

This CFO's for hire

By Roy L. Williams -- The Birmingham News

Joanie Gable of Birmingham is a CFO for hire.

In 1990, she left a 15-year corporate career as a chief financial officer to form Accounting for Profits Inc., a firm in which she was hired out as a part-time finance chief for businesses across the Southeast. In May 2009, she joined Phoenix-based B2B CFO as its first Alabama partner.

B2B CFO has 146 partners across 39 states that provide chief financial officer services for small and mid-sized companies.

Gable says going from a one-person operation to joining a network of CFOs was a smart move.

"It was a step up in my career," Gable said. "Now I have a wealth of knowledge to draw resources from."

When she started Accounting for Profits, the idea of companies turning to outside CFO consultants was in its infancy, Gable said.

"I was told I couldn't do this for a living," Gable said. "Now it is catching on. It is a growing trend in today's troubled economic times as companies turn to seasoned outside financial professionals."

Firms are finding renting a CFO can be substantially cheaper, Gable said. The average annual salary for a full-time CFO in a small to mid-sized business ranges from \$94,250 to \$175,750, according to a 2009 salary guide by California-based staffing firm Robert Half International.

B2B CFO Partners' charges can be as low as \$300 and \$400 a month for small companies to thousands of dollars a month for complicated jobs that require more hours, Gable said.

In addition to providing financial counseling for business clients, Gable said B2B CFO specializes in fraud detection, litigation support, exit planning, succession and estate planning. She also helps companies determine the right computer systems to install to help cut costs and is a turn-around specialist helping struggling firms recover.

Clients Gable has worked with include The Women's Exchange, The Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Collat Jewish Family Services, The Church at Brook Hills and Nutritional Supplements Corp.

Last year, Gable provided litigation support and served as an expert witness in a divorce case handled by Birmingham's Crittenden law firm. Jessica Drennan, a lawyer for the firm, said Gable reviewed financial documents and helped her client discover millions of dollars in hidden income.



Joanie Gable of Birmingham, a CFO for hire, right, chats with Jessica Kirk Drennan of The Crittenden Firm. Drennan had Gable assist her in researching financial documents in a divorce case last year. (The Birmingham News / Frank Couch)

"It was a complicated divorce case and with Joanie's help we were able to prove the marital estate was worth \$4.5 million, which was extremely important in our case because the client was in her 60s and didn't know what was in the financial accounts," Drennan said.

Before striking it out on her own, she spent four years as CFO at Birmingham's AC3 Computers Inc. She also served as director of planning at Birmingham-based Drummond Coal.

Stephanie Rauterkus, a UAB professor of finance, said outsourcing is a great way for companies to cut costs in economic downturns. But she added it is unusual for firms to outsource top management services such as the CFO.

"This is not the same as Walmart/Sam's outsourcing their product sampling department and in turn cutting 10,000 jobs," Rauterkus said. "Those employees aren't handling sensitive information. As a member of the top management team, a CFO is in the position to make key decisions that affect the firm's mission -- maximizing owner wealth."

Rauterkus cautioned firms considering hiring an outside CFO to tread carefully. They should inquire whether that person hires him or herself out to multiple firms, and they should make sure that confidential information stays private and that there are no conflicts of interest, she said.

"I just think that both sides need to be sure that they are thinking through all of the ramifications of the situation," she said.

Gable said she does not work for competing firms and keeps all of her information confidential.