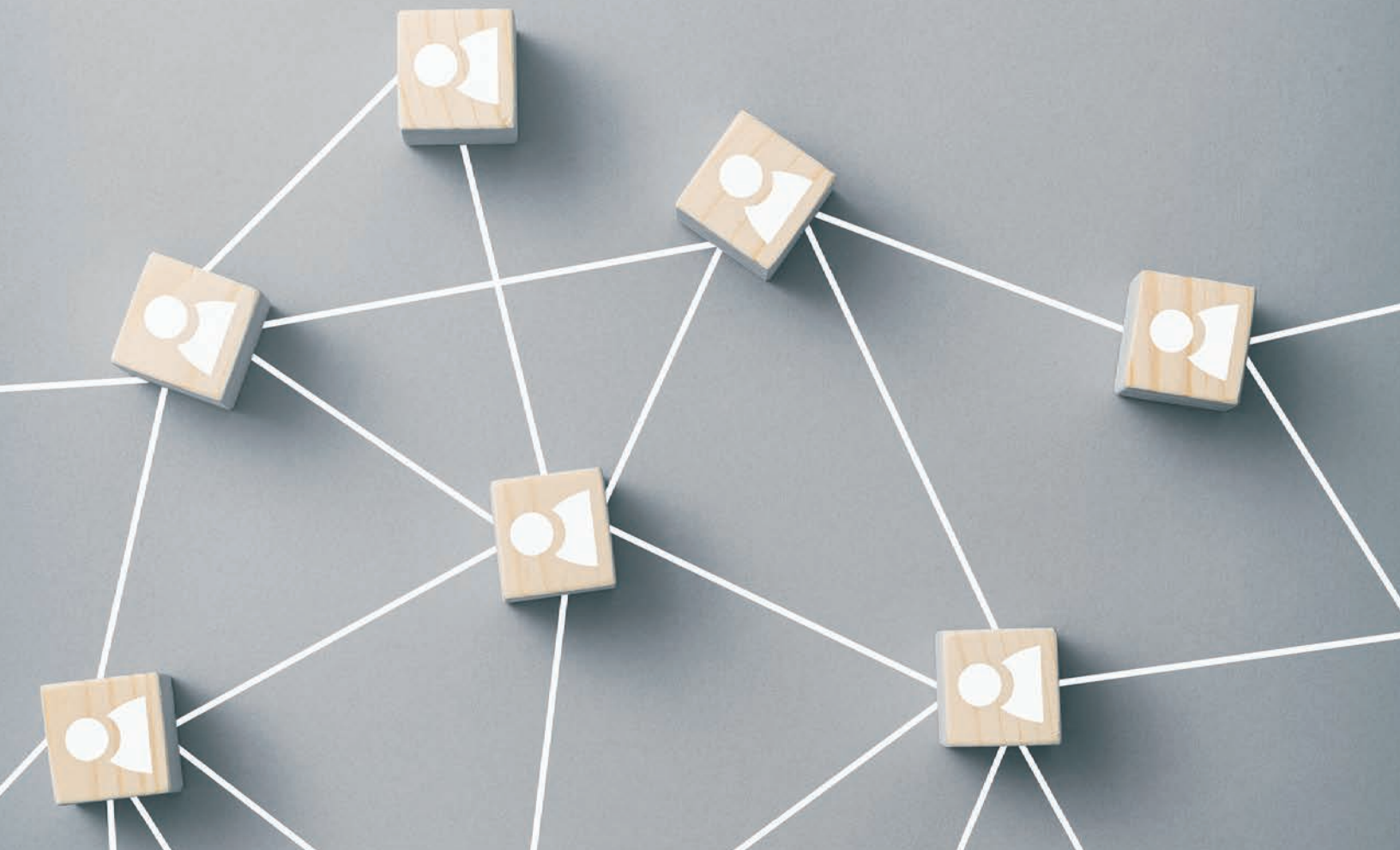


# Where Are They Now?

**BY MICHELE OCEJO**

*This is the sixth Women in Secured Finance issue published by The Secured Lender. Close to 300 women have been profiled since we launched the first WISF issue. Here, we catch up with some of the women profiled over the last few years to get an update on their careers and get their thoughts on how the pandemic could change the way we work permanently.*



**T**he women featured are: Elizabeth R. Khoury Ali, partner, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP; Robyn Barrett, managing member, FSW Funding; Andrea Bernard, managing director, Wells Fargo Capital Finance; Paula Currie, senior vice president, internal controls director, PNC Business Credit; Betty Hernandez, executive vice president, chief credit officer, SLR Business Credit; Janet Jarrett, head of asset finance, Truist; Dorothy Killeen, managing director, Wells Fargo Capital Finance; Yvonne Kizner, senior vice president, asset-based lending, Cambridge Savings Bank; Kathleen Z. Lepak, asset-based lending business director, People's United Business Capital; Jennifer Palmer, CEO, Gerber Finance; Gen Merritt-Parikh, president, Haversine Funding and Jennifer Sheasgreen, president, Siena Healthcare Finance.

#### **What significant changes have you experienced in your career since being profiled?**

**Paula Currie:** Since being profiled in 2019, I have had the pleasure of serving as chairperson of SFNet's Women in Secured Finance Committee and as a member of SFNet's Executive Committee for the past two years. Serving in both capacities has afforded me the opportunity to engage and network with some of the top leaders in the secured finance industry.

**Jennifer Palmer:** Since my interview last year, I am even more confident in my role as CEO at Gerber Finance – and what a year it has been! In addition to weathering the pandemic, we've grown a lot as a company this past year, launching two new divisions: Naturally Gerber Finance, using our deep experience to support growth in the natural products industry, and Gerber+, extending our reach to companies seeking larger lines of credit. We also opened a West Coast office in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2021, we kicked off the year with three deals under Naturally Gerber Finance and one under Gerber+. Additionally, we're formalizing our focus on supporting women by committing to 51% of our portfolio being women-owned and -led businesses. I've been extremely proud of how our team has pivoted and supported clients this past year. We leaned even further into the power of partnership and learned how we can help our clients navigate various situations working hand-in-hand.

I've also joined the SFNet Management Committee and I'm thrilled to be working with my fellow MC members and the SFNet staff to guide the association's future.

**Andrea Bernard:** When I was profiled in 2018, I was managing a portfolio team within our Technology Finance business and have since moved into a Loan Syndications and Capital Markets role. It was a big change, as I had spent 11 years in Technology Finance where I was focused on providing cash-flow financing to software companies, and now I'm predominantly focused on the structuring and execution of asset-based loans. It's been exciting to take on this new challenge and develop new relationships.



■ **ELIZABETH R. KHOURY ALI**  
Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP

#### **Elizabeth Khoury Ali:**

Since being profiled, I was promoted to partner in our firm's Transactional Finance group and am hiring partner of our Houston office. In my new role, I am responsible for managing junior attorneys and my finance and restructuring practice. As hiring partner, I am responsible for recruiting and retaining diverse talent at our firm. Being profiled in *The Secured Lender* has helped raise my visibility both within the firm and externally with clients and our finance industry.



■ **ROBYN BARRETT**  
FSW Funding

**Janet Jarrett:** There has been a considerable amount of change since I was profiled. In 2019, SunTrust entered into a merger of equals with BB&T to form Truist, effectively doubling the size of the company and forming the sixth-largest U.S. bank. At the time of the merger announcement, I was leading the asset-based lending and supply chain finance products for SunTrust.



■ **ANDREA BERNARD**  
Wells Fargo Capital Finance

In mid-2019, I was given the opportunity to run the Asset Finance Group (AFG) for Truist. AFG is comprised of seven different product groups that are primarily reliant on asset characteristics to drive structure and repayment. These products are asset-based lending, asset securitization, equipment finance, government finance, project finance, supply chain finance and structured real estate.

While I am still a deal junkie at heart, I spend most of my time on product strategy and alignment as well as merger integration.



**Dorothy Killeen:** Since being profiled in 2017, I've experienced a number of important changes in my career. Later in 2017, I was asked to serve as co-chair of the Wells Fargo Capital Finance management committee, which gave me an opportunity to build my leadership and communication skills and to drive organizational and cultural change. Drawing on this experience, I moved into a one-year professional assignment in 2019 as the Transformation Leader for Wells Fargo Commercial Capital, where I evaluated and evolved our business model. Then I focused on finding a client-facing leadership role and, in 2020, was selected to build out a new origination organization to drive growth across Commercial Capital. This new role has created opportunities for me to work with more of Commercial Capital's products and services - which include asset-based lending, equipment finance, inventory finance/floor-planning, vendor finance, technology channel finance, and supply chain finance — and better position us to provide creative lending solutions within these areas.

**Betty Hernandez:** Since being profiled early in 2017, I've experienced many changes professionally. In October of 2017, our company was sold to Solar Capital SLR Capital Partners. I had been one of the founding partners of North Mill Capital, renamed SLR Business Credit (SLRBC). Our parent company's financial strength has provided us the ability to not only close larger deals, but also to acquire other portfolios and continue to grow. As a result, in 2019 we purchased Summit Financial Resources, a formidable competitor headquartered in Salt Lake City, UT where I led the due diligence team. Acquisitions are a great way to grow the portfolio in one fell swoop. It also entails careful review of each portfolio account and understanding what exactly it is that we are acquiring. It is both challenging and rewarding. As a result of the increased geographically diverse portfolio, I was traveling quite a bit to meet with our team members as well as to visit our newly acquired and existing portfolio accounts.

In 2019 I was selected to be the chair of the SFNet Chapter Committee. Prior to this I had been the vice chair and had the opportunity to meet with most of the Chapter leaders. I continue to be involved in the SFNet as in 2020 I was selected to be the chair of the newly formed Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Committee. Being a new committee, this afforded me new challenges. We started off by assembling a group of volunteers and establishing a mission statement, longer-term and shorter-term goals. Within the last five months we have assembled two panels showcased in both the SFNet Annual Convention as well as the recent ABCC Conference. I'm excited to be a part of this Committee and to change the status quo. Our committee is working on many exciting goals. One of our subcommittees has established a repository of information on the SFNet website to provide information on Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness including best practices, and solid business cases for why companies should endeavor to hire, cultivate and retain a diverse talent pool and to make them feel equal and included in decision making. Our efforts are simply the beginning of the conversations that need to take place in our SFNet community.



■ **PAULA CURRIE**  
PNC Business Credit



■ **BETTY HERNANDEZ**  
SLR Business Credit



■ **JANET JARRETT**  
Truist

**Gen Merritt-Parikh:** Well... a lot has changed! In the middle of the pandemic, I decided to try something new, joining Stan Vukmer to lead and grow Haversine Funding, where we help specialty finance companies fill funding gaps. We've continued to grow rapidly, adding new product offerings onto our commercial platform. What started as participations with factors, inventory lenders and purchase order finance companies has grown into adding lender finance options as well as growth capital for these factors and lenders. We also focus on additional collateral types, including equipment and real estate lenders.

Our fast growth with our limited team has been challenging, but definitely fun. I'm always up for a challenge though. From focusing on marketing, originations, underwriting, portfolio management, investor relations and more... it's been a balancing act for sure. And, for those that know me, I am sure they can envision squirrels running around right now.

I love that we are building something the way we want to build it. And I especially enjoy that we can help people we know in our industry, and that our funding ultimately will be used to help small and mid-sized enterprises grow. We are now adding onto our team so that will be another adventure as you can

imagine, upgrading and expanding our processes, policies, and internal operations, while creating a new, fun team culture as we launch our Dallas office.

It does make you wonder... what else will change in a year? Guess we will see; it's exciting!

**Jennifer Sheasgreen:** When I was profiled in 2017 in the Women in Secured Finance issue, I was president of Triumph Healthcare Finance, part of a publicly traded bank. Our healthcare team built the division from the ground up into a profitable, bank-regulated, healthcare ABL portfolio. In 2018, we were acquired by a non-bank, healthcare, ABL competitor, and then in 2019 I left that company for Siena Lending Group, to build a new healthcare, ABL group from the ground up. I've had the experience of working for several financial systems in my career, but it's been a new and interesting journey building a portfolio in a non-bank environment. I've enjoyed the flexibility and fast-paced nature of such an entrepreneurial organization as Siena Lending Group. The reflections I have on the past several years are that change is inevitable, transparent relationships matter, and working with people you trust and respect outweighs anything else.

**Robyn Barrett:** The opportunity to be profiled was a great way to expand my network and to help me get more involved in SFNet. The profile also created interest in FSW and what we could do as a lender. Overall, the experience was positive both personally and professionally.

**Kate Lepak:** The most significant changes in my career have been driven by the impact of COVID-19. I've had to re-imagine how to run our business remotely, and without the opportunity to be present with my team, our customers and prospects, our finance community, and the market in general. The challenges of a no-contact business environment are immense. Our business relies on building key relationships with all constituencies – difficult to do when you can't connect in person. The change in 2020 was immediate, without warning as to the scope of our isolation, and is an environment I've never encountered in my long career before. I've learned the value of using technology to connect, and the importance of an information-based business strategy, leveraging digital media and planned outreach to everyone in our world.

**Yvonne Kizner:** I was with Blue Hills Bank when the previous profile came out, where we had just established the asset-based lending group. In the fall of 2018, Rockland Trust announced they were acquiring Blue Hills, which already had their own ABL team, so it was clear that a decision had to be made: did my partner Keith Broyles and I want to try this again, starting an ABL group from the ground up at another institution, or go our separate ways? While we both had many options, we jointly decided it was such a good experience at Blue Hills, and with all the lessons learned we just had to give this another shot. Once you get a chance to run your own show it's difficult to go back to a traditional role within a group that has their own leadership vision. The tricky part is finding an institution large enough to do the types of deals we were targeting (lower end of the middle market), but hadn't already established



■ **DOROTHY KILLEEN**  
Wells Fargo Capital Finance



■ **YVONNE KIZNER**  
Cambridge Savings Bank



■ **KATHLEEN Z. LEPAK**  
People's United  
Business Capital

an ABL group. This time around we were fortunate to have the support of Blue Hill's CEO at the time, who provided the introduction to Cambridge Savings Bank (CSB). Now a \$5B plus mutual bank by asset size, they were slightly smaller in late 2018 when we first got to know the executive management team. They were at the right time in their evolution – while CSB has been around since 1834, their commercial team was relatively young, with that team really getting off the ground in the early 2000s. With our business plan in hand, we pitched our vision of an ABL team, spending time with members of the Board of Directors, as well as the CEO and other senior members of the Executive team. Some were less familiar with ABL or had the common misconception that our deals were inherently riskier, so we spent a lot of time talking about our history at Blue Hills, and our previous ABL shops, and how that would translate to what we could do at CSB. The good news is we started in April of 2019, with Keith leading the team and me in charge of operations and business development. We both wear many hats and mind the existing portfolio together. We have built our team out, with what we consider great success, having closed over 13 deals to date, with commitments approaching \$175MM. Being part of a mutual bank, which cares

deeply about the community it serves as well as its employees, while keeping its customers at the center of all we do, has been



particularly refreshing. So, while I was very satisfied with where my career was headed when I was last profiled, it's hard to believe that it could improve so much over the course of a few years.

**Everyone is struggling with the challenge of standing out at work while working remotely. What advice would you give on increasing your visibility both in person and virtually?**

**Sheasgreen:** Establish and then build out your personal brand as if it's your business. Your personal brand matters and building upon it comes down to how you present and promote yourself at work. This isn't always easy for women who sometimes feel hesitant to focus on their accomplishments. Determine what makes you unique and communicate your vision both internally and externally. Your brand will evolve as you do. You can do this by establishing yourself as an expert in your job or your field, being reliable and trustworthy, returning calls, following through with deadlines, and consistently reinforcing to others who you are at work and in life.

**Bernard:** I agree that the most important thing you can do to increase your visibility is to build a strong personal brand. This applies whether you're in the office or working remotely. You will get noticed if you are someone who adds value to a working group by contributing good ideas (be sure to speak up if you have them!), taking on special projects, being easy to work with, communicating clearly and thoughtfully, and producing high quality work. Ask for feedback if you want to know if you're doing well, and accept constructive criticism on ways you can improve.

**Khoury Ali:** It is certainly more challenging to gain career momentum and stand out in the workplace while working remotely. Try to be as visible as possible. Always offer to help on new projects or take on a work/business initiative where you get to present to internal or external clients. Although many of us are getting Zoom fatigue, try to keep your camera on during virtual meetings, attend virtual social hours, etc. As things begin to get back to normal, try to continue to network and attend trade events, like SFNet conferences or seminars. I also find publishing an article an easy way to gain visibility in your area.

**Barrett:** Stay connected! When COVID hit and all of the sudden conferences and networking events were cancelled, I knew I couldn't live under a rock. I reached out to fellow lenders to see what was going on in their portfolios, work environment and personal life. It was nice to reach out and hear what others were experiencing and how they were dealing with issues of remote working, decreases in portfolios and balancing work/life issues that were now blurred together. I also worked with an industry association to create Zoom webinar content to keep the conversation going among factors. Now that we are seeing some light at the end of the tunnel, I am glad I stayed connected and actually got to know my peers a little bit better.



■ JENNIFER PALMER  
Gerber Finance

**Lepak:** I would encourage professionals to master virtual selling, to employ digital media to reinforce industry visibility. This could be a healthy LinkedIn presence, or the use of sophisticated email marketing programs through a CRM. Attending virtual conferences is key to maintaining visibility as well as staying current with other industry contacts attending as well. We should be able to meet in person as we move into the second half of 2021.



■ GEN MERRITT-PARIKH  
Haversine Funding

**Killeen:** My advice on standing out has not changed since 2017: be great at your job. The benefits of mentorship, sponsorship, special assignments, or programs unique to your organization are often directed to high performing employees. There is no substitute for hard work, attention to detail, building relationships, and learning from your mistakes. Operating in an environment that is partially or fully virtual requires more thoughtful and consistent communication with your team and can often require you to raise your hand more often to be included in calls or Zooms.



■ JENNIFER SHEASGREEN  
Siena Healthcare Finance

**Palmer:** Consistent communication is extremely important in the workplace – in-person, but especially virtually. Because a lot of us are still working from home, it's vital to keep your team in the loop. Over-

communication is infinitely better than lack of communication. If you feel like you're bugging your coworkers with status updates

and important questions, don't worry, you're not. If we were back in the office, those conversations would happen all the time. While Zoom fatigue is, unfortunately, very real, it doesn't hurt to make time on your calendar and have frequent checkpoints with the various members of your team to try and replicate the feeling of being in an office again and casually chatting. What I miss the most is random one-to-one time with the people I don't always work super closely with on a day-to-day basis, so I find it helpful to randomly check in once in a while to feel seen as well as make them feel seen.

**Currie:** It is important to find ways to connect proactively with coworkers, customers, and leaders in your organization. I suggest not relying on email as your primary source of communication. When warranted, pick up the phone to discuss business topics. If at all possible, you should utilize a live video platform such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype when participating in meetings. Being able to see each other during the call makes the meeting much more personable, especially when meeting with a small number of participants. Join the call 5 to 10 minutes prior to the meeting start time to connect with those individuals who also joined early or to introduce yourself to those you may not have met previously. While the dress code has become more relaxed for those working from home, it is best to look presentable and professional. It is critical to stay actively engaged on the call, so avoid multitasking and limit the possibility of home/life distractions. Also be mindful of your body language and facial expressions.

**Jarrett:** Although it seems basic, just using the phone for individual conversations vs. email or group teleconferences is a great way to develop and share more complex ideas, which builds credibility with internal and external constituents. It's also important to consistently convey your contributions in a manner that works for you and your manager. This could be weekly project updates, pipelines, one-on-one meetings or summary dashboards. Interactions that were informal prior to COVID-19 now need to be more intentional.

**Kizner:** Get involved both within your organization as well as outside your organization, through networking groups, charities you care about, etc. It's easy to disappear from the radar screen of senior management, so participating in any task force or strategic planning projects is a good way to maintain a higher profile. Taking on a leadership role within your networking groups is another way to get to know your colleagues on a more personal level, taking part in committees and doing the work behind the scenes. Being on the Advocacy Committee for the SFNet was particularly rewarding for me, as I was able to speak directly to the Fed last spring as they were structuring the Main Street Lending Program, and being able to report back to SFNet on various initiatives we were jointly lobbying for was a great experience in addition to meeting many new contacts.

### **What workplace changes from the last year do you think will become permanent?**

**Bernard:** Before the pandemic, many companies were already transitioning to less office space with more remote work and shared or hoteling options for employees to schedule workspace when coming into the office. The pandemic has proven that we are all capable of working remotely, so I would expect this trend to continue once we're back in the office. We've determined that virtual platforms like Teams and Zoom work perfectly well for both internal and external meetings. I think this will mean that we won't have groups of people getting on airplanes to fly 2,000-plus miles for short client meetings. Instead, we will host on Zoom and save a lot of time and money in the process, while also improving the quality of life for our employees. However, it will be important to travel at times for in-person client visits and other networking events. I don't think you can build true relationships over a computer screen, so there will be a balance as we adjust to the new normal.

**Killeen:** As we evaluate the opportunity to return to offices and get back on the road to visit customers, we're influenced by our new toolkit. Many of us have a greater degree of comfort with Zoom, more fulsome home offices, and better tools for remote interactions with our teams and customers. We also have better data on which roles and activities can be performed efficiently in a virtual environment and where we'll benefit from renewed in-person collaboration. I don't envision any changes as permanent; instead, we'll be evaluating a broader spectrum of opportunities for how we work with our teams and our customers.

**Khoury Ali:** There will definitely be changes to the workplace as we have adapted quite successfully to the current virtual environment. I expect most companies will be more flexible and allow employees to work remotely at least a few times a week, if not more. That said, I can say that most of us are looking forward to some normalcy back in place and the opportunity to convene in-person (at least part time!). Face-to-face contact is much more conducive to organic interaction. So, while more meetings or conferences may be over Zoom, I don't believe we will lose sight of in-person events completely.

**Currie:** People, as well as the companies they work for, have learned that they can be successful working virtually. Because of this, I believe that a large number of companies will either require or make it an option for certain employees to work from home part- or full-time in order to eliminate the expenses of having a physical workplace. A hybrid office-home model will allow both the employee and employer to benefit from efficiencies gained by remote work, such as reducing commuting time and creating better work-life balance, with the benefits of social interaction which result in increased employee engagement, collaboration and loyalty. Those companies that do promote returning to an office location likely will convert their office to include more flexible coworking and hoteling

space instead of assigned offices or cubicles. Additionally, going forward, I think the majority of conference calls will be video calls, and there generally will be more reliance on technology.

**Lepak:** The need for commercial office space will decline significantly, as certain jobs will remain remote. The challenge with this change is how to build a healthy community for your team, and how to manage face-to-face interaction with colleagues, customers, prospects, and the market. There could be less travel, as we've become effective at virtual meetings for many purposes. I think there will be a return to in-person conferences, as connectivity at these events is critical to maintaining networks, and healthy relationships.

**Hernandez:** Naturally, COVID has impacted all of us in one way or another. Obviously, my travel days have been curtailed for the last year. I'm hoping that, after more folks obtain the vaccine, that we can resume somewhat of our normal routines. Notwithstanding this, I do agree that permanent workplace changes will occur as a result. I believe some degree of working remotely will continue. That is not to say that we at SLRBC will be 100% remote because that will not happen, but rather possibly some form of hybrid work from home and in the office schedule may be the new norm. I still think it is important for colleagues to be in the same workplace. One of my largest concerns is the continued training of less experienced team members and the lack of "water cooler" talk. Each lending situation is unique and without proper training, some of the less experienced lenders' careers may be slower to develop as a result of not being in the office. I think one way for a less-experienced person to "stand out" at work during these COVID times is to connect with senior management. We have one team member who contacts me or I contact her periodically to "check in on her." She'll ask questions such as "how am I doing?" I think it's terrific. She wants feedback and doesn't want to wait for the usual customary methods of a review. Sometimes managers get busy and caught up in the day-to-day and unfortunately "out of sight out of mind" sets in. If you want to be noticed, you should volunteer for projects, reach out to colleagues at all levels, voice your opinions during virtual meetings, and look interested during Zoom calls. Each time there is a virtual meeting, it is a point of contact with your colleagues. You may not be in the same office, but that interaction does make an impression nonetheless.

**Palmer:** Working from home is here to stay. Many people are realizing how convenient it has become to work remotely (cutting down on food costs, commute time, gas, etc.), so I very much believe this will become a staple of workplace culture moving forward. This was already starting to ramp up as more jobs became doable digitally; however COVID-19 was the tipping point that I believe will leave a lasting impact for years to come. Many organizations will likely develop a hybrid working environment, allowing their employees to come in on a part-time basis – especially while health and safety is still a big concern for many.

This type of flexibility enables working parents to do their jobs and manage kids' schedules more easily. I think we'll start to see business travel pick up soon because people are ready to leave their homes and get out there, but I can't see it coming back in full-force like it once was – many businesses are concluding that Zoom conferences can be just as effective as in-person meetings (depending on the industry, of course), and I think this trend will stick around for a while. On the same note, I think webinars aren't going away any time soon.

**Barrett:** I think remote work will have staying power. FSW Funding worked remotely in April to mid-May 2020 and then we all came back to the office. My staff and I feel working together creates more of a team environment and works best for us. I have talked to other lenders who feel the opposite and are going to adopt some form of remote work option. The virtual conferences were a great work-around, but for networking seeing people in person can't be beat. Also, I think most of us are pretty done with Zoom calls! I do think hybrid conferences will continue, as having the option of attending virtually is good for more participation at an economical cost. This is especially important as we look to the next generation of leaders. The virtual option is a great way for junior members of an organization to start getting involved in the commercial finance industry.

**Kizner:** Likely most of us will have the flexibility of working from home more often. I know some offices were moving towards a hoteling system before COVID, and now that we've all adjusted our home space to accommodate our work needs, I see less people commuting five days a week to the office. We've proven we can be effective from home, even in roles traditionally thought to be "inflexible" to working outside the office, such as operations and accounting. However, most of us are social beings, and conducting conferences virtually from now on is a trend I hope doesn't stick. I personally can't wait to see colleagues in person and, of course, meeting prospects in person will never be replaced by a Zoom call for me. 🍷

*Michele Ocejo is director of communications for the Secured Finance Network and editor-in-chief of The Secured Lender.*