I have learned to never turn down an opportunity. There are people who might hesitate when presented with a new challenge, but I think it helped my career at various times whenever I took on jobs that didn’t seem very glamorous at the time. One such time was when a job opened for the assistant treasurer of shareholder relations at NV Energy. They came to me because I had spent a significant amount of time working to understand the department during an audit that I performed when no one else wanted to do it. My time in shareholder relations was one of the best jobs I ever had. When you work with the people who are investing in your company, you realize how responsible you are to them. They look to you to take care of their investment. It gave me a whole different perspective of the corporate world.

With a background in accounting, everyone thinks you’re going to be in the corner working with numbers. But understanding how a company works from a financial standpoint will give you a solid foundation for many careers. Over the past 29 years with NV Energy, I’ve had nine different job titles and I credit my financial experiences for enabling me to take on those positions. In fact, when somebody asked if I would like to be the vice president of external affairs, I thought, “That doesn’t sound like me at all.” But, it’s been one of the most fulfilling jobs I’ve had and I really enjoy being involved in the community. It ended up being a better fit than I had imagined.

When I was offered the position of director of water policy and planning, I thought I was being demoted. I thought, “I know cash flow, not water flow.” But it turned out to be one of those great opportunities again because I learned so much and worked with a great group of people who were so dedicated. I learned a lot about the water business, which is very interesting and a lot more complicated than it looks.

In my current position, I’ve had a lot of people say to me, “I want a job like yours. How did you get that?” I just say, “Well, I didn’t plan on having this job.” Your career is going to take whatever path it’s going to take, but you have to look for the opportunities.

You also have to develop your management skills. Develop your ability to understand things and trust yourself. If you don’t understand something, the person sitting next to you probably doesn’t understand it either. They’re just hesitant to ask the question. Sometimes you might ask the “dumb” question. But I’ve been told many times, “You know, I was wondering the same thing but I didn’t want to ask.” Don’t be afraid to ask questions. That’s how you learn. You want to ensure you understand what’s going on before you make decisions or agree to be a part of something.

I feel like the University gave me a really great background. It’s funny; I would be in some of my business classes and think, “I am never going to use this.” But once I was the controller for NV Energy, I thought, “Now I get it. I didn’t realize that I would be putting this to use!” You’re in college and you have to take accounting theory and you think, “Really? Accounting theory?” Then you find yourself using it. At one point I took sociology and logic instead of philosophy, and I think that served me really well. It’s all about taking steps to make decisions and understanding something well.

I had some outstanding professors at Nevada. Nazir Ansari was a great influence. His class was one of the hardest, but one of the most fun and engaging classes I ever had. You had to step out of the box a bit and really think. It was a really important lesson that everything we were learning was a part of something much bigger. When you go out into the world, you’re not going to have a textbook or something all laid out for you. You have to think about how to use your skills and how to solve problems and how to be successful.

While I was still a student, I interned for Kafoury, Armstrong & Co. They hired me full time after graduation while I studied for the CPA exam. At the time, there weren’t many women in accounting, which has completely turned around now. Sometimes people think it must have been difficult, but really it was a time when I think people where recognizing that women were and are a great asset in the workplace. So I never had any issues with being a woman in my field. I had a lot of opportunities at Kafoury, Armstrong & Co. If you worked hard and did the right things, you kept moving up. I also had the privilege of working with Felicia O’Carroll ’76 (accounting). She was a role model for me.

One of the most important lessons I ever learned came from growing up in El Y, Nev. Growing up in a small town you learn how important relationships are, and I think that served me later as well. You need to figure out how to get along with people.

The best customer service lessons I learned were from working at Harrah’s as a cashier and change attendant as an undergraduate. Bill Harrah was still alive and you were indoctrinated with customer service as soon as you sat down for your interview. Everything was for the customer. We always made sure we were paying attention to the customer and they were never left wanting for anything.

I’ve learned that to be successful in business you have to be a good listener and a good communicator. If you listen to the people you’re working with, they probably have better and more ideas than you could ever come up with yourself. I always say I don’t think I’ve ever had an original idea, but I think I’m pretty good at listening to other people and understanding what it is they’re trying to accomplish. Then when you’re in the position to help them make that happen, that’s when you get the great results.

From a conversation in November with Associate Editor Roseann Keegan. Simmons is the 2015 Foundation Board Chair and vice-president of business development and community strategy at NV Energy. She is the secretary for NV Energy’s charitable foundation and has been a University of Nevada Foundation Board trustee since 2013. She is on the board of trustees for EDAWN, the Reno Philharmonic and the Great Basin National Park Foundation.