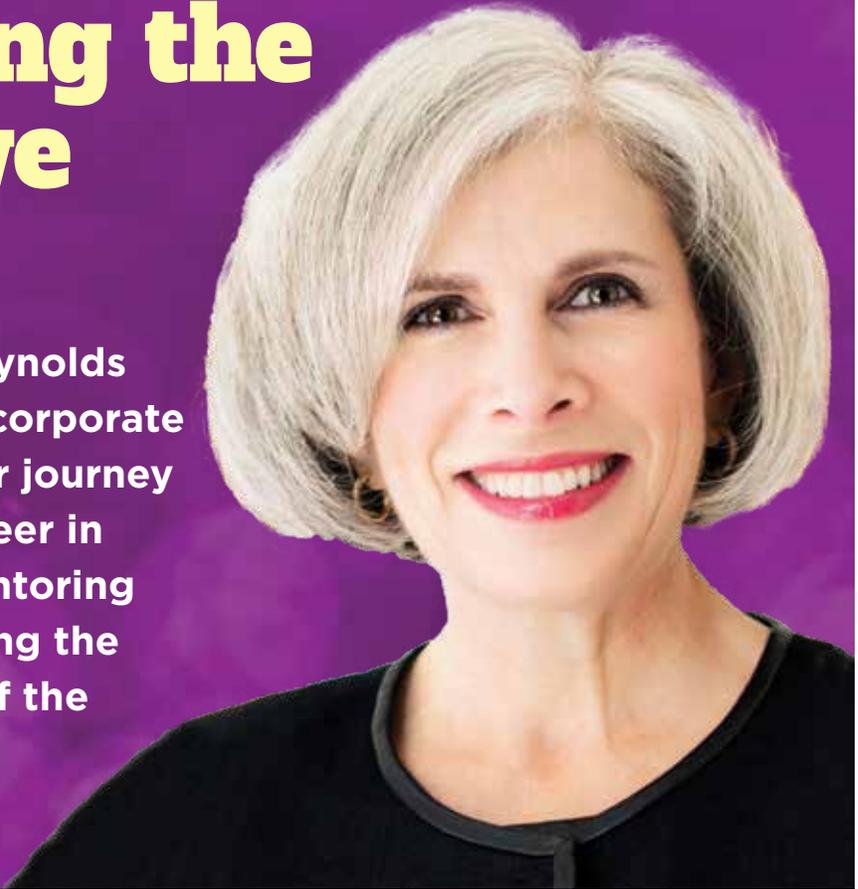


Mastering the Executive Dance

Smooch Repovich Reynolds aced a wide array of corporate executive roles on her journey to an exceptional career in executive search, mentoring hundreds of IROs along the way. Now she's one of the newest NIRI Fellows.

BY AL RICKARD, CAE



Smooch Repovich Reynolds, managing director of the IRO & CCO Practice Group at ZRG Partners in Los Angeles, CA, was one of three professionals honored as new NIRI Fellows at the 2018 NIRI Annual Conference.

Reynolds has built a 25-year career as a highly successful executive search consultant, specializing in global investor relations officer and chief communications officer searches. She has completed approximately 300 IRO searches in companies across a broad array of industries, ranging in size from pre-IPO startups to Fortune 500 corporations, as well as non-profit entities/associations, and universities.

She began her career as a press deputy for a politician, and then transitioned to serve as a corporate communications and financial public relations practitioner at Hill and Knowlton, Inc.

While there, Hill and Knowlton CEO Tom Eidson asked her to launch and lead a U.S.-focused executive search function for the company, which she did for a few years. In tandem with those responsibilities, the CEO also asked Reynolds to design and serve in a regional head of human resources position and placed her on the global M&A team. She ultimately served as his chief of staff in the Western United States.

Reynolds then went on to launch The Repovich-Reynolds Group, a retained search and management consulting firm she led for more than 20 years. She was subsequently recruited to serve as senior vice president/chief communications officer at The Irvine Company, where she was responsible for redefining the communications function.

Later she was recruited to the Los Angeles office of Caldwell Partners, and was a partner

and leader of the firm's investor relations and communications practice. She then went on to hold a similar role at DHR before taking on her current position at ZRG Partners.

A dynamic lecturer, keynote speaker, media expert on employment issues, and frequent contributor to global professional journals and newsletters, Reynolds has been featured on *CNBC's* "Power Lunch," *CNN-TV*, *Bloomberg TV*, *Fox News* and myriad other TV network affiliate broadcast news programs.

She is recognized as a pioneer in executive search in the investor relations profession, recognizing nearly three decades ago that the increased expectations of management teams by the global financial markets would drive the need for senior-level IROs to effectively represent public companies.

IR Update interviewed Reynolds to learn more about her career and what led to her success.

Tell me about the early days of your career when you conceived the need for an elevated role for IROs to interact with financial markets.

When I was employed by a global investor and public relations firm, I was intrigued with the whole notion of the investment community, equity valuation, and activist investors, all of which was ignited by participating in a presentation about a hostile takeover situation. Hearing this presentation unleashed an intellectual passion to pursue this particular subject matter.

As I entered the executive search field, I recognized that many Fortune 500 companies were not addressing valuation and the importance of cultivating a relationship with the investment community. As a result of my passion for IR, I decided that I would initiate a focus in this niche which seemed to be elusive to the retained executive search arena.

How has your experience in corporate communications, operational leadership, talent and acquisition development, and corporate finance/M&A shaped your work in executive search?

All these combined experiences allowed me to approach client talent problem-solving through the lens of someone who served in this wide array of corporate executive positions. As a consultant, there is intrinsic value having walked in myriad executive shoes gaining firsthand operational experience about how to meet challenges and solve problems. This experience framed my consultative approach and led to me becoming a sought-after talent solutions provider to management teams.

You have observed some dramatic shifts in the capital markets, regulatory climate, and corporate governance issues affecting companies throughout the years. How has this changed the skillsets you look for in IROs?

Investor relations is a relatively new profession compared to the chief financial officer and chief legal officer professions, which have been around for centuries. Thirty years ago there was only a role called "financial communications," which we know today to be only one aspect of the overall IR area.

Many diverse shifts have dramatically reshaped the IR function during just the past 10 years. The skillsets required to address brand definition and the corporate narrative that is conveyed to the investment community, as well as the quantitative acumen required to engage with the financial markets in a highly productive manner are today's benchmarks.

The IRO of today must have a foundation based in finance such that the IR professional understands not just the vernacular of finance, but to the degree that the individual can easily toggle between a corporate business model and the financial modeling viewpoints the analyst community may offer. In addition, the level of broad business acumen and savvy that boards and management teams expect an IRO to have is at the highest level ever.

Every job candidate is different, but what is one key area where most rising IROs need to grow to effectively advance their careers?

"My definition of a corporate athlete is an executive who is an expert in all areas of serving as an exceptional IRO and who also brings broad business acumen such that they can contribute intellectually to the well-being of the overall enterprise."

The single most important element is an IRO's "organizational influencing" capabilities, which is a unique combination of serving as a "psychological business partner" to management and having the ability to "see around corners," also known as gravitas. Today, and in the future, an increasing number of CEOs and CFOs want and expect their IROs to be "psychological business partners" with a neutral viewpoint about myriad business topics.

You have presented and written about how successful executives need to become "corporate athletes." Please define this and explain how IROs can become a corporate athlete.

My definition of a corporate athlete is an executive who is an expert in all areas of serving as an exceptional IRO and who also brings broad business acumen such that they can contribute intellectually to the well-being of the overall enterprise. This means their intellectual depth and prowess extends well beyond just the IR discipline, which

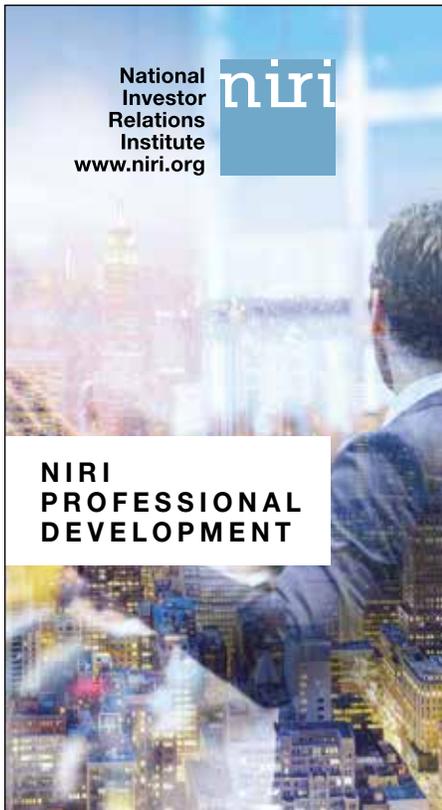
then allows that IRO to serve as the consummate psychological business partner to the CEO and broader leadership team, and as a genuine partner to the Board.

Who have been your mentors and what did you learn from them? Also have you mentored people in your career and what do you try to impart to them?

My single most influential mentor was Tom Eidson, the former CEO of Hill and Knowlton, who challenged me to stretch my abilities by tasking me with overseeing myriad business areas for which I had no experience – global M&A activity, human resources, and operations, to name a few.

At the end of my tenure there, we had a deep conversation about why he had involved me in so many disparate activities that were not a part of my core education or background prior to joining Hill and Knowlton.

His response: "I knew you had the ability to do anything you set your mind to do and that you were smart enough to learn anything. I



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trusted you, wanted you to be my psychological business partner, and knew you would prove out for me. Most importantly, I wanted you to know that you had the ability to do anything you were tasked to do, so I just kept involving you wherever there was a situation that required intellectual curiosity and drive to solve a problem.” My career trajectory was forever changed positively as a result of my willingness to follow his lead and trust him.

Yes, I have mentored hundreds of people in my career as I genuinely enjoy seeing professionals be successful – I derive a tremendous amount of gratification from mentoring others. And, as a direct result of my experience with my mentor CEO, I have encouraged others to embrace the following concept: “When your boss asks you to do something outside of your knowledge base and comfort zone, the answer is always ‘Yes!’ Your boss is not going to task you with potential failure on their watch.”

How do you define success in your career?

For me, my own success has always been defined

by the expectation I have of myself – to always be credible, genuine, helpful to others, and bring positivity to as many situations as possible. And to always do the *right* thing in advising others and in my own actions. I also wanted to help others adeptly navigate their careers because none of us ever takes a class to learn how to do that. And I am thankful I have had the luxury of experiencing 1,000 successful careers through my work.

Tell us something most NIRI members don't know about you.

Most NIRI members don't know that I am a ballroom dancing aficionado, with East Coast swing, cha-cha, a little freestyle foxtrot, and disco being my favorites (my parents met while dancing in the 1940s in the Big Band era). I am also a cat lover and always name them after foods! 

AL RICKARD, CAE, is president of Association Vision, the company that produces *IR Update* magazine for NIRI.



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