

## Careers in Credit: Strategy and Mentorship

By: Toni Nuernberg

To help illustrate the valuable role of credit professionals and the rewarding credit career path, Forius/NACM North Central has been publishing a series of Careers in Credit articles. [Previous articles](#) discussed the roles of credit assistants, analysts and managers. This, our final article in the series, examines directors of credit.

After graduating from college, Jerry Drake, CCE, began applying for entry-level cost accounting positions. Several interviews failed to land him the jobs he sought, including one at Hiniker Company in Mankato, Minn. The company's controller told Drake that the position he was pursuing had just been filled, but his skills seemed like a good fit for a general accounting job working with receivables. And like so many others, he unexpectedly stumbled into the credit profession.

More than 40 years later, Drake's career spans multiple companies and every area of credit management. Today, he is director of credit and collections for Apogee Enterprises, based in Minneapolis. He oversees the company's credit and collection functions, administers policy, focuses on collection effectiveness, quality receivables and limited bad debt, and encourages sales growth. But after so many years learning and honing his skills, his most enjoyable role is mentoring credit and collection teams.

"I'm here to mentor and pass along knowledge," he said. "These younger guys and gals are the future. Trying to get them involved and excited about careers in credit is important."

Citing his involvement in NACM and Forius for "getting me to where I am today," Drake encourages his employees to participate in the annual Credit Congress, volunteer at the regional and national levels, and pursue NACM designations. He believes such guidance is essential for companies to maintain a strong, effective credit department.

"Some companies think they can hire a clerical function and have them collect accounts," Drake said. "But that's a bad strategy. They need to have someone working with them, mentoring them and showing them the ropes."

According to Leslie Harrison, SPHR, CGA, director of membership, staffing and HR for NACM Connect and its subsidiary, Midwest Business Staffing, companies seeking directors of credit usually require at least 15 to 20 years of experience, a [Certified Credit Executive designation](#) and, increasingly, global experience.

In addition to leadership, budgeting and strategic planning skills, hiring managers expect director-level candidates to have experience going through a software conversion or implementation, according to Harrison.

“If they find someone who has only worked on one software platform, that’s a red flag,” she said. “Because so much is based on that software, you need to be able to figure out how to make it work for you.”

Although people outside of the credit department may not understand the intricacies of what credit professionals do, Drake thinks that’s okay.

“We make the credit function the best-run machine ever so others can focus on their core competencies,” he said. “Let them work on sales and manufacturing, and let the credit department help grow the business.”

With more than four decades of experience in building and fine-tuning the “credit machine,” Drake has some advice to credit professionals climbing the career ladder.

“Be someone the company you work for can depend upon day in and day out,” he said. “If you say you’re going to do something, do it. If you’re dedicated, eager about your job and willing to take on new challenges, you’ll do well.”

Toni Nuernberg is president and chief operating officer of Forius/NACM North Central.