

## Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

July 19, 2013



Good for Corporations. Good for Working Moms.

**Topic:** *"Bringing Flexibility and Alternative Working Arrangements to Corporate America"*

**Allison O'Kelly**, Founder and CEO of Mom Corps, joined us this month at Women in Leadership to share her journey and lead a discussion on her approach to the staffing industry and on changes in the current workplace. In 2013 Allison's company was listed as the #5 fastest growing staffing company in the U.S. and the #2 fastest growing company on the Bulldog 100 (for UGA alums.) Since starting her company in 2005, she's appeared on The Today Show, in the Wall Street Journal, Entrepreneur and Working Mother magazines. Along with many awards and other recognition, Allison has been called an innovator and thought leader in the staffing industry.

How it all began: Growing up with a stay at home mom, Allison was always told, "You can do whatever you want." For her that was not going to be a stay at home mom – although she was quick to point out there's nothing wrong with that choice. Deciding to pursue a business career, she attended the University of Georgia where she graduated cum laude with a BBA in accounting. She went on to receive an MBA from Harvard University and then her CPA license.

Allison's professional career began in public accounting at KPMG Peat Marwick. Following that, she was in a fast track management program at Toys R Us where she had various roles including launching the original Babiesrus.com website and running an \$11M Toys "R" Us store in suburban Atlanta. Looking to promote the first female into a district manager position, Allison's boss offered her the position, one among 12 male district managers. He wanted her in the position despite her role as a new mother - and simply asked her what she needed to make it work. "Working 3 days a week from 8-4," Allison responded...and she got it.

But it wasn't too long before Allison realized that even with the exact work arrangement she'd requested, she couldn't make it work. At that time, she just couldn't do it all. Unhappily for her and for the company, she decided to leave.

In 2003, Allison began doing independent contract accounting work. She also knew that that many of her friends were in the same boat. They wanted to work, but they felt like they had to stay home with their children. "When my contracting work became too much to handle on my own," she said, "I asked a friend to work with me. Despite having no specific business plan in place, one thing led to another and two years later, I started Mom Corps, a staffing company dedicated to helping moms and others in search of flexible work."

"Interesting, the name for the company came from a lot of internet searches...and from a suggestion from my consultant husband. Having been in the military, he mentioned the term 'corps' as in 'Marine Corps' and I said, 'Ok, that's it.'"

"I guess ignorance is truly bliss," she continued. "Even without an MBA-approved business plan, I put my nose to the grind stone, worked hard and did what made sense to me. Barely one year after founding the company, I received a nationally recognized 'Entrepreneurial Mom of the Year' Award. To be honest, I felt a little guilty as I had only just begun. I knew that my first approach for the company didn't work, that I had no external funding, and I

couldn't keep staff on a commission-only basis. Later, I decided to move in the direction of franchising and this too was something I knew little about," Allison admitted.

At this point in Allison's story, however, it's become pretty obvious that there are at least 3 major characteristics of hers that have propelled her entrepreneurial career: her decisiveness, her willingness to try new things, and her lack of fear of the untried.

Since the founding of Mom Corps in 2008, over 150,000 individuals from all across the country – 10% of whom are men – have come through the staffing site. Always looking for something new and a way to enhance her business, Allison shared the fact that in 2014, she plans to launch Mom Corps University. "This is a way to better monetize our very substantial candidate base," Allison explained.

Throughout her remarks, Allison made it clear that she loves the career she's made for herself. "It may not be perfect for someone else, but I'm able to have 100% flexibility to work how I need to and to raise my three children. I think I do have it all, and most importantly, I'm happy with the control I have."

Allison went on to share her personal thoughts on some of today's top news stories including some high profile women leaders:

- **3<sup>rd</sup> Metric Conference:** Hosted by [Arianna Huffington](#), this conference on Women and Power highlighted the importance of a third metric. In addition to money and power – the 3<sup>rd</sup> metric is "giving back."
- **Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo:** From Allison's perspective, she hasn't been a good example for balancing work and family by abolishing telecommuting altogether.
- **Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook:** Her book on "leaning in" is much different than views that she presented several years ago at a Harvard conference that Allison attended. But, Allison agrees that the discussion created by Sandberg's book and others' comments about it has been a good thing. She also thinks women do not need to be afraid to share their opinions.
- **Best Buy:** The company recently abolished a results-only work environment thus to some extent, turning back the clock on how work there gets done.
- **Ann Marie Slaughter, professor and former State Department official under Hilary Clinton:** Allison pointed out that in her article published before Sandberg's book was published, Slaughter said "women can't have it all." She quit her job to spend time with her son. From Allison's vantage point, she isn't sure there were not other options Slaughter could have pursued.

Allison added, "Decisions working women make impact their companies and their own careers, but their companies need to evolve as well. Starting now and certainly into the future, U.S. companies must offer flexibility in order to be competitive for the best talent."

## Q&A

**Q:** Do you offer 'job share' opportunities where 2 people / women do the same job but at different times?

There hasn't been much luck with job share. It's difficult because it's hard to match the two individuals and make it work.

**Q:** What is Mom Corps' strategy for matching candidates to positions?

Mom Corps is like any other staffing firm with an additional component. We spend a lot of time on fit and getting to know the job. We make sure both sides – our client companies and the candidates - understand what the other is looking for.

**Q:** What jobs offer more flexible arrangements? And, what is one of the most challenging requests you've had?

From our experience, public accounting jobs are some of the most flexible. And, we've been given some really crazy roles to fill, e.g., a construction litigation attorney.

**Q:** Do Moms Corps women who accept flexible positions sacrifice benefits?

Many women don't need or expect benefits. It all depends on the individual's needs and of course, different employers offer different benefits. There are some employers out there who offer benefits to part time workers.

**Q:** How do you find help when you need it?

I'd say this isn't my strong suit. I'm not good about this. I wish I had and was a mentor. I guess I'm lucky that along my career path, I've played in circles with smart people. I know people who know things. I've called on some of them to say, 'What do you think about this?' But I don't have a board or close advisors. I have also lived in three cities (now in Philly), which makes it hard to keep in touch. But with regards to social media, it's awesome and I do use Twitter and Linked In. Facebook – that's strictly personal for me – just family and friends.

**Q:** How do you find meaningful work and give back in the corporate sphere?

We do understand that people want that. Right now we don't know too much about our candidates other than through a few surveys. We have a broad database, and we hope to come to know more about them going forward.

Note: Here the seminar attendees shared a number of ways to make work meaningful including: serving on a non profit board, joining an affinity group, volunteering, participating in job shadowing days, etc. One pointed out that you have to be clear about what meaningful work means to you and define how you'll achieve it. You may have to give up something on a daily basis. Some have found meaningful work in their role as a coach and trainer. One attendee also shared a personal example of how she has taken responsibility for helping an associate and how that has added meaning in her own worklife.

**Q:** Can you give an example of some large corporations moving to more flexible schedules?

Sometimes these programs are eliminated under financial strains. Some companies offer long term leave of absences, where employees are still engaged and may come back in phases. It's difficult to make a blanket program for all employees.

**Q:** Is the workforce changing?

About 10% of the people we place are men. The demographics aren't changing too much, but the anecdotal "why" is changing. People are looking for different kinds of flexibility.

**Q:** How do you walk the line of telling a potential employer that you want flexibility while being completely professional?

You're a professional and you act that way. It's a 2-way street. You have to show that you're a team player and that you understand that sometimes you may need to make concessions in your agreed to work schedule. And the good employers will reciprocate. We don't try to convince clients that flexibility is important and we shouldn't have to. Incidentally, the best clients are fathers with daughters because they really understand.

**Q:** Is awkwardness around the maternity leave conversation going away?

No, this issue will always be there. It comes down to talking to people and being a good leader. You need to talk about options and help coach through it. Role models are so important in this conversation. Consider how you can make re-entry easier.

**Q:** Has your journey changed how you manage your own business? How are you looking at business growth?

You have to decide what works for you at a given time. I feel like I have it all at the same time. And I feel good about what I do. Someone else might think I'm crazy, but it makes me happy.