

FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF ROB.SHIRLEY@APRIO.COM

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A career comes full circle for Aprio's Rob Shirley

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An accountant who worked for his father's McDonald's franchise – and an affinity for math in school – inspired Rob Shirley early on to pursue a career in finance.

Shirley launched his career in public accounting at Arthur Andersen in 1993 before moving into the banking and broker/dealer industry. After nine years away, he jumped back into the public world and last year joined Atlanta-based, CPA-led business advisory firm Aprio as an audit partner when the firm expanded to Birmingham with the acquisition of Yeager & Boyd.

Shirley said his job is to grow and expand the Birmingham office – the first of Aprio's expansion outside Georgia – geographically, products-wise and talent-wise.

The *BBJ* recently sat down with Shirley to talk about his career path and Aprio's plans for growth.

What's the biggest risk you've taken in your career? I think leaving public accounting and then coming back. It's unusual that people come back after they've been out. I was out about nine years ... but with the experience I had in the industry, it was such a different take on the accounting process. It gave me such a different perspective and allows me to treat the clients with that knowledge of how they live their everyday life ... so it gives me a better picture of the insights as to how a company really runs versus the theory behind it when you're doing the audit side and the accounting classwork side. So, it was risky at the point when I came back in because I didn't know if I was going to be successful or not.

What is your philosophy on management? Here in Birmingham, we have over 18 (on the Aprio team). In the firm, we have over 500. My biggest philosophy for management is surrounding yourself with good people – professionals that want to be there, want to work, want to do a good job and help the clients out. So a lot of it is around the people. You've got to like the people you work with.

What's the best advice you've ever received? Treat everybody the right way – everybody from the janitor to the CEO. They all know what's going on in the company more than you do. They're there all the time. So, we go and visit the client; you're there representing Aprio to the client and want to make sure that we treat everybody right. You never know who you're going to talk to or who you're going to run into at the client's office. You may be talking to somebody that could be the CEO's wife, and you have no idea. And they're all important.



BOB FARLEY

Rob Shirley of Aprio has years of experience in both the public and private financial realms.

How do you approach growth at Aprio? We're more than a traditional CPA firm. We've kind of gone away from the traditional tax and audit and accounting work. We've got blockchain consulting, data analytics, business technology consulting, cybersecurity and cloud accounting, just to add a few of the services we provide to help our clients reach their potential, hit profitability goals they have and assist them. It's more of a partnership. We're trying to relate with these clients instead of just being the old nuts and bolts tax guy, accounting or audit guy. We really want to help them succeed. So that's our goal is to set that as well as growing the firm in general. Geographically, we're looking at multiple markets around the country to pull in merger acquisition work as well. Actually, Birmingham was one of those acquisitions a few years ago. It was a big target for us, at the time, to grow. And this was the first outside-of-Georgia acquisition the firm ever did.

Does Aprio have any plans to expand in Alabama? We continue to look at other firms and partner with them. We have a CPA channel that we work with other firms that provide services they cannot afford or do not have to serve their clients with like our R&D tax credit group and stuff like that. So, we do work with other firms, as well as look at other firms for acquisition purposes.

What advice would you give your younger self? Probably the same thing I tell the guys we recruit out of colleges now: we expect you to have a good core accounting knowledge but we expect you to know nothing from a business and actual operational standpoint. We're going to teach you everything. Just realize that you're supposed to feel stupid and not know everything. That's one of the things I've learned over the years is that, as we grow and you get more experience, the experience level is really where it kicks in. It's not necessarily just learning things from school.

What's an interesting fact about you most people don't know? I played junior college basketball for coach Bill Langford at Jefferson State Community College for two years after school. A lot of people don't know that I did that. When they hear it and they see me — I'm 6'5" — they usually clue in pretty quick and go, "Oh, that makes sense."

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