



# Lending more than a helping hand

By Arda Ocal

**A**lthough CMAs typically volunteer their time sitting on boards for non-profit organizations wearing their financial “hats,” organizations are realizing that CMAs have the skill set to contribute to more than just budgeting and finance.

All three of the following CMAs have very different backgrounds, jobs, experiences, and are involved with a diverse group of organizations. What they all have in common, however, is a passion for what they do and a backbone of CMA training.

“The main reason I volunteer is to give back to society,” Peter Strum, FCMA, says. “Like many baby boomers, I have benefited from the opportunities that were presented to me during my education.” For 30 years, Strum worked with an international management consulting firm and was a partner for 20 years. With a little more time on his hands now that he is semi-retired, he felt a desire “to give back a little something.” He earned his MBA from the University of Western Ontario in 1970 and worked in the oil industry. He was attracted to the CMA program because it “had a heavy emphasis on costing, cost allocation and budgeting. In the 1970s, zero-based budgeting and new techniques for financial planning were coming into the forefront. The program gave me a head start on financial planning plus the prestige of a professional designation.”

The desire to give a little something back is certainly shared by Cathy Snyder, FCMA, chief financial officer, United Way of Kitchener-Waterloo and Area. It was actually her association with United Way that led to the position she has today. “My goal was to eventually work in the not-for-profit sector and volunteering led to the fulfilment of that goal,” says Snyder, who was previously vice-president of finance at an insurance organization in Waterloo.

An active member of her community for many years, there are few places that have escaped her helping hand and hard work. Snyder explains she decided to pursue the CMA designation because she liked the idea of working for an organization rather than an accounting firm. She found she was “far more interested in the management side of finance and accounting than purely the mechanics of financial statements.” She adds, “What’s most important is determining the ‘story’ behind the numbers ... and forecasting what will happen based on what has happened.”

While Strum and Snyder dedicate their time and efforts close to home, Rocky Dwyer, CMA, has done work both locally and abroad in both his career and volunteer endeavours. In his full-time position, Dwyer is an evaluation principal, chief review services, National Defence, Government of Canada. His job has him working on a wide variety of projects that deal with “areas of design and delivery of complex programs such as integrated force development, peacekeeping and other departmental initiatives,” and he’s had the opportunity to work on both inter-departmental and international committees. After completing a PhD in management, Dwyer decided to pursue a CMA designation to “further develop the depth, breadth and scope of my theoretical experience and to complement my public sector strategic management experience.” He felt the accreditation process was ideal as it would allow him to “learn beyond the boundaries of a traditional accountant designation.” Many of his volunteer activities are of a more academic and international nature, such as his work to provide improved education to students in Armenia.

“The challenge in volunteering,” Strum points out, “is to find something of interest and to ensure that my background will be used to its highest and best use.” All three individuals have found different niches in which to apply their skills and

knowledge, but one note of commonality is that they’ve all served as board members for various organizations.

Snyder has been an active member of her community for many years. The list of organizations with which she has been involved is extensive: United Way, the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce, St Monica House, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kitchener-Waterloo, and various committees with the City of Waterloo, Ont. In 2003, CMA Ontario awarded her with a community service award for her extensive volunteer involvement in the community and with CMA.

While the groups she has worked with are diverse, the positions she has held are less so. “My designation usually leads me to becoming treasurer of the organizations I volunteer for,” she notes. “Although I’m often a treasurer, I bring more to the role because of my understanding of strategy, risk and performance management. I have the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience in these areas as well.” Just recently, Snyder and her husband facilitated a session on strategic planning to the board and staff with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kitchener-Waterloo and Area.

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#### **More than just finance**

While Strum, a past-president of CMA Ontario, has held a variety of volunteer positions over the years, he also says that, unsurprisingly, most of his contributions to boards have been through audit committees. But, having done much of his volunteer work after a diverse career, he didn’t find himself pinned as one-dimensional. However, he admits that “based on discussions at our boards about potential new board members,” it is fair to say that a CMA is, “in the first instance, seen as a ‘financial person’ and often automatically slotted for the audit committee.”

Strum also points out that, “the evolution of the role of the audit committee today is actually a great place for a CMA.” Today, these committees handle a wide range of activities, including “deal[ing] with enterprise risk management across the whole of the organizations’ operations, various ethical frameworks, accountability mechanisms, as well as the standard financial audit. Accordingly, the audit committee is an excellent place to take advantage of the diverse talents of a CMA,” and one he feels many CMAs would find rewarding.

Since becoming a CMA, Dwyer has been involved with a number of volunteer projects in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Each year, he typically uses four to five weeks, out of his six-week vacation entitlement at work, to give back. His volunteer projects have taken him to the United States, South

America, Russia and to various parts across Europe and Canada. At home in Canada, his resumé of volunteer activities reflects those of Snyder and Strum. Here, he says, “my volunteer activities include board memberships on both finance and audit committees at Saint Paul University, memberships on several editorial boards; and I continue to be active in various conferences as a presenter both within Canada and abroad.” He notes when you utilize mentoring and coaching — organizations can develop a professional employee cadre via knowledge transfer. Not only that, he gets something in return — an opportunity to “hone my coaching and mentoring skills, while enabling me to add greater breadth and perspective back into my regular public service position.”

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While Dwyer speaks to the skills and knowledge a CMA brings to the table, Strum focuses on a slightly less concrete, but equally valuable component. He finds that CMAs have a unique perspective, a certain way of thinking that can be a significant contribution, and are particularly well-suited to certain roles, such as being a board member.

“The CMA accreditation process integrates a number of managerial topics ... this background forces and trains a person to think in a structured fashion,” Strum says. “CMAs can then bring these structures and mental frameworks to various issues.” He has found his training invaluable in his dealings with the many complexities of the health-care sector. He muses that the “ability to tackle problems and opportunities in a structured fashion is very valuable to any board.”

A key contribution of a board member is to “ask good questions,” Strum adds. “A good question helps to challenge management, can add value to management thinking and will spawn follow-up questions by other board members.” Being inquisitive and the ability to ask a thought-provoking question are invaluable skills fostered by the CMA accreditation process. Further, Strum suggests that there are three key responsibilities of a board member: provide oversight, insight and foresight into the issues, challenges and changing circumstances an organization faces. He says CMAs are well equipped to assist with these matters.

Snyder says she admits that being a CMA may have “pigeonholed” her to certain functions at first, but “because of the management side of our training, I believe it opens other doors as well. In order to understand an organization financially, I believe you need to understand it from all levels.” As such, she has been able to branch out and “assist with marketing and other ‘non-accountant activities.’”

A typical day for her can include everything from “doing the accounting for the organization, writing organizational policies,

financial forecasting, creating human resources documents, working with the CEO and the board on the strategic plan and performance measurement, writing policies on ethical conduct and acting as a privacy/risk management officer.” There’s certainly never a dull moment, and never a lack of things to do. “My typical day is more ‘project’ based than routine – there is always something different that needs to be completed,” she says.

Her role continues to expand as well, on top of her already lengthy list of responsibilities that include: accounting, HR, administration, information technology, facility management and risk management. Snyder mentions that, recently, she’s been asked to assist with strategic planning, risk management and corporate governance activities. She believes that the need for individuals who can fulfill such roles will continue to grow. “These areas for non-profit organizations used to be the ‘nice to have’s’ and now have become the ‘need to have’s’ in order to ensure the board is fulfilling its fiduciary responsibilities,” she says. In fact, Snyder predicts that ‘these areas [are] becoming just as important as the financials for NPOs.’

### **Creating opportunities**

Dwyer’s day job and volunteer work, both nationally and internationally, have allowed him to “leverage my expertise and CMA contacts to facilitate and support organizational development and growth.” For example, he proudly describes how through CESO, a not-for-profit organization that helps build independent communities, he has been able to “provide support to ASUIR University in Armenia to develop curriculum, teaching materials and learning aids to develop and enhance student competencies and abilities related to the management education.” Although many of Dwyer’s responsibilities involve education, he’s had opportunities to work beyond that area. In Bolivia, he “provided assistance to the Superintendencia de Transportes of the Bolivian government to build a sustainable performance measurement and accountability reporting framework based on the Balanced Scorecard.”

As for Strum, his volunteer work in recent years has been devoted to the health-care sector where he felt he could make a real contribution. His efforts have been concentrated in two areas — chair of the board for the Queensway Carleton Hospital — an acute care hospital that has “seen and plans exceptional expansion and growth in facilities and services” — and leadership roles on the board for Perley and Rideau Veterans’ Health Centre — a 500-resident non-profit, long-term care facility; one of the largest in Canada.

No matter where one dedicates their efforts or the reasons why one chooses to volunteer, there will often be plenty of challenges and many more rewards. That’s a given. But as Strum, Snyder and Dwyer have demonstrated, CMAs have the skills, experience, and knowledge to make valuable contributions to most any organization, and not simply as a ‘financial person.’ It is simply a matter of finding a role that suits you best. The opportunities for learning, leadership and growth will follow. ■

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