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Anita Caputo, CMA, founder, Big Picture Institute

Looking at the big picture

Anita Caputo, CMA, says she's not a traditional accountant. She uses a thought-provoking style to empower her clients to take control of their careers

Looking at the *big picture*

As an author, professional speaker, and founder of Big Picture Institute, Caputo uses her storytelling techniques to educate and empower business leaders to foster and cultivate a productive workforce. Through her strategic thinking and thought provoking style, she's empowering her clients to explore options and take action to get what they want from their own careers.

By **Andrea Civichino**

Anita Caputo, CMA, knows how to tell a good story. "When you're a professional speaker, people love to hear stories," Caputo says. "I knew I had a lot of stories to share because of my 28-year career, 12 years in the high-tech community."

Caputo's story begins in June 2001, after being laid off from Nortel Networks.

"I was in finance up until the mid-90s," she says. "I helped senior managers do finance for IT and eventually moved into customer relationship management. Before leaving Nortel, I was involved with divestitures. It was my role to see that there was a seamless transition of the people who were leaving Nortel into the buying company. My last role at Nortel involved me being spun out into a new company for which I was supposed to manage the North American set up of IT services, but it never did come to fruition because of the whole bust."

After the layoff, Caputo had no idea that receiving flowers from a friend, with a note attached that read, "Today's the first day of the rest of your life," would have such a powerful impact on her new career.

"For me, it was one of those bittersweet moments," she says. "As the time was approaching I could see the writing on the wall, but the exact day that I was laid off came as a surprise. I was bittersweet because I was thrilled to have an opportunity to start something new in my life. On the other hand, it was difficult because I had to leave behind the people who knew me best, my colleagues. I now had the chance to do something that I always wanted to do; however, I didn't know what that was."

After reading "Finding your Perfect Work," by Paul and Sarah Edwards, Caputo received authorization from the authors to teach their material at an out-placement agency in Ottawa. The book is based on the foundation of how to build a career and make a living doing what you love with the innate talent or skills and resources that an individual already possesses. Caputo's new career, teaching business professionals, led to another opportunity — teaching finance to non-finance managers at Learning Tree International, a centre for hands-on training for management and technology professionals.

"Teaching finance to non-finance managers can be a real challenge," she says. "I had students who were comfortable with numbers and those who couldn't wrap their head around numbers."

Along with her teaching endeavour, Caputo began to search for ways to make the transition from a professional CMA to an entrepreneur, professional speaker, and author. She actively volunteered and took leadership positions with organizations that shared her interests.

"The Venture Creations Group complemented my skills, and built on my CMA training and experience," she says. "I helped counsel others and in turn, learned a lot about what it took to build a successful business. The Ottawa Talent Initiative helped me connect with the people I wanted to help the most, laid off high-tech workers. I knew the pain they were suffering and I knew I could help."

As Caputo started to put more energy into her new professional speaking career, she started to document anecdotes about her previous jobs.



Dwayne Brown

“One of my contacts advised me to get in touch with a gentleman named Lee Wallace. From the moment Lee and I met we knew that we needed to collaborate and write a book.”

Wallace, a retired high school guidance councillor, partnered with Caputo to write “Learn to Bounce: From a High-tech Layoff to your Ideal Work.”

“Every week there are stories in the news about high-tech layoffs,” she says. “The unique thing about our book is that applies to all industries, not just high tech. We stuck with a niche market because we interviewed 32 men and women who worked in high tech and overcame the adversities of unemployment,” she adds.

A new direction

Caputo says that she knew she wanted to do something other than accounting after experiencing her own challenges with unemployment.

“When I was laid off, I made the decision to remove CMA after my name on my business cards,” she says. “It wasn’t until one of the counsellors at the out-placement agency sat me down and told me I was crazy because even though I didn’t want to work in accounting, the CMA designation says a lot about what I’ve accomplished in life along with my capabilities. I use this story today in the work that I do because it’s a reminder to others that a designation does bring recognition. There are CMAs out there who are doing

accounting and perhaps want to do something different. When they see me, they’ll often ask ‘how did you do it?’”

Caputo agrees that she’s not a “typical accountant.” She often tells other CMAs and her clients that after her layoff, she saw a huge opportunity to do what she really wanted to do.

“I chose not to worry about money and getting a job immediately. I had my severance pay and my husband’s income to help our family financially. I listened to what other people were telling me were my strengths.”

Caputo adds that her CMA designation, coupled with her work experience, were instrumental in the launch of her new career. She hesitantly admits that obtaining her CMA designation was not initially her first choice.

“At age 17, I wanted to be a secretary,” she says. “My brother, an accountant, suggested I attend university and work towards a business degree,” she says. “After receiving a bachelor of commerce degree from the University of Windsor, I moved to Calgary and enrolled in the CA program in Alberta. Within a year, I dropped out, joined the City of Calgary, and eventually became the controller for emergency medical services (EMS). I was surrounded by CMAs. I realized that if I wanted to advance my career and continue to grow my responsibilities, I needed to have a designation. Working towards a CMA designation was the right thing to do, at the right time. I had the experience under my belt and it made it that much easier to get.”

When she’s not delivering speeches or building her business through networking events, Caputo participates in initiatives that allow her to give back to her community. She’s a founder and past steering committee member of the Ottawa Talent Initiative, a former executive member (treasurer and director of marketing) of the Ottawa Chapter of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, past marketing chair of the Board of Directors of the Ottawa Network and Venture Creations Group, finance committee member for St. Isidore Catholic Church in the Ottawa area, school council past chair at All Saints Catholic High School, an area team captain for the Canadian Cancer Society and a canvasser for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

“Building my business is also about giving,” Caputo says. “From a business leader perspective it’s all about helping people be the best they can be. I’ve learned that in adversity, there’s always that silver lining.” ■

Andrea Civichino is editor-in-chief of *CMA Management*.

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