



Lisa Wise graduated in finance and marketing (University of Cincinnati) and received her MCRP from Cal Poly in 2001. She is a principal at LWC - Lisa Wise Consulting, San Luis Obispo.

¹ *Coopers & Lybrand is now Pricewaterhouse Coopers, currently the world's largest professional services firm.*

CAREER PATHS: LESSONS LEARNED

LISA WISE

Life Before Planning

Before going into planning, I worked in banking and financial services. My undergraduate degree is in finance and marketing from the University of Cincinnati. I graduated in a recession, similar to now. After graduation, my first job was in Chicago with the National Bank of Detroit, as a teller and personal banker. It wasn't my dream job, but it was a start in an industry that interested me.

In 1988, I won a scholarship to DePaul University in Chicago for a Master of Science in Accountancy. I saw this as an opportunity to earn a higher-level degree and work my way into a better job. After graduating from DePaul, I became a CPA and started as an Associate with Coopers & Lybrand (C&L)¹ at their Chicago Board of Trade office. The job gave me a chance to learn the securities and commodities industries.

I worked to make myself valuable to the firm. After a couple of years with C&L, I was encouraged by a managing partner in the New York City office to apply for a management training position there. The partner learned that I was a hard worker with good people skills and aptitude for numbers. And, although it didn't come naturally, I also learned to promote myself.

In New York, I was lucky to have good mentors. The firm also offered training in staff management and operations. My clients were mostly large investment banks, such as Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and Smith Barney. The business, management and client service skills learned in New York have been invaluable throughout my career.

Lightbulb Moment

Even though I liked my job in New York, I came to the realization that financial services and investment banking were not my long-term calling. While mergers, acquisitions, and high-stakes financial dealings were exciting in many ways, there was often a negative social impact from some of the transactions. I finally decided that I needed work that was more personally rewarding. Although I was interested in how City's functioned at that time, I didn't really consider it as a career until later.

Taking a Break:

After eight years, I quit my job in New York in 1998. My husband and I decided to spend a year traveling in South America. Most of our time was spent in the Andes mountaineering and in the jungles of Brazil canoeing. Extended time off was a rare opportunity and a great change of pace. But after a year, I was ready to get back to work.

Change of Careers

After our trip to South America, I decided to go back to school for a degree in urban planning. In 2001, I graduated from the MCRP program at Cal Poly in SLO. The MCRP brought new opportunities that would not have been open to me otherwise. In addition to professional experience, I also teach at Cal Poly and sit on the Board of Trustees for the Land Conservancy.

Current Job

I started Lisa Wise Consulting, Inc. (LWC) in 2006. Shortly after launching the business, I won the first “big” contract, a working waterfront study for the City of Morro Bay. The California Coastal Conservancy funded the contract. Due to this project and a couple of others, my husband joined the firm in early 2007. Over the last three years, LWC has brought in work related to planning, economics, and natural resources. And, we have grown from a small team working out of a home office to ten people, a nice office in San Luis Obispo, and clients including the Port of San Diego and the City of Cincinnati, Ohio. I think the keys to our achievements include hard work, people skills, and constant networking.

Our connection to Cal Poly has been integral to our success. Since the beginning, we have hired Cal Poly graduates and interns. Currently, three of our full-time staff and all four of our interns are Cal Poly graduates and students. Internships have been a great way for us to cultivate new team members, and we plan to bring a couple of our current interns on full time. The Cal Poly students bring energy, enthusiasm, and a fresh perspective to the office. We find the planning students to be intelligent, versatile, and technically competent.

Prior to founding LWC, I worked as a Senior Associate with Crawford, Multari, & Clark Associates (CMCA), a planning firm in San Luis Obispo, for about 5 years. The experience and contacts gained at CMCA were instrumental to helping me build my own firm.

Looking Forward

There’s a lot to look forward to in urban planning. A formal education provides a framework for critical thinking and strengthens problem-solving skills. However, for me, a rewarding planning career has come from lifelong learning, being engaged in innovative planning approaches, and working with great people.



Figures 1 & 2

Lisa Wise during a community workshop (above) in the participatory process toward the Tulare Downtown Concept Plan in 2008.

