

East Bay accounting firm's new leader says improv upped his presentation skills

Jan 17, 2019, 6:37am PST

Mark Calvey *San Francisco Business Times*

Walnut Creek-based Rina Accountancy Corp. named Tom Neff president of the firm, succeeding Ed Fahey.

Fahey, who has been at the helm since 2005, will be an audit partner at the firm.

Neff's appointment represents a new generation of leaders taking the reins at accounting firms across the Bay Area, including Debbie Messemer, who stepped down at KPMG last year, and Deloitte's Teresa Briggs recently unveiling her retirement plans. Messemer has joined the boards of South San Francisco-based Allogene Therapeutics (NASDAQ: ALLO) and Carbon Inc. in Redwood City, according to her LinkedIn profile. This week PayPal (NASDAQ: PYPL) said Messemer also joined its board. Briggs said she also plans to serve on corporate boards when she leaves Deloitte in August.

The leadership transitions occur amid changing times in accounting, as industry consolidation sweeps over the profession and new technology is changing how business is done. Thank you, DocuSign (NASDAQ: DOCU).

In an interview with the San Francisco Business Times Wednesday, Neff shared some of the challenges he plans to tackle in his new role. High on that list: staffing.

"Staffing is a big issue, so flexibility is key," Neff said. Rina is among the Bay Area companies that have embraced the idea of people working remotely, with a half dozen of Rina's 95 people working outside California. A few work in Washington state, another in Tucson and one in rural Connecticut. The trend of remote workers was explored in a recent Business Times cover story.

Asked how Rina competes for talent against the region's huge, and always hiring, tech sector, Neff said, "Tech jobs are the shiny penny. There's definitely an allure."

Asked how he pitches working at an accounting firm to young people who might find tech more attractive, Neff said, "I tell them, 'Today is going to be different from yesterday' and that they'll have an opportunity, pretty quickly, to work with business owners and decision makers. You'll get an education in business."

Rina often works with owners of closely held businesses in a range of industries as well as those involved in real estate, including developers and owner-operators.

The firm ranks No. 24 on the Business Times List of Greater Bay Area Accounting Firms, based on it having 78 Bay Area client-service professionals.

Neff also shared some of his leadership philosophy: "I feel strongly that leadership isn't about having the best answers, it's about bringing out the best in those around you."

Neff, who joined Rina in 2002, also is co-chair of Rina's international tax practice group. In that role, he advises family offices investing abroad, non-U.S. citizens moving to the United States or investing in U.S. real estate as well as entrepreneurs from other countries establishing businesses in the United States. His work also involves advising Americans moving internationally.

When he's not at the office, Neff enjoys hiking in the Oakland hills and taking his dog to the beach.

Neff also may be single-handedly



RINA ACCOUNTANCY CORP.

Tom Neff, the new president of Walnut Creek-based Rina Accountancy Corp., says recruiting staff is one of his biggest challenges.

shattering the public's perception of the green-eyeshade crowd. He likes to attend rock concerts – his favorite bands include Radiohead and Arcade Fire.

He also performs monthly with an improv troupe called Butter Boost at the All Out Comedy Theater in Oakland.

"Improv has rewired my brain in a healthy way," Neff said. "Accountants and engineers are perfectionists, and for good reason.

"But I do a lot of presentations. I would put in three times the amount of preparation necessary, anticipating every possible question the audience might ask," Neff said. "Improv has broken me of that habit. Now I know it's OK to say, 'I don't know.'"