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The Best of the Breed

Strategic Investment Group Attracts Top Notch Employees, But "There Are No Stars"

Ask Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg, CFA, one of Money magazine's "50 Smartest Women in the Money Business" and founder and president of Strategic Investment Group (SIG), whether she prefers managing people or managing assets, and she'll say the latter. In fact, SIG, which provides investment management outsourcing services to benefit plans, endowments, foundations, and family trusts, was founded upon her belief that less is more. By maintaining an open architecture, SIG is able to hire, in Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg's words, "the best of the breed."

Since the company opened its doors 14 years ago, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg has maintained that the right employee makes all the difference. "The culture of the firm is one of professional excellence and respect for one another," she said. "We are attracted to well-rounded people who are smart, knowledgeable, and curious, and, most importantly, who care more about the group than themselves. There are no 'stars' here. The one common thread in everyone is professional excellence, integrity, and drive."



"We have a duty to control the quality of our work lives," said Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg. "Given that we spend two-thirds of our waking hours working, we might as well get the most out of it."

“Look at the CFA Program as a knowledge advancement program — as something that will satisfy you personally. If you’re satisfied intellectually and growing professionally, career advancement will follow.”

Hilda Ochoa-
Brillembourg, CFA

Not surprisingly, all of SIG’s investment officers are CFA charterholders or are enrolled in the CFA Program. “To me, the CFA designation is just as valuable as an MBA from a good school, and perhaps more so,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, who earned her CFA charter in 1985. Yet, she says, “The CFA Program is purely voluntary. We will not force people to do anything; it has to come from within.”

SIG offers reimbursement for tuition and related expenses, however, to employees pursuing professional enrichment programs, such as the CFA Program. The firm’s generous training policy is a manifestation of Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg’s corporate vision. “I wanted to be part of a work environment where people would be growing constantly and would have opportunities to learn other things — not by force, but by motivation,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, who believes such an environment is difficult to achieve in a large, corporate structure.

She also believes in the importance of maneuverability. “In a competitive market you have to be able to move quickly, and I perceived that you cannot move quickly if you are building up an army of employees,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, who has resisted the trend to build up internal staff and integrate all functions in-house. Instead, the Washington, D.C. area firm maintains a relatively lean staff of 40 employees — in addition to another 100 or so individuals working among five affiliates. Through its “managers of managers” concept and its affiliate organizations, SIG currently manages US\$18 billion in total assets for more than 400 clients.



SIG’s ideologies are symbolized by the Greek letter “alpha” in the company’s name. “It not only represents the alpha of modern portfolio theory,” explained Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, “it also suggests value, transparency, all things that are good — the way we should behave in life.”

With such high standards, it’s no wonder that nearly 40 percent of SIG’s investment staff are CFA charterholders or candidates. The value this high percentage brings to SIG and its clients, according to Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, is that SIG’s investment officers share a common understanding of investing, economics, and accounting. She added, “In terms of investment decision making, it is very important to build upon the knowledge and discovery that other people have

gathered — the best ideas that the profession has come up with over the last 20 years — and that's what the CFA Program allows for in a very efficient way.”

Although prospects for career advancement at SIG do not hinge on earning the CFA charter, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg advised, “Look at the CFA Program as a knowledge advancement program — as something that will satisfy you personally. If you're satisfied intellectually and growing professionally, career advancement will follow.”

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