



The road less travelled

Why women's path to partnership in consulting firms is still not straight



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Foreword

At Sheffield Haworth, we've always believed passionately in the importance of people and in the impact they have on business performance.

The recruitment, retention and promotion of women remains one of the biggest issues for consulting firms. Despite the many wide-ranging initiatives designed to resolve this, the results, especially at senior levels, continue to be disappointing. The direction may be clear, but the pace of change is still too slow.

Although much has been written on the subject of gender diversity, we wanted to obtain some deeper insights about how the women who have made it to senior positions in consulting firms were able to do so, and what they see as the barriers to more women joining their ranks.

To do this we've joined forces with Source Global Research, who specialise in researching the consulting industry, and share our interest in ensuring there are more women at its senior levels. Source had already undertaken analysis showing that there's a strong commercial case for more women consultants on teams – clients believe diversity delivers a better overall result. So, for this study, Sheffield Haworth spent more than 80 hours interviewing partners in consulting firms, both men and women. Often amusing, rarely the same, but always inspiring, we've used their views to draw out some consistent themes about what's helped – and in some cases hindered – women on their path into the partnership and even onto senior partner roles. These women, who include some of the most successful partners in their field, have been genuine trailblazers, both within their organisations and for the industry as a whole – future generations will be indebted to them.

This report shares these insights as part of our contribution to advancing the debate about how to achieve greater partner parity amongst the sexes. We hope you enjoy reading it and we'd love to discuss how our findings apply in your own firm and what we can all do to accelerate the pace of change.

John Gardner, Sheffield Haworth

“ I was at director level for about two years before I thought about going for partner. The trigger for me was that I was put in charge of a practice area within restructuring. It was the first time a non-partner had been put in charge of any part of the business – hiring, firing, taking responsibility, and so on. A couple of years in, we had to make some structural decisions about how we were going to approach future plans. My then boss said, ‘Oh can you write me a paper? We need to try and get this signed off.’ Which I did and he went, ‘Thanks very much, I’ll take it to the board.’ He walked off and I thought, ‘Actually, I don’t have a seat at the right table if I’m not a partner.’ If I was going to be an effective leader of that part of the business, I needed to be a partner. I needed a seat at the table.”

A word about our methodology

Sheffield Haworth interviewed 35 senior women and men in consulting firms from countries ranging from the US to UK and Europe and to Australia. Most are equity partners. Of the women, two-thirds were career consultants; the rest had joined the profession later, from industry. 43% had worked for more than one firm, often earning promotion via this route rather than through an internal process; 57% have families as well as careers. The fact that so many very senior people were willing to give hours of their time to contribute to this report is testimony to how much they care about diversity and to the importance of the issue. We're deeply grateful for their input and support.

A summary of the key messages from our research

- Research shows that clients believe consulting teams are still male-dominated, and 90% would like to see more women.
- Clients state that diverse teams produce better quality solutions and, given a choice, would generally select gender-balanced teams. Diversity can therefore bring commercial benefits.
- Women are joining the consulting industry in ever greater numbers but they are not staying
- Representation of women at partner level and beyond remains low – often under 10%.
- The blueprint for a consulting partner remains implicitly male; masculine behaviours and practices tend to be valued over the differences that women bring in their ways of working.
- Whilst these stereotypes prevail, women do believe that the situation is improving – just not quickly enough and with a way still to go.
- The problem is not that there are no women, more that there are not enough and too often firms are comfortable with a token woman or two present at senior levels.
- Critical mass of women at senior levels is a necessity if firms are to stem the flow of women leaving rather than seeking further promotion.
- Having more female role models is essential in retaining women, as are flexible working arrangements.
- Mentoring and sponsorship are both approaches which, where deployed, have proved successful in promoting women.
- Quotas too, whilst divisive, are seen by women as a mechanism that can accelerate change, even if only deployed for a limited period.

Recommendations for accelerating change:

- 1 Invest in research on the universe of female talent
- 2 Understand the factors that stop women from pursuing a career with you
- 3 'Lean in' on women's behalf
- 4 Find the good (male) sponsors
- 5 Empower engagement leaders too
- 6 Identify and encourage the return of female consultants by offering a supportive and truly flexible working environment

Introduction

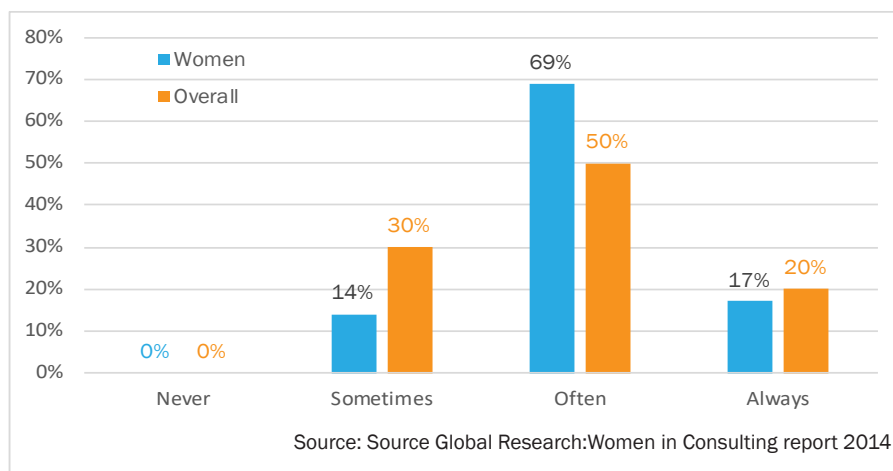
This is a very senior female partner in a strategy consulting firm talking:

“If I was working on the client side right now and listening to what consulting firms say about diversity, I would honestly think, ‘I’m not going to buy a project from you.’ Perhaps I’m being a bit harsh but I’ve seen pictures here in Germany which are supposed to show consulting teams, but they’ve put some of the secretaries into the groups to make them look more diverse. Even then all these pictures really do [is] highlight how few women there are. Personally, if I were running this firm, I’d be developing a new view of what leadership is: one that’s less biased towards a certain gender.”

Why do 90% of clients’ firms want to see more women in consulting?

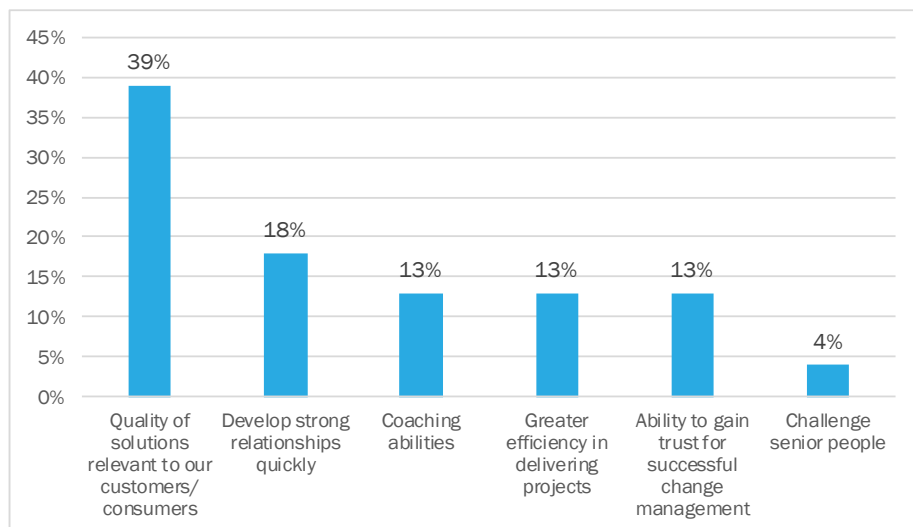
Source Global Research canvassed 100 senior executives in the US for their views on the role women play in the consulting teams they work with.¹ Nine out of ten of them wanted to see teams which had more of a gender balance, and two-thirds said that, if they had to choose between two consulting teams and all other factors were equal, they’d often or always hire the team that had more women. The proportion was even higher (almost 90%) among female clients. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The extent to which clients would be likely to select one consulting firm over another based on the presence of women, all else being equal



And they’d choose the team with more women, not out of a sense of fairness or loyalty, but because it makes commercial sense to them. Consulting teams which have a greater proportion of women are seen by clients to be capable of delivering better quality solutions, relevant not only to the client’s own organisation but to those organisations’ end customers. Women, in other words, help consulting teams to think more laterally and to consider the longer term. They’re also seen to be faster at developing relationships, more gifted coaches, generally more efficient and better at gaining trust.

Figure 2: The reasons why clients want to see more women on consulting teams



Source: Source Global Research: Women in Consulting report 2014

1. Women in Consulting: Findings from Source Global Research’s report on women in US consulting firms (2014)

“They’re more thoughtful,” said a client in the banking sector, “they’re more prepared to take time, more reflective and more engaging.” (Figure 2)

Female partners and project leaders are also seen to have a positive impact. More than 80% of clients think that a project run by a woman is likely to keep to time and budget and that female project managers are better at stakeholder management than their male counterparts. Women are also seen to excel in terms of communication. 75% of clients said that they tend to be more upfront with what needs to be done and why; 58% said they’re more straightforward than men and are more prepared to spend ‘quality’ time with their clients and teams.

None of this should come as a surprise to consulting firms. The idea that consultants should do more than deliver advice emerged in the mid-1980s as clients started to become more mature buyers of consultancy; the CEO of a US insurance company complained that it wasn’t planning his staff needed help with, but execution. It has, however, become increasingly marked since the financial crisis. Separate research in 2013 indicated that 83% of clients expected a consulting firm which has helped develop a strategy or plan to stay around to help advise on the implementation.

With an increasing number of former consultants now working in client organisations, there’s no shortage of analytical skills or best practice. What is still seen to be lacking, though, is the ability to collaborate and to implement quickly and decisively, while also ensuring that change, once delivered, sticks. If clients want to see more women on their consulting teams, it’s primarily because they think women are generally better at the skills required in implementation².

The scale of the challenge

But it certainly poses a problem for the consulting industry. Women may make up 44% of the total consulting workforce in the US³, but one in five of the clients we surveyed there hadn’t seen a female consultant in the last two years. Women may be joining the consulting industry in ever-greater numbers, but they’re not staying and they’re certainly not yet well represented at senior levels in the consulting industry. And that’s not for want of trying: it’s fair to say that consulting firms have bent over backwards to devise policies that give all employees greater flexibility around childcare, to support women coming back from maternity leave and to provide technology that allows people to be productive when working from home. Yet the proportion of women staying the course long enough to make it to partner and then to senior partner remains stubbornly low. Consulting firms which like to be trend-setters are finding themselves outpaced by clients’ success in promoting diversity and wrong-footed when it comes to dealing with the growing number of senior clients who are female.

Much has been written about the problems organisations face in recruiting and retaining female talent. **The purpose of this report is to take a slightly different tack: to look at the factors which helped women in consulting firms progress through the ranks to become partners and senior partners.**

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2. Source Global Research: Strategic Planning Programme: Part 2: Strategies for Growth in Consulting

3. US Bureau of Labor Statistics: Management, scientific and technical consulting services category (December 2014)

The key issue: trial by stereotype

Clients want mixed teams, and think women make good consultants. The business case for diversity in consulting is compelling – and is becoming more visible to all sides.

“I think we’re starting to see more and more, sometimes overt, questions being asked [when clients] think, ‘hang on a minute the team you’ve sent isn’t very diverse.’ We’ve had a couple of comments when we’ve sent an all-white middle-aged male team,” said one of the women we talked to.

Plenty of others, men and women, noted that the firms they work for are dominated by what Grayson Perry memorably dubbed ‘Default Man’. “We recently failed to be short-listed for a very big piece of work because, when we turned up for the presentation, our team was all middle-aged white chaps. I think it was a pharma company, and the client panel was a mixture of men and women.”

Clients are pushing against this default – ‘white, middle-class, heterosexual, usually middle-aged’ – because they themselves are increasingly diverse and resent having to take advice from firms that fail to demonstrate the same diversity.

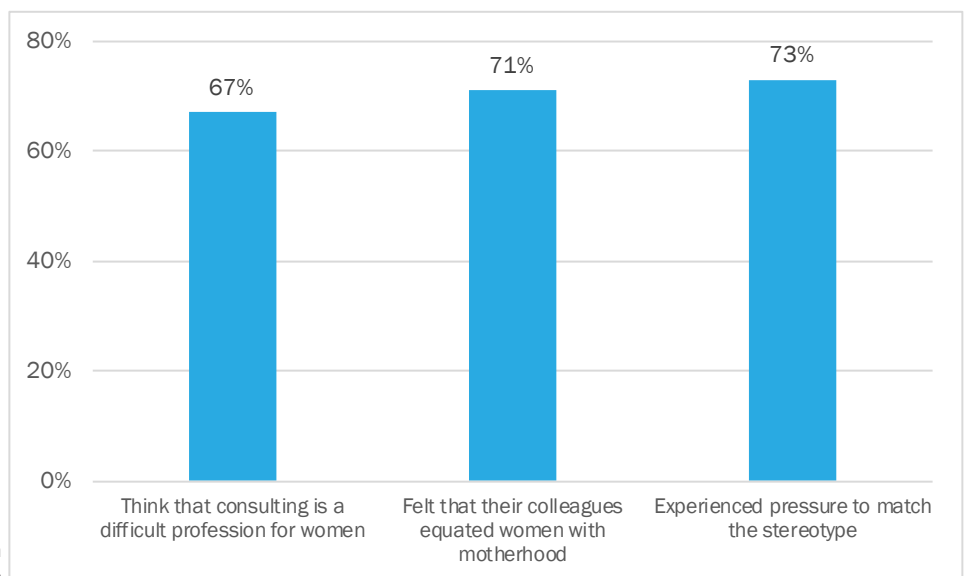
“I’ve certainly had feedback saying, ‘your team is not a diverse enough team, it doesn’t represent the community or us as an organisation’.”

Plus ça change

It’s not unheard of for fewer than 10% of partners in a consulting firm to be women. Even where the gender balance at junior levels is fairly even, women simply evaporate from the system as you move up the organisational hierarchy. The scarcity of women at partner level can have straightforward consequences, some as obvious as that related by one UK partner: “It was 2003 and there was no maternity provision for partners ... because they didn’t have any female partners.” Another woman offers a depressingly mundane counterpoint to more institutional failings: “Often [c.2000] I was the only woman in a room at a conference. In fact a couple of times I went to join a group in the room and someone gave me their glass for a refill. That happened alot: I learnt not to wear a black suit and a white shirt very quickly!”

Sounds antediluvian? Plenty of the other women we spoke to commented on the insidious assumptions that continue to influence corporate views. “At a recent partner conference, the support staff assumed I was a secretary, because almost all the partners were men.”

Figure 3: Experiences of women in consulting



Source: Sheffield Haworth interview programme

The life stage of the women we interviewed certainly coloured their perceptions: everyone recognises that things, though far from perfect, are getting better. But some important things haven't changed:

- **Almost three quarters feel that their male colleagues automatically equated women with motherhood. Women who want to pursue a career at the expense of having a family could still be held back by general attitudes. 73% said that they'd felt under pressure to live up to a stereotype, whether that was as a 'career woman' or as someone who put their family first (Figure 3).**
- **Two-thirds of women think consulting is a particularly difficult profession for women because family commitments make it harder for them to travel frequently and work long hours in an office.**

Young women are attracted to a career in consulting – many of the women we spoke to talked about the opportunity to travel, to be given responsibility at an early stage, and to do interesting work. The vast majority of women we interviewed believe the firms they joined, and in some cases still work for, are genuine meritocracies: nine out of ten felt their contribution had been valued from the outset. But they still recognised many women leave at the senior manager level because they find a career in consulting incompatible with having a family: “It felt as though I was working all the hours God sent and that there was still more to do. That's the reason why I left,” said one.

These concerns are felt even more acutely when it comes to the process involved in becoming a partner: an already depleted pipeline of potential candidates shrinks even further because the sacrifice the firm is seen to demand is too great, akin to selling their soul: “I was put off being a partner because I wasn't sure I had, or even wanted to have, the values I felt you had to demonstrate.” For most women, this boils down to a black-and-white choice: firm or family. “Before I got married, I'd had several long-lasting relationships and was even engaged, but on each occasion I felt I had to put my career first.”

Of course, the men we spoke to face the same challenges, but many benefit from having stay-at-home wives who bear the brunt of responsibility for day-to-day family matters and, even today, it is seen as more acceptable for a man to put his career first.

Not everyone agrees, though: “I think what you have to look at here is who suffers when a woman (or man, for that matter), works part-time or can't always be available in the way someone who has no other commitments can be. It's the engagement manager: the person on whose shoulders the success of a project usually depends. The partners in charge may be quite happy with the idea of a diverse team, but they're not the ones juggling all the stresses and strains of project work. It's the engagement manager whose job is on the line.”

A male blueprint

All of this creates a blueprint for the consulting partner which is inevitably male. Whether they referred to it in such explicit terms or not, all our interviewees agreed that its effect is to blinker the appointments process and value similarity over difference. Even the men we spoke to are acutely aware of the issue, even when they feel powerless to make a change: “I would choose people who I thought were tough enough, and resilient enough. I’d like to think they even had quite a good time with the banter and they gave as good as they got. You could certainly argue that that is discriminatory, but I had to kind of go with it and make sure all the women I brought along would either accept it or go along with it or push back on it but not in a way they would find very stressful or challenging.” Any potential disruption to the status quo is passed over. The speaker’s defence seems to be meritocracy, that he’s selecting those best suited to this task, but he’s doing so according to very limited, very male criteria.

Unsurprisingly, it’s the women in our research who most frequently focus on this point. One American partner has risen to a position from which she can see the men below her still treading the familiar course: “I have project leaders and engagement managers, male project leaders working for me evaluating the women below them and I can see the biases extremely blatantly. They say someone is shy because she is not as aggressive as they are. When I look at her I think that she is being [as effective, or more] than they’re being.”

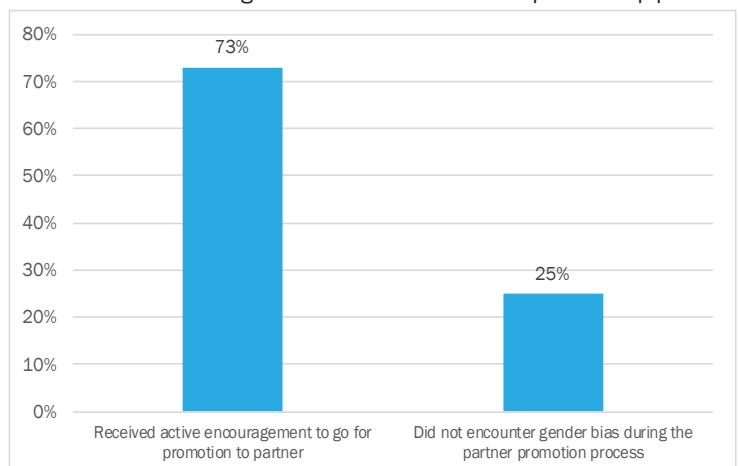
Despite firms’ success in being gender-neutral during the early years of their careers, only a quarter of the women we interviewed think that the partnership process is unbiased (Figure 4).

“With election to partner there’s a huge subjective component: in the end, a group of people taking the decision. Performance is simply what gets you in the room. You have to have top grades to become a principal but, when it comes to promotion to partner, everyone is in the top or second band which means that the objective component has been removed and the subjective takes precedence. The partnership has to decide whether it wants to have this person, whether making a partner seems fair, and whether they want to work with the person. It’s a bit like playing in the right sport.”

Forced to play by the rules

“I remember a story which probably sums up some of the subjectivity. It was an event I went to as a director where there were some quite senior partners from the firm. I was so busy focused on the client project I was working on, I didn’t even want to go and I was spending the break working on my laptop when the head of the advisory business came over. He was a nice guy and sat down next to me, so I stopped what I was doing and chatted to him, asking lots of questions and just being me. Then there was a plenary session and I asked a lot of questions, more for my own amusement than anything else. I thought nothing more of it until a couple of weeks later when

Figure 4: Women’s view of the partnership process



Source: Sheffield Haworth interview programme

I was talking to my immediate boss: 'I thought it was so interesting how you played that whole day,' he said – but I had no idea what he was talking about. 'It was brilliant the way you positioned yourself, the way you spoke with Steve.' It was as though, in his mind, I'd created the whole thing so I could present myself positively. I think it was at that point that I started to wake up a little bit as to how people think."

Institutional failings can look fairly easy to solve by comparison: get HR, albeit belatedly, to draft maternity provision into contracts. But the problem isn't really solved until there are partners choosing to take it up. It has to be obvious to aspiring women – from graduate entrants up – that it's possible to become partner, and on your own terms. "When I first started as a consultant, the very small number of women in senior positions were ball-breakers. You had to assume that that kind of behaviour was the price of partnership – and it wasn't one I was prepared to pay." Another asked "When I come to work, do I have to be aggressive and strident and forceful?"

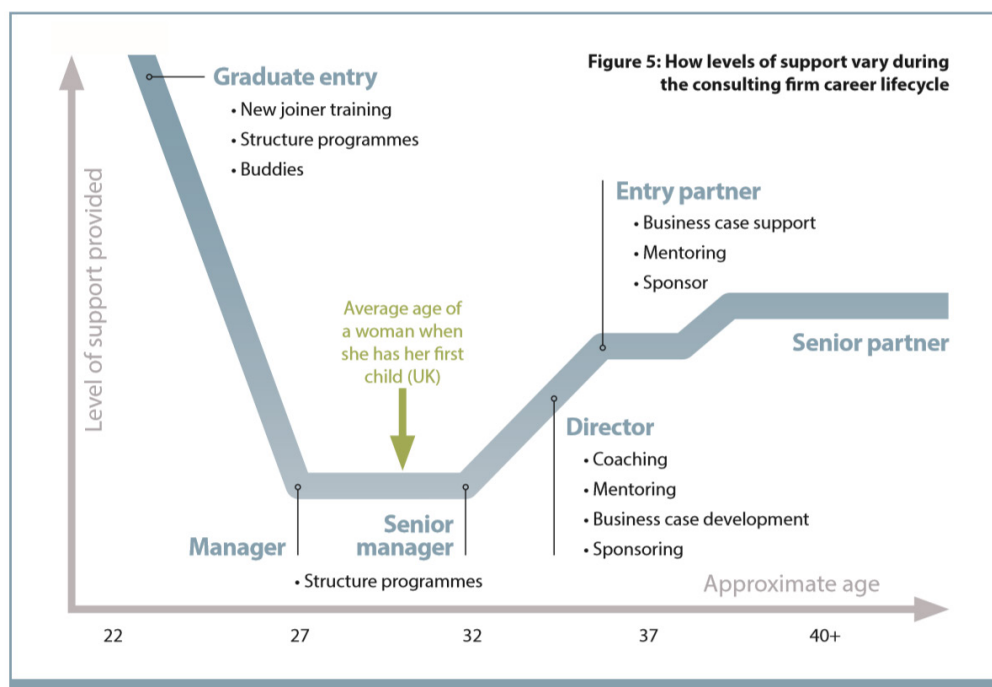
Women are both expected to conform to the male stereotype and subject to criticism if they do. As one UK partner noted, "It's like ambition is a bad thing in a woman, energy is a bad thing in a woman, asking for things is bad." The same behaviours are judged differently when performed by men and women: "People accept and also expect [a man to be dictatorial] without them having to explain their behaviour. I think that there is a clear difference here. A man can be completely prescriptive [and] it is far less of an issue than if a woman does it."

Double standards like this magnify feelings of injustice, and further the failings inherent in having one dominant blueprint drawn up by one dominant group. What a lot of women want is more dialogue which acknowledges the blueprint: "Quite often our model of what a successful consultant looks like is very skewed by the male opinion of how people should communicate, and how vocal they should be. There are many more models of how people can be effective and influential without having someone who is talking all the time or is super central within discussions."

A significant number of interviewees talked about the depleted pipeline and the attrition of talent which mean that first sponsors and then partner panels simply don't have enough choice. One woman made clear that it's not even particularly about the partner process, "it's the 15 years that you need to do before that". Discussions about what drives people out of the industry are well-rehearsed, but the effects are especially pronounced among women. Our research shows there is a critical period when a woman is in her late twenties or early thirties when she may well be thinking about starting a family or looking for a better work/life balance. It's at this point that she may well leave.

The stage at which a woman is most likely to have her first child (the current average is 30 in the UK) is also the point in consulting terms (usually they're a manager or senior manager) where arguably she receives least support from the firm. As a new graduate there are structured training courses and often help to pass exams. At the most senior levels of Director and Partner, there are continuous feedback processes combined with coaching to help people over the line. But for those people – men and women who are at five to seven years in – the job is all about increasing consulting skills and building knowledge. Obviously people receive training and attend courses, but at this stage there is no substitution for the simple hard graft and long hours that

“...what a successful consultant looks like is very skewed by the male opinion of how people should communicate”



Source: Sheffield Haworth interview programme

are needed to demonstrate billability and value on client projects. The passage to partnership can feel a long way off at midnight on a client site away from home with a deliverable due the next day. The promise and the reality often feel far apart at this stage (Figure 5). Without strong encouragement from senior people at the firm, a ‘disappointment gap’ emerges. When that is coupled with competing pressures at home, a career in consulting can start to feel too hard, and more importantly, not worth pursuing. So women in particular just quit.

Lots of women we talked to also felt that what they perceived as ‘partner values’ were not ones they had or wished to have, and that the workload would simply escalate, obliterating work/life balance. Ironically, seniority is much more likely to provide the much sought after flexibility. It removes expectations of being constantly available to clients and gives far greater control of schedules and travel. One woman summed it up succinctly: “I actually might have decided to do it much faster in my career if someone had told me what being a partner was.” While the men we interviewed tended to have been clear from the beginning of their careers that they wanted to be partners, women’s focus was on doing the current job well and then looking at the next tier rather than some kind of ‘ultimate goal’ of partner.

“The route to partner has always been very opaque.”

Some of our interviewees found perceptive ways to go beyond the blueprint. One turned to science: “I would also say it’s probably very male-brained. Women and men can both have male brains, so if you read the neuroscience stuff, your gender can be one thing, your physical body can be one thing and your brain can be another, and I think there’s a lot of male brains in consulting.”

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Another interviewee deconstructed the way stereotypes are built up, arguing that naming conventions work as straitjackets: “I think that the people who get promoted have certain characteristics. By that definition, if you call them ‘alpha characteristics’ that is all they look for. So if it is not in their mindset to look at people who don’t have them, then you just encourage the same type of behaviours.”

The problem is not that there are no women, it’s that there are some women. Some women, especially if they feel they have to mimic male mores, can actually reinforce damaging stereotypes. Men feel comfortable with a token woman or two on their team but can’t imagine how different the world might look if women were in the majority.

Perceptions around promotion

Our research suggests that female consultants’ perceptions around promotion change over time (Figure 6). Junior consultants see themselves as working in a meritocracy where good work will automatically be recognised and rewarded by their immediate boss.

Figure 6: Perceptions and promotion

Perception	Junior Consultant	Manager	Director
Clarity about what’s expected in terms of performance	Very clear		Requires interpretation
Perceived basis of decision making about promotion	Objective		Largely subjective
Who’s involved in promotion decisions	Immediate boss	Immediate boss and his/her colleagues	Broad group of partners
Candidates can assume they’ll automatically be recognised and rewarded on the basis of good work	Very high probability	Fairly high probability	No probability

Senior managers have similar views, but female directors face different challenges: increasing opaqueness around what’s expected of them; less importance attached to objective performance metrics; and a wider group of people involved in the decision-making process who need to be actively courted because they’re less likely to see actual client work.

“The proportion of partners is the ultimate indicator. There’s still not enough female partners. I suspect all the leaders of the businesses are male. I suspect the way we get around showing women are on the leadership team is to say they are talent leaders or HR. It is still predominantly a male industry.”

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The route to critical mass

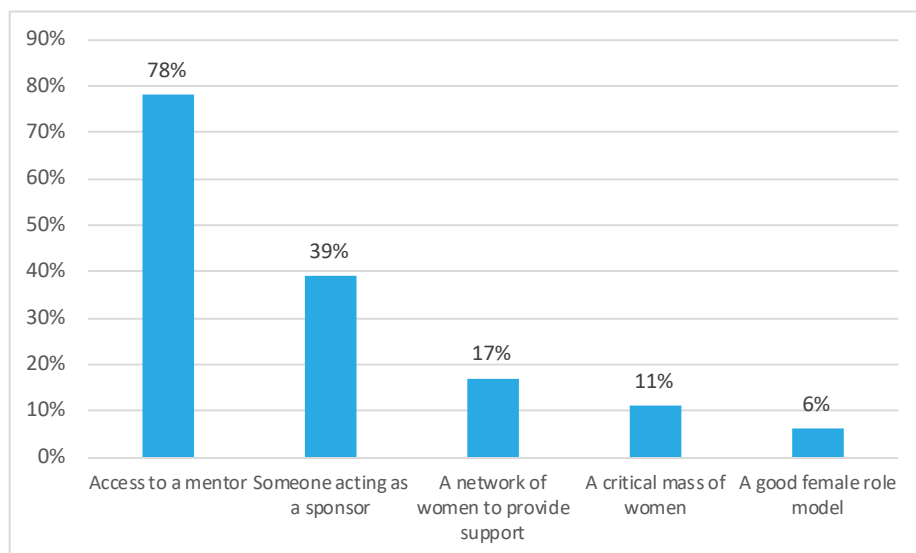
Against this backdrop, the various approaches firms employ to support women through the process become hugely important – a fact almost everyone we interviewed recognised, recent partners as well as those who went through the process a decade or more ago.

This support comes in many forms, but the most common is access to a mentor – almost four out of five women we spoke to had access to such support (Figure 7).

A much smaller number (39%) had a sponsor, someone willing to take an active role in recommending the individual to others and to help to strengthen would-be partners' personal networks. 17% relied on their own network, usually of other women, to provide encouragement and advice. Just 11% said that the number of women in their organisation had reached a point of critical mass, where women's attitudes and behaviour balance

those of their male counterparts. A depressingly small number – only 6% – said they had a really good (i.e. effective and inspirational) female role model they could look up to as they were going through the partner promotion process.

Figure 7: Support received by women in consulting



Source: Sheffield Haworth interview programme

Women attract women

There is a tipping point, after which having women in senior positions becomes self-perpetuating simply because the panel has greater diversity and is naturally more open to a range of candidates and styles: “We are now trying to have more female representation on the partner panel so that we get a more balanced view,” acknowledged one of the people we spoke to.

Again and again in our interviews we heard that women attract other women. So senior women have a disproportionately big impact, not simply because they erode the automatic association between seniority and men, but because they provide an environment in which other women can, and do, thrive. One partner in Australia described how her early career had involved several occasions in which she'd had to choose between a relationship and her job (she chose the latter). Eventually married and with young children, she found herself working for a senior female partner alongside other women who were also juggling their home and business lives. **“The partner didn't have the best reputation internally, so it was her who reached out to us, rather than us choosing to work with her. But she created in my experience a uniquely supportive environment in which we all helped each other.”** No one was made to feel bad when they had a childcare issue or domestic crisis; everyone worked together.

“If a senior woman is working part time, actually that is something that is desperately relevant for making women feel supported. Flexi-working is desperately relevant for women, and I can do that, I can help with advice and I’m a role model.”

“Why have I got a greater proportion of women in my team? Because like attracts like.”

The wrong tools

Women are being offered tools to break through what one partner described as the ‘permafrost’ around them, but not necessarily ones which suit them or play to their strengths.

Women are, for example, told to build relationships as a way of getting noticed, giving them an echo chamber in which their achievements should sound more loudly. As we noted in the introduction, clients see female consultants’ ability to build meaningful relationships as a real strength. But what matters in terms of promotion isn’t the ability to network per se, but self-promotion. Moreover, the context in which these interactions play out is a barrier in itself: the number of women who mention out-of-hours socialisation as something they recognise as both important but almost entirely unwelcoming is staggering. One narrates how seemingly informal, pub-based chats about careers actually function as a crucial part of career development. They translate into X going back into the office and mentioning the great work being done by Y, who’s really taking Z forward. Deprived of that kind of casual endorsement, her only option is to blow her own trumpet, but as she says, “what sort of a jerk would I feel going up and knocking on his door to tell him I’ve done a good job?”

This speaks to a central point raised by lots of interviewees, both male and female, that the blueprint really encourages the advancement of those who succeed most visibly and loudly: “Men will be doing a lot more of the things that they see are necessary to build the relationships that take you through to partnership, whereas women think that the body of work they’ve done, the body of good things they’ve done, the task focus they’ve had, will speak for itself.”

One response is to dismiss this as a naive failure to play the game on the part of women, but that’s simply untrue. We already found that clients are impressed by the on-time, on-budget projects delivered by women but for advancement up the ladder, according to the blueprint, it’s not even about success, it’s about getting that success acknowledged as your own: “I think women wait to get tapped on the shoulder, assuming that people will see the good work we are doing rather than going out there to show them, whereas a guy will make sure the world knows the great job they are doing.” It’s no good encouraging women to be better at self-promotion – to ‘lean in’, as Sheryl Sandberg has famously described it – because most of them won’t, and many actively despise it. Female consultants tend to talk about ‘we’, while their male counterparts use ‘I’.

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Quotas - the most divisive of approaches

In an attempt to address the lack of women in senior roles, lots of firms have taken steps which single women out.

Several of these, including the vexed topic of quotas, can be seen as discriminatory against men, which of course they are. Our interviewees were split on how this delicate subject should be handled. One interviewee commented that it sometimes felt that “the mountain is simply too steep to climb, so we need a bit of help in the form of gender targets and quotas – just to force change.” But while plenty of women agreed, for others targets and quotas represented something more like surrender and a last resort: “as long we still have an aspiration and are working towards it, I don’t want to achieve it at any cost.”

Quotas do have the advantage of speeding up change. When Norway first introduced corporate board gender quotas in 2003 the proportion of women on boards stood at just under 16%; the target (40%) was reached four years later. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, used to be against quotas, but is now an advocate: “I soon realised that unless we had targets, if not quotas, there was no way we were going to make the right step.”

As we noted at the outset, consulting firms have become very successful at attracting women in equal numbers to men in the early years of their careers, but the proportion of women at senior levels remains very small.

At the current rate of progress, we estimate that it will take another 30 years before we reach gender parity at the partner level.

“I do believe in quotas. If the system is broken then you’re not going to change it by reinforcing and doing the same thing.”

“I wasn’t previously in favour of targets and quotas but I must say I am moving much more towards that view. We need a critical mass of women to get there and if we just carry on based on the status quo it’s going take us much longer than if we just put in quotas.”

It must be said that, among the people we interviewed, it was the men who really had a problem with quotas. Their concerns centred on an assumption that quotas undermine what they perceived as the current meritocracy. As one put it: “I wouldn’t want weaker people who’d had concessions made for them because they were women or men or disabled or anything.” Others expressed their views in more measured language, but still emphasised how disruptive quotas are. While that’s exactly what they’re supposed to be, there’s clearly a balance to be struck. Nobody is suggesting that people be promoted beyond their ability; quotas only force the system to consider and recognise very capable women who already exist. Ultimately, they’re an imperfect solution to a problem that isn’t solved by notional equality. There’s no merit in a meritocracy that says that men and women are equal but somehow doesn’t appoint women.

A further issue with quotas, targets and all initiatives of this kind, is what happens when they are missed, and whose problem that becomes. A lot of senior women reported that it ended up on their desk, creating a whole new set of difficulties:

“If the system is broken then you’re not going to change it by reinforcing and doing the same thing.”

“They love to ask women to run these women initiatives but then it becomes that the woman has to figure it out for herself. You have it on the agenda on a regular basis in the partner meetings and time and again you speak about it but nothing has changed much, targets have been missed again.” It’s all too easy to think that setting the target is enough, but it has to be worked towards and given resources. As one German partner put it, “don’t set targets when you are not willing to change”.

Mentoring, good; sponsorship, so much better

A far more acceptable way of restacking the heavily skewed deck more in favour of women is mentoring – something most of the senior women we talked to have benefited from, especially as they started to move from middle to senior management.

“I describe becoming a partner a bit like becoming a professional footballer. When you become a professional footballer people think you have made it, when actually the training gets even harder. In fact, in many ways, the support mechanism needs to be even better when you become a partner.”

Many of the women we interviewed spoke about the specific benefits of having a female mentor, although it’s clear that some men can play this role very effectively too. “You need to have someone who understands the stage of life you’re at and the decisions you face as a woman, about mobility, marriage, if and when you want to have children.” Men were less likely to understand the issues, not because they weren’t sympathetic (many were) but because most of them, supported by wives who were either full-time mothers or working in less demanding roles, had never had to make these choices. “Women need to hear that it’s okay to put a relationship ahead of their career, or to take a different job for a period of time – and men, because they don’t understand or don’t want to be seen as patronising, are reluctant to say that. Other women can”. It’s something that our male interviewees recognised as well: “I would think that, if you’re a woman, having a female mentor would make a definite difference.”

“Having a female mentor helps a lot.”

“Having a good mentor is really critical, even more so for women than men.”

“Everyone who’s being considered for promotion to partner gets a career counsellor as standard, but women get extra mentoring – typically a couple of hours every other week – with another, more senior woman, just to make sure that we’re on the right track and that we’re connecting to the right people. It’s a formal programme, not just something that’s squeezed into your spare time.”

“You need to have a mentor who understands the stage of life you’re at, and the decisions you face as a woman.”

What does it take to be a good mentor?

- An understanding of how to navigate the firm's written and unwritten rules
- Openness, the ability to give clear and objective feedback, and a willingness to explain how the 'game' works
- Being trusted to see things from a woman's perspective and to have empathy with the choices they have to make
- "A guide, someone you can turn to, more a friend than a colleague"

"I've had people in the past ask if I'll be their sponsor, people who I don't know very well, and I just say 'no'. That's because sponsorship means putting my personal reputation on the line, and if I don't know you very well, how can I do that? I'm just going to look as though I'm advertising without any real substance. Yes, I'll be your mentor, coach, conscience, whatever, but we need to be very clear what we mean by sponsor."

As these comments suggest, almost all our interviewees had male sponsors. That's partly an issue of numbers: a sponsor has to be someone at a senior level, fewer of whom are women. But it also reflects the extent to which men are implicitly seen to be better at interpreting the rules (because they're set by men in the first place) and at helping women having the courage of their own convictions: "My sponsor restored my faith in what it meant to be a partner; he helped me with my own self confidence and encouraged me to think I would be a good partner." However, it's also clear from our interviewees that some men are simply good at sponsoring (and mentoring) women. Perhaps it's because they have daughters who have faced challenges in their own careers, or may face them in the future, but they exhibit the empathy that's vital here. Everyone is different: consulting firms need to do more to actively seek out the men and women who'd make the best sponsors and mentors.

Those are hopefully short-term issues, because the most important result of sponsorship is critical mass. It's a feedback loop: with every woman promoted, there are more role models in which women can recognise elements of themselves and their situation. Because, of course, not every woman is the same, the solution isn't one female blueprint.

These interviews show us that success isn't about similarity, it's about valuing difference.

“My sponsor restored my faith in what it meant to be a partner.”

Six things consulting firms can do

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost. The Road not Taken (1920)

As consultants are fond of saying, you can't boil the ocean. But there are six points we think consulting firms should consider, based on what we heard from our 35 interviewees.

1

Invest in research on the universe of female talent

Most of the firms Sheffield Haworth works with recognise the value of looking strategically at their senior recruitment plans, but the same can't always be said of their approach to diversity planning including female recruitment. Too often, consulting firms lack data about women in the sector, function or geography in question and they therefore assume that, because they've not come across women at competitor firms, the latter simply aren't available. We recently undertook an analysis of an Asian market and were able to identify 200 female partners and directors. Our client – a man – was delighted with this finding, commenting “I knew there were senior women out there and was fed up with being told they ‘didn't exist’ in my market.” Investing in research to identify the universe of women in a given sector, geography or function allows the opportunity to approach key targets on a more informal basis to understand their individual career ambitions. The best recruitment results emerge where there is regular engagement with potential candidates to build a relationship that encourages interest to join a firm based around customised propositions that work for the women in question.

2

Understand the factors that stop women from pursuing a career with you

Women aren't a problem, but an opportunity. Firms have all kinds of data and metrics about female staff these days, but the reason why someone wants to leave is typically only collected when they're walking out of the door. If firms are serious about their female staff, they need a qualitative understanding of the drivers for promotion amongst their key female talent, as well as any concerns and issues they may have. As our interviews illustrate, it won't matter one iota how much a woman is acknowledged and rewarded for the quality of her work if she feels she has to sacrifice her life to have any chance of making partner. Unless you know this and know it early enough, you won't have any chance of addressing the problem.

3

'Lean in' on women's behalf

Our research has pointed to the hugely important role played by senior people in consulting firms who've taken a direct interest in helping individual women to realise their potential. In Sheryl Sandberg's book (Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, 2013) and elsewhere, evidence suggests that being heard by a senior person can make the difference for women consultants between staying and leaving. It really can be that simple. Our interviewees were clear that the impact of a well thought-through sponsorship programme for female consultants is significant but one that consulting firms have yet to fully explore and embed.

4

Find the good (male) sponsors

Whilst mentoring and sponsorship are really important, it's also clear that not all mentors and sponsors are created equal. You need to find the good sponsors within your firm. That means being clear about the profile and characteristics of the most successful sponsors and searching for them inside your firm. Sponsorship is no longer an activity that can be left to individual preferences and whims, but, like any other corporate process, needs active management if it's to be successful. Moreover, sponsors need support, guidance and above all training if they're to fulfil their roles effectively. Firms need to identify those people (mostly men right now) who'll make good sponsors and to support them in making this role a success. This support is essential in an era where the potential for sexual discrimination lawsuits is a reality.

5

Empower engagement leaders too

Our research has also found that engagement leaders and project managers – the people leading an assignment on the ground – have a huge impact on women's perceptions about their future with the firm. These are the people with day-to-day responsibility for delivering a project to demanding clients and equally demanding colleagues – let's call them 'the pinched middle' – so they're the most risk-averse of all and other people's commitments outside work, however important, carry little weight. More – much more – needs to be done to demonstrate to this crucial constituency that clients want greater gender diversity and that, despite the inconvenience of juggling people who may, for example, have different working hours, the benefits outweigh the hassle. And this group needs active (and public) support in managing the situation from the partners they report to.

6

Identify and encourage the return of female consultants by offering a supportive and truly flexible working environment

When women leave it's often because they're unwilling to commit to the 24/7/365 working model most firms implicitly follow. And they're not alone in this respect: the millennial generation has a very different idea about what constitutes a work/life balance and are even less willing to sacrifice themselves for their career than are most working mothers. Consulting firms can be pioneers in this respect: project-based work lends itself to working from different locations and at non-standard times. They can, for example, exploit the opportunity to re-engage women who would enjoy returning to their careers after periods away, but assume the option is not available. Put simply, they don't realise there is an alternative way of working: flexible hours, working from home or another convenient place, and using technology to connect remotely. Consulting firms could actively promote flexible practices and provide access to role models at the senior levels, who are prepared to promote different working practices and are attuned to the challenges returning women face.

Underpinning all these proposals there is another requirement. On the surface this is easy to fulfil, but in practice is the hardest task of all. To achieve parity in male and female staff numbers, diversity needs to be top of mind at the most senior levels of the professional services firm. It needs to be built into strategy, leadership activity and personal and business targets. Other initiatives will emerge, but without constant pressure and continuous focus amongst the leadership to remind people that this is a serious issue, gender diversity at the top of consulting organisations will be a challenge rather than a reality.

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