

Every day is a new lease on life for Barbara Elia

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Barbara Elia, a partner at DTZ FHO Partners in Boston and the manager of research and lease administration services, admits she “fell into” commercial real estate, but you’d never know it, her enthusiasm for the industry is so infectious.

“Like most people I know who work in commercial real estate, it’s not one of those things you grow up saying, ‘That’s what I want to do when I grow up,’” she says, laughing.

But after a year’s false start in newspapers right out of college, Elia found her fit through an ad for a research analyst at a commercial real estate firm.

“Everything fell into place,” Elia says. “It was a good use of my skills. I was learning a lot, which is something that helps me stay engaged, and I really liked the people part of it, too.”

Elia didn’t realize then that she’d still be at it 23 years later, but she’s still engaged, still excited about coming to work – something that she throws herself into every day.



“Anytime you’ve been in the same industry or business for 20-plus years, you need to keep yourself on your toes,” she says, “so it’s always looking for the next thing to do – what we need to do, what we need to do better, what our competition is doing, what new technology platform we can use, what our clients are saying they need, that sort of thing.”

At DTZ FHO, Elia oversees a group of eight to provide research, lease administration and lease audit services to corporate clients that range in size from a company with 250 locations across North America to those with less than 10 offices.

Advising clients on market analysis and site selection, managing their lease obligations and expenses, assisting with software selection and database transition and, if their business has slowed, helping identify opportunities to streamline their real estate portfolios and costs are some of the services Elia’s group provides. Clients include Parametric Technology, Kronos, Biogen Idec and Hasbro.

Her role, Elia says, includes keeping the ship running, developing new business and fostering relationships with existing clients. As a partner in the firm, she’s a contributor to its management and an advocate for many of the firm’s employees.

The one hand up, one hand down philosophy of pulling up others during the climb is a reflection of Elia’s personal experience. A mentor and the right work group got her through her own career transitions.

Elia began in commercial real estate at Cushman & Wakefield in Boston in 1986 and within a few years was asked to join the national research team in New York. For five years, she traveled the country, met people in different offices, learned about different markets and then, tired of New York City, she returned home to Boston without a job.

“At that point, I wasn’t sure: Do I stay in commercial real estate or do I make a switch?” Elia says. Through a friend she learned that Fallon Hines & O’Connor was looking for a researcher. The job as director of research was the answer to her uncertainty.

Since 1994, Elia has worked with essentially the same core group that transitioned to Trammell Crow upon FHO’s acquisition in 1998 and spun out to form DTZ FHO in 2007 after Trammell Crow’s acquisition by CB Richard Ellis.

Kathleen O’Connor, one of Fallon Hines’s founding partners, proved to be an excellent mentor throughout Elia’s career.

Four years into her job at Fallon, Elia was tired of doing research for so long and looking for a new challenge. O’Connor, who was managing lease administration, encouraged Elia to try adding the discipline to her skill set. As O’Connor reduced her time to eventually retire, Elia increased her responsibility.

“A lot of it was luck,” Elia says. “I was and am with a great group of people. Our talents mesh well together, and if that weren’t the case, things might have been different. Kathleen was a great mentor. When I was frustrated and thinking I should do other

things, she helped me find a way to stay engaged and happy and keep growing at the same place.”

What Elia learned then was to think outside the box to avoid getting into the everyday rut. Looking at new ways to approach obstacles, taking on tasks that look interesting and initiating projects are ways Elia has kept the job engaging for herself and beneficial for the company.

Elia also learned from her mentor to look at her work as part of her life, not the only role she played. Although her extreme focus has stood her well throughout her career, Elia admits she can become too involved in her work.

“I have to stay on top of myself because I can get too wrapped up in work, so balancing that is always a challenge,” she says.

New to Elia as a partner of a 45-person firm is the added decision making that was not the norm in a large company and the ability to help lead the direction of the firm. She approaches her firm-wide responsibilities much the way she tackles her responsibilities as a group leader.

“It’s thinking about what new things would make sense, how we can manage things and deliver services in a cost-effective manner and how we can keep getting better and growing,” Elia says. “We can’t stay the same so we have to evolve to meet the needs of our clients and we need to keep our employees engaged and happy.”

Collaboration, Elia believes, is crucial in running her group and the firm. Listening is a key component of her management style – “great ideas can come from anywhere and sometimes new people or junior people can have the best ideas because they look at things with a fresh perspective,” she says.

Making sure that her colleagues feel valued is crucial, too – “I think that’s what makes people do their best work.”

A mentor now herself, Elia feels as though she is returning the favor she received by listening and advising the younger group at the company. “I hope it’s helpful to them,” she says. “It certainly means a lot to me. Anything I can do as a sounding board is greatly satisfying.”

One key piece of Elia’s advice? Ask for what you want. There is an advantage to working in an industry dominated by men, Elia says – learning some of their communication and approach skills. She admits she was the “typical female,” believing that if she kept her head down and worked hard, she’d be noticed and would get to where she wanted to go.


“Men ask for the office, for the promotion, for more money, for a change in title, for whatever it is they want. Women need to get better at that. It’s a matter of asking, but not demanding,” she says.

In addition to her role in the workplace, Elia is also an eight-year veteran of the firm’s mentoring program at the Dearborn Middle School in Roxbury, where she provides small group tutoring on a variety of subjects.

In keeping with her sunny outlook, Elia sees the current economy in a positive light. More clients are asking for help with managing and reducing their real estate expenses– “every time there’s a recession this happens” – and new clients with current small projects can turn into larger business once the economy starts rolling again.

“We have been consistently busy and that busy-ness has not slowed down. It will be interesting to see how this plays out for the next 12, 18 months,” Elia says.

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