

John Tarvin, CMA: An Opportunity to Take On a Broader Role

Position: Senior Vice President, Jumpstart

Start Date: January, 2004

Education: BS, Business Administration, Boston University; MS, Computer Information Systems, Bentley College

Previous For-Profit Experience: series of general accounting and financial management roles, including finance manager for Fidelity Investments' systems company

Previous Nonprofit and Government Experience: over 10 years in senior financial and administrative roles, including CFO of Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities; volunteer experience includes serving on town strategic planning committee and coaching Little League and youth soccer teams

Organization Information: national organization bringing at-risk preschool children and caring adults together through one-to-one relationships that focus on building literacy in combination with social and emotional readiness; founded in 1993; based in Boston; 120 employees; \$12 million budget

John Tarvin bridged from the private sector early in his career—nearly 15 years ago. Having joined Jumpstart in 2004, he is responsible for the financial management and national fundraising efforts of the 120 employee, 57 site organization. A certified management accountant, he holds a BS in Business Administration from Boston University and an MS in Computer Information Systems from Bentley College. John also serves on his town strategic planning committee, and coaches Little League and youth soccer teams.

"I bridged after seven or eight years in the private sector. That was some time ago, but I remember well why I did.

"I had been working in a series of general accounting and financial management roles; ultimately, as finance manager for Fidelity's systems company. We bought and ran all the technology, including telecommunications, for Fidelity. At the same time, I was in graduate school, studying for a master's degree in computer information systems. Wherever I had worked I had taken on a technical role in the finance arena, and school was a natural way to round that out—better than an MBA for me, because I didn't want to study finance again at the graduate level.

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“As I was advancing in my career I saw that the path for someone of my background was to become a controller, or to take on a centralized financial management role. Both options were too narrow for me; I decided to explore something really different.

“I got recruited to Millipore to help transition their financial systems to Oracle, but that turned out to be a short-lived assignment when the company contracted with the vendor to do the work of the team. I got a severance package, and I decided to use the time to my benefit.

“The outplacement firm did a great job of helping me assess my skills and interests. I took the whole battery of tests, and of course they showed that I could pursue either IT or financial management. I didn’t want to choose—I wanted to do it all. The generalist role really appeals to me.

“I also knew that I wanted to identify with the cause, to be more closely aligned to the product.

“I was warned that if I went to work for a nonprofit I would never be accepted back into the corporate world. I found that perspective to be a bit dramatic and alarmist. But it was another thing to break into the sector! I called people; I had informational interviews. I answered every ad I saw. It took me forever to get an actual job interview, and when I did I definitely picked up a sense that I was suspect. What, after all, could be the motives of a corporate finance guy? You have to make your prospective colleagues understand that this is a conscious decision.

“I did get that first job that I interviewed for. And, just as I had hoped, there was an opportunity to apply my expertise much more broadly. In the nonprofit sector there is just more flexibility to try things, even things you may have never done before. I found the for-profit side to be more narrow; they hire specialists, even on the operations side.

“For example, at Jumpstart I have responsibility for fund raising as well as finance. The stereotypical personalities of people in those two particular roles are pretty different—the dire finance guy and the overly optimistic development guy, you know? But I have been involved in development activities throughout my nonprofit career—most senior leaders get involved in some way. When there was some turnover here I jumped at the opportunity.

“For operations management, the variety comes through leading functional teams. For an executive director, though, most organizations choose someone with either strong domain expertise, or a fund raiser. It makes sense.

"I recommend nonprofit management strongly for people who like to take on multiple roles. Nonprofits really value generalists. To be successful you have to be open-minded and flexible, and opportunities will appear... you can help shape and drive the organization. I don't know how I would feel about being levels down in a corporate setting... it's fun and inspiring to be at the table."

March, 2005

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