accounting and advisory services, Brinker Simpson): Brinker Simpson values their employees' input. They encourage suggestions or concerns to be brought to Partners and management. A few years ago, there were several parents with young children. Backup emergency care is always an issue resulting in moms taking off and using their PTO. Brinker set up an emergency backup nanny service for their employees to use. Not only do they offer the program, but they cover the majority of the cost. This allows for a more balanced life. I enjoy a flexible schedule so I can be involved in my children's activities and school -- I never feel pressured to miss any because of work. The Partners' don't look down if you want to take time for your family. These extra benefits as a working mom make Brinker Simpson stand out.

Mastrocola (Tonneson): The environment here is a safe environment, an environment where you are able to grow and to be driven. We have a good mentor program here, and the fact that you are safe here is incredibly important to all of us, male and female.

Christine Graygo (manager, HD Davis): As women we at times feel we have to choose between career or family and if we chose a career we feel we are not being the best mother, wife, daughter, friend, etc. The partners have gone out of their way to create a truly flexible work and an open communication environment. We are able to work from home, flexible schedules and their doors are always open for anything that you need to discuss. HD Davis goes above and beyond to make sure we do not feel we have to choose between work and family.

Crystal Harmon (tax director, Wymer Brownlee Wealth Strategies): We have created an environment and culture at Wymer Brownlee that not only supports women but also promotes a family friendly atmosphere for all employees and encourages work life balance. Women leaders in our firm – in senior and executive-level positions – mentor and encourage fellow female employees.

You are an Accounting Today Best Firm for Women based on positive survey responses from the women in your firm. What would you say these positive responses are based on?

Alex McNally (supervisor, HD Davis): Positive responses are created due to the atmosphere that has been created by our partners and managers. Their leadership that has been taught and their ability to break social norms of having a "boys club" when it comes to a public accounting firm.

Angela Johnson (tax specialist, HD Davis): Our culture and family-oriented dynamic creates an inviting environment for all employees. Although everyone is given equal opportunities within the company, we have participated in Women in Business recognition through local newspapers and press releases to acknowledge their success and appreciation for them.

Jocelyn Tabus (supervisor, HD Davis): You are valued by your work and ability to be a team player, not anything else. Everyone is treated as individuals and the partners do everything to allow you to meet your own goals.

Graygo (HD Davis): Positive responses are based on the partners creating an inclusive environment. The partners have worked really hard to ensure that everyone regardless of gender is regarded equally based on abilities and team work.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): At Wymer Brownlee, we have created an environment where anyone can succeed. There are no limits, no glass ceiling, or hoops to jump through. You can create your own success through hard work, integrity, and mastery of your craft. Our flexibility and family friendly culture helps to support our employees, and the potential for growth and advancement without having to compromise your commitments at home attracts amazing women to the firm.

Anne McPeake (office manager, Brinker Simpson): Brinker Simpson walks the talk and commits to inclusion. Our leadership team demonstrates this as a business priority – by what they say, what they do, what they measure, and how they lead. I have been here for 30 years and saw the company go from one woman to 24 women, including four who are partners. The leadership team encourages all staff to further their professional interest – online training, CPEs, webinars, access to leadership development programs, etc.

Donna Stilwell (partner, Brinker Simpson): Management has always been willing to listen to employees and flexible when women need to work at home. We also offer part-time opportunities. I tell my team, "If you are not stressed at home, you will not be stressed at work, so whatever I can do to make your life easier, let me know." I am a working mom. I was fortunate enough to have a lot of support, and I worked part-time. I still consider myself to be a working mom. My kids are grown now with their own lives, but I still want to be there for my family. It is just a little less stressful for me now. I don't have to drive anyone to practice etc. I understand how hard it is to juggle your job and career. The firm also supports your career goals. When I started in 2015 as a supervisor, there was no formal outsourced accounting or fraud and forensic department. We now have a team of 10, and I'm the Practice Area partner. It was not my intention when I started, but the firm opened the door for me.

Phelan (Tonneson): Everyone at every level, top to bottom, is supportive of our culture. There are certain people who work at Tonneson who fit our culture--one of balance, flexibility and talent. With the talent we are able to get from women, it's almost more of a benefit to us than to them.

Do you have any specific strategies for recruiting women? For retaining them?

McNally (HD Davis): We don't strategize to recruit any one gender over another; however, we are open and honest about our team. That our team is diverse, respectful and uplifting. Us being able to retain women in our company simply comes from our ability to work as a team and to lift each other up, rather than tearing each other down.

Johnson (HD Davis): We hire based on fit-if the individual can mesh well with our company culture – because our people are our main focus. The goal is to invest in our employees to create opportunities for growth for all.

Tabus (HD Davis): Staff are hired based on their willingness to learn and be a team player. HD looks for the best fit for our team regardless of other factors like gender.

Graygo (HD Davis): Our team feels like a family so we really just look for people based on their willingness to be part of the team and look out for each other.

Mastrocola (Tonneson): The recruiting part in this profession, it's difficult to find good people. Everyone is in a tough position finding good, qualified people. In recruiting, we talk about core values, work-life balance, education and training, professional growth and development, personally and professionally, DEI – we were an early adopter of DEI--and social responsibility. We ask candidates to weigh in on core values, and how they align.

Phelan (Tonneson): Public accounting is a tough career choice, it's deadline-driven. We recognize that early on, to attract the best talent, a lot of the talent [being] women, we provide that flexibility and opportunity for balance... It's not just women with young children, but women that have other things – women that have aging parents they need to help out with. I recently became a grandparent, and I'm able to take care of my granddaughter on Fridays. I'm really proud that we are offering that across the board, not just to women of small children, or women with aging parents – it's important to offer that flexibility.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): We are flexible, with a family-first mentality. We are surrounded by intelligent women who want to offer first-rate services to our clients. If a team member needs to take time off, another team member jumps in to ensure our clients receive the best possible attention and assistance. We work together and support one another as a team.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): We employ the best person for the job regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation, and when that happens to be a woman, we're enthusiastic to extend an offer to join our company. Some of our female employees have been with the organization for more than 20 years. We feel the biggest reason for that retention is how women have been able to establish goals, set career objectives, and experience a path designed to help them reach their own kind of success. Again, there are no glass ceilings for anyone at our firm.

How did the pandemic impact these efforts?

DeLorenzo-Rosci (Brinker Simpson): The firm went above and beyond to help parents balance their work responsibilities with homeschooling during the pandemic. Leadership held a virtual meeting with the firm's working parents to understand the struggles they were facing, propose solutions, such as keeping the office open for staggered schedules, and even offer conference room space for children to complete their school work.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): The pandemic solidified the ability of team members to work at home and be productive. I think it helped prove we can be more flexible for all team members, not just women — we have young fathers on our team as well.

McCabe (Brinker Simpson): Our billing coordinator earned her accounting degree during the pandemic. Almost immediately, the firm committed to backfilling the role and advancing her into an accounting position. The firm established a child care program that provides a paid benefit and service for backup child care in response to female colleagues expressing the struggles of balancing professional responsibilities if/when daycares were closed or when their child had a fever and couldn't go in. A woman with 6-year-old twins earned her CPA certification during the pandemic because the firm supported her with flexibility and a recently established study program.

Mastrocola (Tonneson): We shut down early, because of our investment in technology. We did receive an award from the Boston Chamber of Commerce for 2021, Innovation and Growth — very few companies get that. Our technology has always been very strong. As a result of that kind of technology, we were able to transition to remote. For all communications, we always took into account the fact that families are at home with children, and it's a much bigger challenge trying to balance all of that. We don't work off an hourly matrix, but stick with what value you bring to the company.

Phelan (Tonneson): If anything, the COVID environment, the virtual environment we are so used to, made it a better environment for working remotely. We still see each other, even miles apart. The silver lining is it is more feasible for women... We've always had a women's group within the firm where a few women get together. It's educational and we are talking back and forth about the challenges we are facing — with children at home, educating at home. It really took off during the COVID environment, with real support. The women's committee we always had in place but it really helped people in isolation, it really did grow and make us stronger.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): In general, hiring in some of our smaller, rural markets is tricky, but we have always been able to attract amazing talent thanks to our culture and flexibility. An extended tax season delayed the need for immediate hiring, but we will increase our hiring efforts as we head into a more compressed season like pre-pandemic.

Johnson (HD Davis): Many businesses were forced into adapting a new virtual working environment. By being open to change, our firm was able to turn this into something positive. Most of our employees work remotely now, so we are able to hire anyone from anywhere throughout the country!

Tabus (HD Davis): Working remotely is definitely more common since the pandemic, which allows even more flexibility for everyone. This new environment allows for recruiting from across the country and opens a new pool of candidates.

Graygo (HD Davis): We always had the ability to work from home but have expanded to be able to work from anywhere. We have continued to hire from throughout the country.

What have been your biggest challenges and successes in recruiting and advancing women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): COVID has been tough on most businesses and employees, and a lot of the burden to teach children virtually or care for sick family members fell on the shoulders of women. We actively worked to make accommodations for our employees over the past year and a half. We allowed employees to work remotely. We offered flexible hours to those who needed extra support. All while providing a safe and friendly work environment.

Graygo (HD Davis): Our biggest challenge has been finding individuals with the way the job market has been. Our success has been that we are able to hire anywhere in the country and our flexible hours. We have team members in Florida, Texas, New York, Indiana. Being able to work from anywhere and with flexible schedules the women within our organization are able to not feel the need to choose between work and family. HD Davis promotes based on abilities regardless of gender.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): We had two women in our firm promoted during the pandemic. I don't think we experienced any recruiting challenges that were unique from other firms. We were fortunate to find good people. Social media has become an essential tool for recruiting and providing insight into our business models, talent management processes, and culture.

McCabe (Brinker Simpson): Right before the pandemic, I was promoted to a newly established Business Development role. When the Governor shut down nonessential businesses, I was furloughed. CPA firms were added to the essential list by the end of that day. I was asked to mobilize and lead the firm's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Task Force, dedicated to studying, interpreting, and advising clients on available federal and state laws and stimulus initiatives. I was responsible for providing critical guidance on overcoming challenges and navigating this uncharted situation that continued to evolve rapidly. We hosted over 25 free webinars for the public. Our first webinar had less than 30 people, and by May, we had close to 400 people in attendance. I've gone from intern to staff accountant, staff accountant to senior accountant, senior accountant to Manager, and now a Director. I credit this to being part of a firm that supports me with the flexibility I need as a working mother and a firm that values me enough to lead through a nontraditional career path in the accounting industry.

What is the typical experience for a woman advancing within your firm?

Phelan (Tonneson): My experience coming in the door--and I'm honestly saying this--I never felt I would be held back... The first day I started, I never felt held back, I felt supported, along with education and career growth.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): Brinker Simpson is committed to ensuring that all employees have the same professional development opportunities and achieve success regardless of gender. We treat each team member equally, and we support everyone's goals. Women don't want special treatment. During our review process, we set 60-90-180 goals and meet accordingly to review them. We help our team navigate their personal challenges to achieve their professional objectives. Recently, we promoted a senior accountant to a supervisor. She has been a dedicated employee and just completed her CPA exam. During the pandemic, she came to me and was stressed because of homeschooling, studying for the exam, etc. I told her to do what she can and let us know how we can offer our support. That is our culture. The firm genuinely cares about the people who work here and wants them to do well.

Buchanan (Brinker Simpson): Brinker Simpson has many female leaders. This sets an excellent example for new or current females in the firm that opportunities to grow into management positions are available. They encourage all employees to further their education, network, take on new responsibilities, promote a healthy work-life balance, and support their employees while achieving their goals. They have also created mentorship programs to help the younger staff grow in their careers.

McCabe (Brinker Simpson): There is no typical experience, which is what I love most about Brinker Simpson. We recruit, promote, and retain many women because the firm has always been receptive and willing to implement employee feedback. Flexibility, curiosity, and openness to change at Brinker Simpson create an environment where women want to work and be supported in a path to leadership. I started at Brinker Simpson as an intern and have spent most of my professional career at the firm. Around three or four years ago, I began to shift my vision of an ideal career path based on my passion and strengths. I spoke to the managing partner about moving me into a Business Development role (a role we did not have prior). At that time, I was a highly billable employee, managing consulting-oriented projects with high rates; it would make little sense to move me into this new role. However, our managing partner was enthusiastic and worked independently on my behalf with the other partners to establish a position that supported everyone. To this day, I am more grateful for this support than I am for anything else in my professional career.

Johnson (HD Davis): Just like the men at our firm, women are heard. When anyone has a concern or idea, there is an open-door policy for growth. People respect each other. Relationships matter regardless of gender. Promotions are based on efficiency and quality of work, all while ensuring that the visions of each employee at the individual level are considered.

Graygo (HD Davis): The managers and supervisors within our firm are all women. The partners do not take gender into consideration but instead look at abilities, willingness to take on whatever is needed for the firm. Everyone is heard and personal growth and goals are always considered.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): We strive to provide a supportive workplace with opportunity for growth for all employees regardless of gender. We maintain good communication and make a concerted effort to know their individual goals and design a pathway that cultivates the career they want. We don't push people into boxes or roles they don't want to be in, so we work to understand what "success" uniquely means to them.

What does the accounting profession need to do to retain and advance more women?

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): Providing employees with flexibility in their schedules and work life balance goes a long way for most employees, especially women. Our staffing model and expectations have evolved over time. In the past, we required employees to work on Saturdays during tax season, and several years ago, we decided that didn't fit with our firm's culture of being family friendly. It's been a great change for our team, and they are able to get their work done when it's best for them.

Johnson (HD Davis): Stop being so damn stuffy haah Creating an all-inclusive, authentic working environment for all will help eliminate any feeling of inequality. Accounting has its stigma, so have some fun with each other to keep things lively and enjoyable!

Graygo (HD Davis): The accounting profession needs to stop having the reputation of a "boys club". Flexible schedules and an open door and open mind policy.

McPeake (Brinker Simpson): Pay and benefits might attract, but it takes more to make women stay. Allow the women to grow and don't hold them back. Encourage your staff, show your appreciation, and remind them how valuable they are as a team member.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): Offer flexibility and support. Operate as a team. Support each other.

McCabe (Brinker Simpson): Be strategic about unforeseen child care needs, include women in networking and social events, encourage and treat men with children the same as women (when men begin to feel more comfortable taking time, women will too), and invest in professional development guided by what women are expressing is most beneficial to their career growth.

Mastrocola (Tonneson): What's important is it cannot be a check-the-box mentality at the leadership level; it has to be real, what you really believe in. Leadership has to believe that it's the right thing to do, the fair thing to do, and have to be behind it 100%. That has been the leadership position at the firm since 1980, the importance of leadership to mandate a safe environment and career opportunities. No barriers or glass ceiling have existed at Tonneson + Co... We don't think if you have a reduced schedule that somehow reduces opportunities to people.

How would you advise other firms seeking to become a Best Firm for Women?

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): The change doesn't have to happen overnight. However, consistency is key. While it may seem difficult, start with one opportunity, one assist, one woman. Remember to appreciate the successes of all the women in your firm loud and clear -- show them that you value them.

DeLorenzo-Rosci (Brinker Simpson): Promote work-life balance, and actually mean it. Ensure that those behaviors are modeled at the top so that women don't feel guilty for prioritizing their families and other responsibilities.

Graygo (HD Davis): To have an open door policy as well as an open mind. HD Davis partners listen to the women in the office with their concerns and suggestions. They not only listen but also try to come up with solutions. Some firms have the open door policy but suggestions and/or solutions are not implemented. Here we all work together to come up with the best solutions not only for the individual but for the firm as well.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): Provide opportunities for women to be in leadership. Ask your female employees what's important to them and make modifications if you need to. Recognize talent and create paths for women to excel and advance.

What's on the horizon for the firm in terms of keeping up its status as a Best Firm for Women?

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): We are constantly evaluating ourselves as a firm — including an annual benefits review, annual two-day company retreat, and regular team-building events throughout the year. We have an engaged — and largely female — leadership team that meets weekly to discuss the firm's needs, challenges, and opportunities, and we strive to do the best we can for all of our employees. We will continue to listen to feedback from our employees and foster a welcoming environment. In our changing business world, it's more important than ever to be understanding and make accommodations when you can. We want to continue to make this a wonderful place to work and promote those that have earned it.

Johnson (HD Davis): Because we've adapted a new virtual working environment, the potential for new hires has expanded substantially. We plan to seek individuals all throughout the country who fit our company culture and are willing to learn.

Phelan (Tonneson): A focus of ours is our mentor program--continuing to try to build our mentor program and make sure our mentor program is relaying our flexibility and culture, addressing it all. At the end of the day, our employees are our assets.

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): To continue our culture of supporting each other and achieving work/life balance. It is not easy, but when you work as a team, someone can help you when you need a break. Today's young accountants will be tomorrow's senior partners. We hope to continue recruiting the best accounting and finance professionals and provide them with the training and advancement opportunities to keep them continually growing.

Any other comments on your firm's role as a Best Firm for Women or on the status of women in the profession?

Stilwell (Brinker Simpson): Listen to your employees and work with them. When there is less stress at home, there is less stress at work, and your employees will want to stay and grow with your firm. Be flexible. Recognize achievement – no matter how big or how small.

Buchanan (Brinker Simpson): I started at Brinker Simpson almost nine years ago. I got married in those nine years, had twins, struggled with the life-work balance, and recently passed the CPA exam. At every point, Brinker Simpson has been there to help me succeed in both my family life and career. While pregnant with twins during tax season, a Partner came to me one night and told me to go home and rest because my mental health was more important than any work that needed to be completed at that moment. We work as a team here and help out when another person needs it. I recently passed the CPA exam and struggled to find balance during the process. Whenever I went to a Partner feeling overwhelmed with COVID, virtual schooling, work, and studying, they would take the time to help develop a plan to achieve my goals. When I passed the exam, I can honestly say I could feel their excitement for me. When I thought I couldn't pass or wanted to give up, they would support me and get me right back on track. They want women to succeed in the firm, and to me, that is the critical component to being the Best Firm for Women. Brinker Simpson is a firm committed to its culture – our leadership team stands by their word and prides themselves on following through on actions and offering continual support for one another – it's priceless.

McCabe (Brinker Simpson): With schools going remote and volatility of the availability of preschool/before and aftercare, childcare needs became seemingly insurmountable obstacles for working parents. Mainly, working mothers compromised their professional lives to prioritize newly established responsibilities in their personal lives. I feel confident this had to impact progress made by women in the accounting industry, and I have personally struggled with this. The common theme among organizations excelling at promoting and supporting women is flexibility. I think Brinker Simpson has mastered this concept primarily because it's baked into our culture – it's part of who we are individually and collectively. The pandemic transformed the concept of a working mother into one of exhaustion and a state of constant overwhelm. However, I often felt grateful to work at a firm where leadership consistently supported working mothers and parents. Our partners recognize the everyday challenges of working parents and families. This was true before the pandemic and remained consistent when our team desperately needed the support the most. The accounting profession needs to be creative, proactive, and collaborative to keep women engaged and happy in the profession; Brinker Simpson does a fantastic job and can serve as an excellent example to our peers. Firm culture, flexibility, and an environment where women want to grow their careers will protect the accounting industry from the impending doom of the Great Resignation.

Harmon (Wymer Brownlee): We're thrilled that the women in our workplace feel safe, heard, and love being here and that we built a culture that supports and recognizes them for their accomplishments.

Graygo (HD Davis): I am encouraged by the growth in women's advancement within the accounting profession. We have a lot more to go but with firms like HD Davis and their willingness to continue to grow, improve and do what is necessary to retain the most talented individuals I have hope that women's advancement within the accounting profession will continue.