

# Developing Diverse Talent

An Interview with Mary A. Tolan,  
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Accretive Health



Mary A. Tolan

**EDITORS' NOTE** Mary Tolan has served as Founder, Chief Executive Officer, and Director since November 2003. Prior to joining the company, Tolan spent 21 years at Accenture Ltd. serving in several leadership roles, including as Group Chief Executive for the Resources Operating Group and as a member of Accenture's executive committee and management committee. She serves on the board of trustees of The University of Chicago, Loyola University, and the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Accretive Health ([www.accretivehealth.com](http://www.accretivehealth.com)) partners with health care providers to help them more effectively manage their revenue process, strengthen their financial stability, and improve the quality of care they provide while reducing overall health care costs.

## How critical is having a diverse workforce and how successful have you been in growing your female workforce?

Talent is the number one determinant of our company's long-term success – the talent you can attract, retain, and develop.

To the extent that you are effective at attracting talent of the highest caliber and you have the potential to retain and develop it, you're going to do better than your competition.

The women who are top students in undergraduate or graduate programs will be

a fabulous source of talent and leadership. If a company is effective at developing diverse talent, it will end up with a higher caliber leadership team at the top.

Approximately 50 percent of the people we hire annually are fresh off of campuses. As we look at the people who are becoming operations leads a couple of years later, we still see that ratio reflected in those promotions.

When we look at who is being promoted to manager or senior manager positions two or three years down the road, we want to ensure that the promoted population has the same complexion as the promotable – those who could be considered. If we don't see that, we won't have a company that is effective at talent development.

So it's important to look at our promotion process and see that those who are moving up in the company reflect the talent that has been out there developing their track records and experience bases.

Ours is a service industry and there is a lot of diversity in the leadership of our client organizations that look to see that we value diversity as well. That can mean gender diversity and age diversity as well as ethnicity. The whole health care arena is, by its nature, one of great diversity.

That is great for us in attracting talent because high performers want to be in an ecosystem that will give them tremendous opportunity to seek their highest potential. With us, they can see that those possibilities are there.

From a business standpoint, we know that innovation also flourishes from diverse inputs. For any company that successfully innovates on an habitual basis, it comes from the stimulation and interaction of diverse ideas and backgrounds backed by a culture that esteems innovation.

A lot of companies think you can only spend so much time on innovation and then you need to get back to work.

What allows us to innovate at the highest level is that, if our talent achieves high performance on a current assignment, that gives them greater freedom to take on more in the future. That concept requires that they achieve operational excellence that creates results on their current job and then provides them with the freedom to figure out what else they want to work on.

## How do you address work/life balance?

I've always been optimistic that having a strong and close family is possible at the same time that you're having a successful career.

I got that confidence from my dad who worked extremely hard and still managed to raise seven children.

If you work through challenges along the way with optimism and the confidence that business prepares you as a problem-solver, you will overcome the difficulties that come up.

I also find that a lot of my male colleagues are every bit as committed to work/life balance as my female colleagues.

## What do you find most fulfilling about your leadership role?

Working with great colleagues is the fun part. I've always found it critical to be working on great challenges and opportunities that

you feel are important – in our case, we have the chance to help health care providers create even better quality outcomes while helping make health care more affordable.

We know that the kind of capabilities we're working on are absent from the ecosystem and we can see the impact we're having; that makes the work gratifying.

But we can add to that the fulfillment of working with smart colleagues who put their clients and the team's goals first, which means we have an incredible team atmosphere in which to achieve success.

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Mary Tolan (center) with Alicia Coughlin, Sara S. Spector, Briana A. Kearney, and Natasha Esprey (left to right)

### Alicia Coughlin

In her current role as Director of Operations and Business Development, Alicia Coughlin says her focus is the development and integration of a new Health Information Management (HIM) initiative. In addition, she continues to expand AccretiveU, looking for ways to operationalize and replicate their training methodology.

She arrived at Accretive over five years ago, when she was seeking opportunities to break into business after staying home with her children for a decade. After interviewing with a series of companies in various industries, she met with someone from Accretive and found the opportunities for growth unmatched.

Mary Tolan gave Coughlin and Sara Spector the challenge of partnering with the City of Chicago to come up with creative staffing solutions: hence the creation of AccretiveU, which is their training center at the Chicago shared service center where they work with a non-for-profit organization as well as Chicago City Colleges, and are working on developing an additional partnership with a high school that Mayor Emmanuel has decided to make health care specific.

Of Tolan's leadership, Coughlin notes, "Because Mary has created a culture where learning is so positive as well as a culture of diversity, you're put into contact with people that you might not talk to on a daily basis."

The benefit of "nailing her day job" is what she refers to as "freedom land": "If I get my stuff done, I can have fun and drive the incremental value and go above and beyond at night. And that is celebrated at Accretive."

### Sara S. Spector

Sara Spector joined Accretive in October 2008 and is currently Manager of Operations and Business Development. Her accomplishments in the role include having structured and implemented an outsourcing program of insurance collections to the centralized processing center utilizing a unique blend of inexperienced and experienced staff, and ultimately offshore, resulting in 100 percent of accounts receivable goals and a 20 percent cost savings.

She originally joined Accretive in Human Resources, attracted by the innovative and entrepreneurial culture. She is directing strategic efforts to vertically integrate AccretiveU graduates into new and existing clients. Along with Alicia Coughlin, she has partnered with the Chicago City Colleges to help re-engineer their health care program.

Her current focus is on building out an HIM solution, specifically focused on coding, in preparation for ICD-10, a revised World Health Organization classification of diseases and other health conditions to be implemented in the U.S. in 2014.

Prior to joining Accretive, Spector was an investment associate with Premier Asset Management, LLC.

She is starting at The University of Chicago, Booth School of Business, this summer, to obtain her M.B.A and is expected to graduate in May 2015. She received her Bachelor of Science in Economics, Cum Laude, from DePaul University.

Spector insists that Mary Tolan's "outstanding reputation" is what drew her to Accretive: "She is a great role model for any woman."

### Briana A. Kearney

Briana Kearney has held a variety of roles with Accretive Health including her current post as Site Lead at Sacred Heart Hospital System, where she oversees all revenue cycle operations for the \$550M Net Service Patient Revenue hospital system. Her previous roles include Revenue Cycle Operations Manager with Santa Clara Valley Medical Center and Senior Operations Lead and Front End Operations Lead with St. Vincent's Medical Center in Jacksonville, Florida. She received her Bachelor of Arts Cum Laude from Georgetown University in May 2009 and is an M.B.A. Candidate for 2015 at The University of Chicago Booth School of Business. In addition, she is an Accretive Health Mentor.

Kearney says that what drew her to Accretive was that "even at an entry-level position, I had a tremendous amount of freedom and autonomy to be creative and innovative, and to implement my ideas that drove actual tangible results."

She credits Mary Tolan's leadership with the fact that, at Accretive, she is not cognizant of her gender: "It is a testament to Mary and the rest of the leadership that we have here that I think of my colleagues on their merit and judge myself and my contributions that way."

At Accretive, Kearney says, "I have benefitted from being able to have a lot of freedom and time to think innovatively, and as we grow, that is crucial for our continued success. As your company expands, you need to make sure you're not just talking about it but doing it."

### Natasha Esprey

Natasha Esprey reports to the Chief Information Officer and is responsible for all Internal IT Applications as well as IT Finance. In this position, she leads a team of 12 to 16 people, which runs all internal company-wide IT including departments such as HR, Financial Planning & Analysis (FP&A), Accounting, Revenue Analytics, Compliance, and Legal. She has also implemented a new Hyperion Planning, Forecasting and Financial Reporting system which significantly increased the FP&A department's ability to provide more accurate and frequent plans and forecasts. The outcome was real time management reporting and dash-boarding allowing the leadership team to have greater clarity in their numbers, to understand the true drivers of costs and act on required corrective measures. In addition, she runs and maintains a number of IT applications including Lawson HR and Accounting, Hyperion Planning, Financial Reporting and Essbase, IntegriFY, SharePoint, Kronos, Protiviti, and SuccessFactors/GeoLearning, as well as updates and reviews the monthly IT financial reports, which include project status tracking for company-wide IT.

Prior to this, she was Senior Manager, Financial Planning and Analysis. Esprey received her Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing, Information Technology, and Finance in 2000 from University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Before coming to Accretive Health, Esprey held roles with Royal Caribbean International, which she says she left to "move into the health care field, but also to work for Mary Tolan. She promotes thinking, which makes for a wonderful organization and a smart individual." ●