

CMA in the Fabric of Life

By Catherine Gallagher, CMA, CFM



Catherine Gallagher, CMA, CFM, is a senior manager of the National Revenue Cycle Division at Kaiser Permanente, and she occasionally teaches at the University of Phoenix. A member of IMA's San Gabriel Valley Chapter, she is on the ICMA Board of Regents. You can reach her at copperccg@aol.com.

I never expected to be an accountant. I graduated from college with aspirations to be a weaver and sculptor. To make ends meet, I worked temporary jobs as an office assistant. But even then there were harbingers of my later career as I went to night school to obtain a Certificate of Arts Management, which taught the basics of running a small business.

In time, the office jobs became permanent, the arts became a hobby, and I embarked on a journey that would ultimately bring me to leadership roles in accounting and operations. One of my early mentors got me started by handing me a bankers box full of receipts and saying, “Here, figure out our expenses, and build a budget.” I sorted receipts, identified recurring patterns, and prepared my first budget. It turned out to be surprisingly accurate. Department leaders then asked me to help justify expenses, and I produced what I now know to be make-or-buy and ROI arguments that made it through the finance department’s scrutiny. To me, it was all just common sense.

Later I was promoted to operations “process auditor” and worked for a woman who knew all things Deming. Our little group applied systems thinking, CQI (continuous quality improvement), and a collaborative philosophy to build efficiencies and reduce risk throughout the company.

I wanted more. I heard I needed a master’s degree to advance, so I embarked on that path so many take to juggle work, family, and school. Others struggled with the

accounting courses, but I found them (dare I say) fun. Here the skills of a weaver were reawakened as I built and discerned patterns and saw the bigger picture they created. I switched from an MBA to the Master of Accounting program and never looked back.

Then our local company was purchased by an industry giant. We all knew the layoffs would come. Still two years from a degree, I called my academic advisor. “What can I do to make myself marketable?” I asked. “Have you thought about the CMA®?” he replied. He explained how the CMA would exemplify the budgeting, operations, and process work I was doing as well as the accounting I was studying. The layoff occurred before I completed either certification or degree, but my credibility during the job search had already jumped just by pursuing each.

Serendipity brought me to the CMA, but everything I was doing—everything I wanted to do—involved knowing a business from inside out. Knowing its financials, its risks, and its operations and weaving them together to optimize results. I went on to serve in progressively responsible manager, controller, and director roles that straddled finance and operations, and my CMA training (along with the CFM later) contributed to the diverse body of knowledge and skills necessary to be successful. IMA® has served as a beacon of information, as well as a source for networking and enjoying supportive colleagues throughout my career. I will continue to be glad that I made that call to my advisor. **SF**