

The Road More Travelled?

Five years after publishing our research paper 'The Road Less Travelled' on women's path to partnership in Professional Services Sheffield Haworth discovers that very little has changed.

INTRODUCTION

The failing of institutions

Five years ago, Sheffield Haworth released the thought paper 'The Road Less Travelled' about women's path to partnership in Professional Services.¹ This year we revisited the recommendations made in 2015 to discover whether the road is more travelled in 2020. We discovered that very little has changed, and that the journey has been more challenging than we anticipated when drawing up our recommendations 5 years ago.

The data paints a bleak picture of the reality of female Partners and MD's in Professional Services. The Big 4 and the technology consulting giants struggled to increase their global female partnership by more than 2% in the last 5 years. Smaller Professional Services firms barely achieved 20% female representation at Partner, Managing Director and Director level, with some firms having a female executive representation as low as 9%.

Through our conversations with leading women in Professional Services in Europe and the United States we discovered that the reasons behind this are less complex than initially thought, the anecdotes and data show women are still underrepresented because the institutions are specifically designed to support white men. While a lot of gender diversity initiatives may focus on women's own advancement and influence in developing their career, little is done to attempt to change the underlying structures in which the women operate.

There has been a change in the last five years regarding the perceived openness to discuss sensitive topics thanks to campaigns such as #metoo. Recent months have also shown an increased acceptance for home-and flexible working due to the unprecedented changes thanks to Covid-19. However, with no clear end to Covid-19 in sight, and an acceleration towards the future of work, is now the time for change? Are we more ready to make a real difference, and if we are what can we do to make that difference? How can Executive Search leaders contribute? And how do we re-write our recommendations and create a call to action that will bring about actual change?

Our 2015 Recommendations:

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

¹ For the purpose of this article women refers to any individual identifying as female

1. INVEST IN RESEARCH ON THE UNIVERSE OF FEMALE TALENT

Do not just hire 'the best'

Five years ago, our first recommendation was for firms to invest in the research on the universe of female talent. While firms realised the value of looking strategically at their senior recruitment plans, they seemed to lack a targeted approach to diversity planning. We found that too often, consulting firms lacked data about women in the sector, function or geography in question and they therefore assumed that, because they've not come across women at competitor firms, the latter simply weren't available. Furthermore, we found a complacency with the hiring teams. Even if diverse shortlists were requested, little action was taken to hold the hiring team accountable to the diversity agenda.

In 2020, a switch appears to have been made on the graduate level, with a more active approach and stronger accountability regarding diverse hiring at the junior level. However, while this means there still is about a 50/50% intake of male and female at the graduate level, this does not mean that the systematic problems have been solved, as this systematic approach still appears to fall away when it comes to senior level hiring. In addition, unconscious bias still plays a large role in hiring and promoting women to executive positions, with over **75%** of our interviewees confirming it has negatively influenced their career, and solutions such as unconscious bias training and structured protocols around hiring and promoting have not yet proven their effectiveness. We will touch on this in more detail when discussing the final recommendations.

Too often the phrase 'we just want to hire the best' is used, and firms seem to struggle to challenge their own perception of what 'the best' looks like and aren't aware of their own **confirmation bias**. Looking ahead, firms need to reevaluate what 'good' looks like and continue to invest in research on the universe of female talent, ensuring an accurate view of the external and internal pipeline of potential talent.



CREATING A LONGER-TERM EXTERNAL PIPELINING AND SUCCESSION PLANNING PROGRAM ENABLES GREATER GENDER AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN SENIOR HIRES

2. UNDERSTAND THE FACTORS THAT STOP WOMEN FROM PURSUING A CAREER WITH YOU

Covid-19 and the acceptance of home working

In 2015 our study showed that mid-career was a key point for women to leave the Professional Services sector, for many reasons including home-work life pressures. Our conversations in 2020 revealed that this has not changed, and not much has been actively done to prevent this in the last five years. While some firms have started being more methodical in obtaining an understanding of why women are leaving, seeking to address the concerns and motivation to leave, this is not yet common practice.

For this article we gathered data over the course of 2020, and during that time Covid-19 dramatically changed our working circumstances. Thus while Covid-19 may have started to alter firms' opinions about the effectiveness of flexible working, it also brought home the reality that on average, women still appear to be the primary caregivers regardless of their professional success. It is also not clear what the long-term impact will be of this change towards accepting flexible working. In addition, while part-time or flexible working has become more acceptable, several interviewees pointed out the perceived effect that working flexibly or part-time would have on their career progression. Or, even worse, at times, part-time hours meant part-time income, but not part-time workload. Firms appear to be reluctant to accept a two-tier career model which allows consultants to split time between the client site and home working. This means those that are able to travel and be on client site 100% of the time are advancing more often than those that have flexible working patterns. Whether Covid-19 will have an impact on that, is again too early to tell.

On a positive note, taking longer than statutory parental leave seems to have become more acceptable in the last five years, allowing families to balance childcare duties. Looking ahead, firms should continue to invest in increasing the **work-life balance**, and work towards limiting the negative perception of flexible working on career progression.



FOCUS ON MEASURING OUTPUTS, RATHER THAN INPUTS: WHAT IS THE ACTUAL PROPORTION OF WOMEN BEING PROMOTED, WHAT ARE ACTUAL RETENTION RATES FOR SENIOR FEMALE HIRES AND HOW MANY FEMALE CANDIDATES ARE INCLUDED IN FINAL INTERVIEWS?

3. 'LEAN-ON ON WOMEN'S BEHALF'

Going beyond the network

The last five years seem to show an increase in the development of women's networks addressing the unique challenges faced by female employees. While this is a positive movement and there appears to be more openness to address challenges and create a safe environment to discuss sensitive issues compared to 2015, these networks are not yet connected to actual career progression of women. This undermines the impact that they could have on increasing diverse representation and inclusion. There still appears to be a reluctance to positively discriminate, to hold people to targets, or to set directives only hiring women or diverse candidates. There is of course a balance to be made between increasing diversity, and accomplishing hyper growth as a company, and there are questions to be answered about compromise.

Success seems to be more direct when firms can create local networks compared to global or national groups, as each region faces their own unique challenges, but this is more difficult for boutique firms. Beyond the clear increase in women networks, firms seem to be 'leaning in' on women's behalf in different ways. Solutions include specific development plans for female top talent, specific mentorship programs for female consultants and efforts to make the path to partnership more transparent.

Real progress seems to come when there is direct and genuine input from the Senior Management Team which goes beyond a verbal and digital commitment. In addition, the importance of female role-models should not be overlooked. Having not only a senior woman in place, but a senior woman who is thriving in that role is very important. When it includes active measures to 'lean in' while simultaneously measuring and monitoring the proposed solutions, greater impact can be seen. This can be done for example by measuring the correlation of promotion or retention of female staff and their involvement in mentorship programmes or diversity networks.



MEASURING THE IMPACT OF NETWORKS ON
PROGRESSION AND DEVELOPMENT ALLOWS YOU
TO CREATE REAL IMPACT

4. FIND THE GOOD SPONSORS (MALE AND FEMALE)

Make sure you train them too

The conversations with Partners at various firms revealed to us that having an informal or formal sponsor or mentor appeared to be extremely beneficial when it comes to career progression for women. In fact, **90%** agreed having a sponsor had been invaluable for their career progression and indeed those in a Big 4 consulting firm confirmed it was required to reach Partner status. However, there appears to be a lack of structured, formalised mentorship or sponsorship schemes catered towards female staff specifically, and more often than not sponsors or mentors were sought out individually or developed from a natural connection early on in someone's career.

While some firms train and coach mentors as part of their formalised scheme, this does not appear to be common practice yet. A balance should be found by ensuring all employees have access to sponsors and mentors, while simultaneously ensuring the effectiveness and impact of the programme. As per our recommendation in 2015, firms need to make greater effort to identify the good sponsors and to provide training to help them be successful.



EMBEDDING A FORMALISED SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMME (WITH TRAINED SPONSORS!) IN WOMEN'S NETWORKS HELPS YOU TO REACH YOUR FEMALE EMPLOYEES – IN ADDITION, CONNECTING THE SUCCESS OF THE SPONSORSHIP TO THE SPONSOR'S KPI'S ALLOWS YOU TO HOLD THEM MORE DIRECTLY ACCOUNTABLE

5. EMPOWER ENGAGEMENT LEADERS TOO

Not just about 'who you know'

We previously discussed the reality of women leaving the Professional Services sector when they reach mid-career level. In 2015 we found that engagement leaders and project managers have a huge impact on women's perceptions about their future with the firm. This appears to be the key stage for a firm to support if they want to increase gender diversity at a senior level.

And, at this stage, it is not about "fixing the women" or about empowering women to find their place, it is about educating each institution about each person's role, from Senior Partner to HR, to the advancement of women. In one discussion, a female leader was advised that HR had "simply forgotten" about her because she seemed to be thriving in her current role. The aperture to see candidates for promotion was limited and a high potential performer was left behind.

This is not isolated or intentional and therein lies the problem. Project teams are still based on a "who you know" basis rather than a structured way to assess and ensure diversity on a team. Without data to track and understand who may be well positioned, planning, development, coaching and all of the other tools we have discussed are offered on an ad hoc basis with limited effectiveness. Even when teams know that they are at a disadvantage because of a lack of diversity, the time and effort needed to deliberately change this has been too much for firms to execute successfully. Without an intentional and defined connection between the business strategy and the diversity strategy, we will keep inching towards change with accidental improvements.

This is related to the resourcing of project teams, which, more often than not, is still based on a 'who do you know' basis rather than done in a structured way to assure the diversity of the team. Several stakeholders mentioned having lost pitches before due to the lack of diversity on their proposed project team. Additionally, sourcing project teams based on networks often limits the opportunity for diverse employees to be part of main projects. On the other hand, this relates to our second recommendation as firms still appear to be struggling to show women that consulting can be a life-time career and they don't have to give up due to home life pressures.



CONNECT THE SOURCING TEAMS FOR CLIENT ENGAGEMENTS TO YOUR DIVERSITY PRACTICES TO ENSURE THE INCLUSION AND DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR DIVERSE EMPLOYEES

6. IDENTIFY AND ENCOURAGE THE RETURN OF FEMALE CONSULTANTS BY OFFERING A SUPPORTIVE AND TRULY FLEXIBLE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an actual cultural shift

In 2015 we recommended that firms actively re-engage women who may want to return to their career after a period away, but assume the option is not available. While in 2020 most larger firms have a formal return program in place, this is not standard across the board and smaller firms appear to struggle to invest the resources to make this happen. When it comes to inclusivity firms seem to have gone through a substantial amount of cultural change in a very short period, but often only at the surface level.

For a long time, the culture of many firms was such that it was not uncommon to encounter explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic attitudes. But increased public visibility of issues relating to diversity and inclusion has led firms to take a hard line on this—and most have been very successful at identifying these attitudes and embedding positive attitude change. However, this does not mean that the underlying structural issues stifling diversity have been addressed. Consulting is still a relationship-driven industry and achieving Partner level still requires impressing the people who are already there. If anything, the surface-level improvements, such as the development of women's networks, diversity training, and target setting (which, make no mistake, have been remarkable) can lead to a sense of complacency among partners. Concerted effort is still needed to offer a truly inclusive environment.



INTRODUCE A BLENDED DELIVERY MODEL FOR CLIENTS, COMBINING REMOTE AND CLIENT SITE WORKING ENSURES THE CONTINUATION OF FLEXIBLE WORKING AFTER COVID-19

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the recommendations made five years ago all seem to be still valid in 2020. We recognise there is more acceptance and discussion of the issues, and the intent has been changing but that does not mean the results are reflecting that. Continuous effort is needed to assure the talent pipeline doesn't dry out. While there has been some progress in firms 'leaning in' on women's behalf and developing women's networks and mentorship programmes, there is still a way to go if we want to truly move the dial and show actual results by 2025.

Given Covid-19, and the accelerated transformation of work, there needs to be an even greater focus on creating and maintaining diverse, equitable and inclusive organisations. Unless organisations continue to improve their efforts and more importantly, outcomes, around this topic they will struggle to maintain success given the ever-increasing demands on talent in the consulting and technology sector.

About Sheffield Haworth

Sheffield Haworth is a global talent consultancy focused on people led transformation and our purpose is to help organisations and people to realise their potential.

The Consulting, Technology & Services team at Sheffield Haworth has extensive global experience across the breadth of the sector. The team works with clients across all their industry competency and functional areas including all aspects of technology, data and analytics, digital, cyber, strategy and operations, finance, human capital, risk and compliance.

Talent Consulting firms play an important role in furthering the diversity agenda. However, our ability to truly deliver results is often restricted by our own diversity challenges. Particularly, the Executive Search component is often characterised as largely homogenous and white. Our global Consulting, Technology and Services practice is committed to changing this paradigm, which is why we hold ourselves to the same standards and recommendations as we recommend to our clients.



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