

Training and Development

**An Interview with Char Fortune,
National Director of Learning and Professional Development, Avison Young**

EDITORS' NOTE Char Fortune is also an advisor to corporations seeking to outsource real estate functions and activities. Before joining Avison Young, Fortune was with Grubb & Ellis as Managing Director of the Corporate Services Group for the Southeast. Prior to that, she was a Senior Vice President at Trammell Crow Company. Earlier, she worked for Cushman & Wakefield as a Senior Managing Director.



Char Fortune

COMPANY BRIEF Headquartered in Toronto, Ontario and founded in 1978, Avison Young (avisonyoung.com) is the world's fastest growing commercial real estate services company. Avison Young is a collaborative firm owned and operated by its principals. Comprised of more than 2,000 real estate professionals in 69 offices across Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the U.S., the full-service commercial real estate company provides value-added, client-centric investment sales, leasing, advisory, valuation, management, financing, and mortgage placement services to owners and occupiers of office, retail, industrial, and multi-family properties.

How do you focus your efforts and define your role within Avison Young?

I have two primary roles: number one is as Director of Learning and Professional Development. In that role, I lead Avison Young University and all the education and training available through that platform.

My second role is with our enterprise solutions affinity group, which is the moniker we give to corporate services. This involves me dealing with clients for whom I provide services across their multiple markets. I serve them in areas such as transaction management strategy, lease administration, etc.

What was the vision and purpose behind the creation of Avison Young University?

Mark Rose (CEO) headed the expansion of Avison Young that moved rapidly in 2009. When he stepped in as CEO, part of his vision for what Avison Young would become included the creation of a culture that promoted collaboration throughout the organization.

With his experience in commercial real estate, he felt that training and development

across all roles in commercial real estate had really been abandoned, particularly as the economy went south. He wanted to create a learning organization at Avison Young where we provided professional development for all levels and all roles. It was his brainchild to start Avison Young University.

My background is also in commercial real estate so I have a broad knowledge of the field. As part of my professional development, I have also found a personal passion and aptitude for presentations, selling, and public

speaking. In some of the roles I filled as a manager, I also did a lot of coaching. When Mark asked me to lead Avison Young University, I was very interested and began to develop it.

How critical is employee engagement in those efforts?

For AYU online, we have 30 self-paced courses available right now that anyone can log onto.

I handle AYU onsite and travel to our offices all over North America where I conduct various workshops onsite. I teach professional selling skills, persuasive presentations, and prospecting. All of these onsite courses are available to all levels, including Principals.

That said, we have a special focus on our young professionals, so much so that we have created an affinity group called Young Guns. The requirement to be a Young Gun is to have five years or fewer of experience in the business.

At Avison Young, we currently have 250 Young Guns in that affinity group. Much of the work I'm doing at AYU is focused on our young professionals who are getting started in the business. Age-wise, they're probably in their mid-20s to mid-30; some are coming out of college and some are making career changes.

The Principals are partners and owners of the firm, but they are also seasoned veterans who are looking for new ways of doing things. I make a habit of studying what is going on in business development because commercial real estate is such a legacy business. I use that knowledge to focus on new ways of developing business and servicing clients.

How does Avison Young differentiate in this industry?

There are two or three things that make us different. We are all about culture. We're the only privately held company of any size in the

industry, and are principal owned, which means that, of the up to 2,000 employees that we currently have, several hundred are owners in the company.

We have a different mentality regarding how we service clients, which is that we don't have to worry about the internal competition for profit margin. Even though this is a difference for us internally, what happens for the client is that they have the benefit of working with an owner versus a hired hand. This leads to a different approach, attitude, and investment in providing service to the client that is material and noticeable.

This manifests itself through some things that are invisible to the client. Avison Young collaborates and we don't care who gets the credit. Because we're all partners, we all have a vested interest in making sure we support our partners. So when one of our clients asks for something, and a partner reaches out to someone across the firm for help, they get it immediately.

How important is it to have a diverse workforce and are there substantial opportunities for women in the industry?

Avison Young can focus on this at a much higher level than a lot of our competition. Among our leadership, and we're a fairly flat organization, we have about 16 people on our executive leadership board. Of those, nine are diverse, be it by ethnicity or gender. That is a big percentage. From a leadership standpoint, there is great representation of diversity here.

In terms of rank and file of Avison Young, we started a diversity and inclusion affinity group early last year. We have established a women's network, and have rolled out a mentoring program with more than 40 women in the company who have signed up as protégés. The effort around this has been well-received.

What is there about your experience that has made this such a dynamic career?

I love the chase and every day is different. We get to see clients in so many industries, every transaction is different, and every client has different needs. The industry is constantly evolving and I suspect, at some level, I'm a serial learner. I love learning new things. I have done a lot of different things in my career and commercial real estate has allowed me to do that. ●