



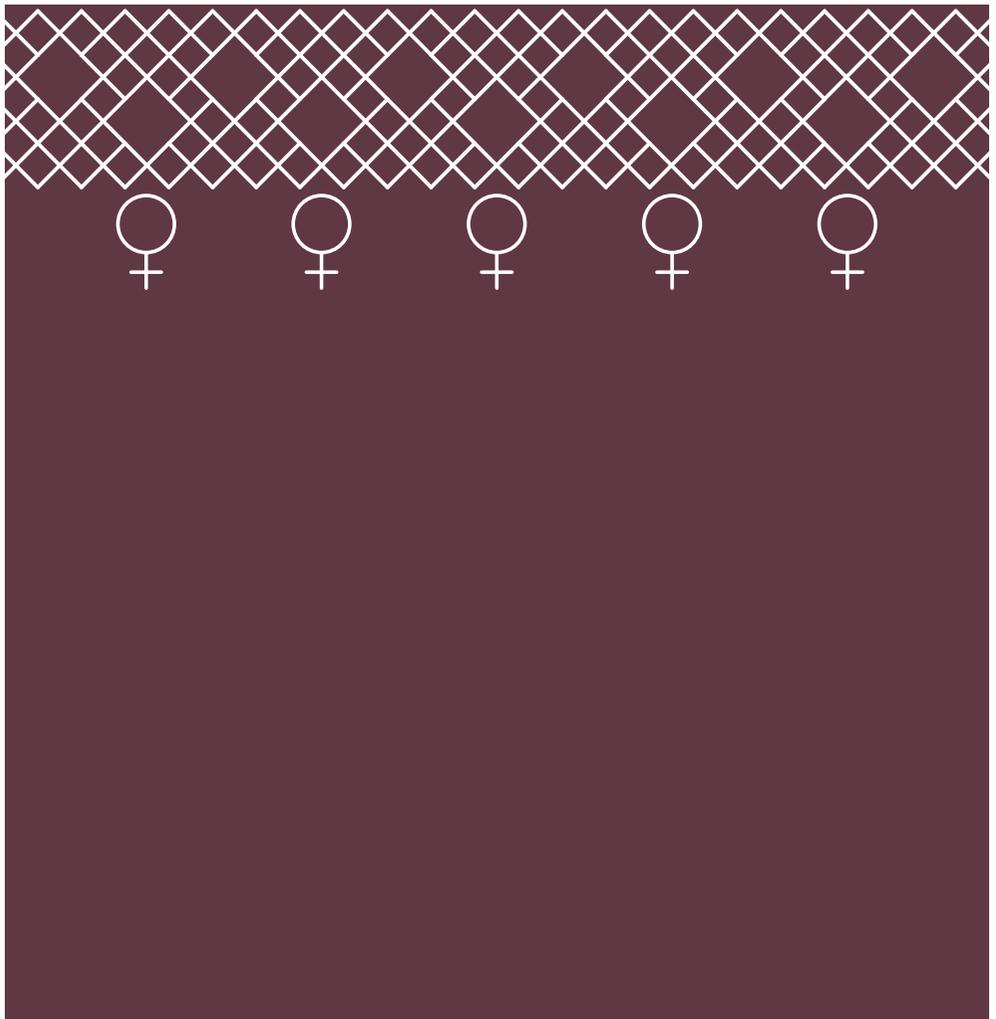
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# THE GLASS CEILING: AN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY UNDER THE LENS

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NOVAK DRUCE CENTRE INSIGHTS

No. 4



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**‘I THINK A LOT OF THE PARTNERS LIKE WHAT I CALL A “GOOD BLOKE”’. SOMEONE WHO WILL GO OUT DRINKING, PLAY SNOOKER, AND I CAN SPOT A MILE OFF THE TYPE OF PERSON WHO’S GOING TO APPEAL TO THAT SPONSORSHIP GROUP AND TEN TO ONE YOU’LL SEE THEM IN THE ROOM’**

(Female Director in an international consultancy)

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Based on the article, ‘A Study of the Promotion to Partner Process in a Professional Services Firm: How Women are Disadvantaged’ by Savita Kumra and Susan Vinnicombe, published in *British Journal of Management* 19: S65-S74.

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## WOMEN IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS

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Increasing numbers of women are attracted to careers in professional service firms (PSFs). Nevertheless, their representation in partner positions is surprisingly low. When women’s promotion to partner is considered, they seem to face a ‘glass ceiling’ – defined by one commentator as ‘a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy.’ While the phenomenon of the glass ceiling has been studied extensively in other kinds of organizations, it has rarely been examined in PSFs. We still know but little on the impact of sex bias on the promotion to partner process.

We looked at the UK practice of one of the ‘Big Four’ international consulting firms. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 women and 15 men representing a range of ages in the positions of Consultant, Principal Consultant and Director in the practice’s four key business areas. The results provided clear evidence of sex bias in the promotion to partner process, and identified three aspects of this process in which women are disadvantaged:

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The promotion process is guided by a predominantly masculine model of success

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The promotion process requires a proactive approach of self-management and self-advertisement

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The promotion process is significantly influenced by informal mechanisms such as networking and sponsorship

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## THE GLASS CEILING

Increasing numbers of women work in professional services such as law, accountancy, management consultancy and investment banking. In the past 30 years women's participation in the legal profession has increased by a phenomenal 1,800%, and women now represent over 40% of practicing solicitors. This trend is likely to continue. In 2006 more than 60% of new trainees, new law graduates and acceptances on university law courses were women. A similar trend is evident in accounting, where women comprise 42% of the members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants. In management consulting firms women typically represent between 30-40% of the intake, and there are similar proportions in investment banking.

However, this development has not been matched by gender equality at senior levels. Only 7–14% of women make partner in the 'Big Four' consulting firms, and in law firms the number is 23.2%. These data are consistent with those of a survey commissioned by the American Women's Society of Chartered Public Accountants, which made clear that women in the profession perceive lack of gender acceptance to be a key barrier to attaining senior positions within firms.

To set this in context, however, figures for senior female participation in UK business generally are equally discouraging. According to the recent Lord Davies Report commissioned by the Business Secretary, women represent only 12.5% of board members in the UK, and three-quarters of women in managerial roles believe the glass ceiling prevents them from reaching the highest levels in their organizations. 'At current rates of change,' the Equality & Human Rights Commission commented, 'it will take women 73 years to achieve equal representation.' This picture, incidentally, is only marginally better at the top of British politics: only 17% of current Cabinet members are women.

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## THE RISE IN THE NUMBER OF WOMEN IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS HAS NOT BEEN MATCHED BY GENDER EQUALITY AT SENIOR LEVELS

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## MASCULINE MODEL OF SUCCESS

Researchers have offered various explanations for the low representation of women in partner positions. A common explanation is that firms are less inclined to promote women in the belief that women, much more than men, are likely to leave after promotion or significantly reduce their commitment to their work. However, our study revealed a quite different obstacle – the need to fit a specific mould in order to succeed in the firm. Three-quarters of the interviewees discussed the issue of fit:

**'There is a mould you've got to fit and if you don't fit that the other bits you've got never get pulled out.'**

(Female Consultant)

This mould was sensed as overwhelmingly masculine:

**'I think it is fair to say that people have much in the way of glass ceilings... it is a very male culture, and the people that do get into the partnership tend to be like the existing partners.'**

(Male Director)

And in the words of two other interviewees:

**'If you have as the ruling cohort in senior positions white, middle class men in their 40s and 50s, who are educated in a certain way and have had certain sorts of life experiences... it's hardly surprising that they don't know that they are looking for people like themselves... so the question of how a woman leads [and persuades the firm she is ready for partnership] is something she has to evolve for herself, whereas young men coming through see how men operate and they can adopt those behaviours.'**

(Female Director)

**'Have you got what they look for in a partner candidate? Is it talent? No, I don't think it is talent, I think it is people who [the existing partners] think would be safe partners to have along. We want to promote people like us.'**

(Female Director)

To fit into the dominant model of success, one had to demonstrate 'heft', 'weight' and 'drive'. A tall and imposing physical presence, characteristic of men, was also seen as important:

**'Quite high on their list, I think, is the being one of us. I have heard that partners talk about people who will never make partner... because one of the qualities you want to see in partners is that when you walk into a room people stop and take notice that you're there; therefore physical presence is important... which is why there are so many big tall male partners, because they have that immediate impact.'**

(Female Director)

It is hardly surprising that many female interviewees found it difficult to fit into this masculine mould and culture, and some also discussed this explicitly:

**'I've never blended in this firm or taken time out to drink with my work colleagues after work. I've worked hard and most of the people who go out drinking after work are men, but then most of the people around here are men anyway, but I think there is a show of being one of the lads and I think to make partner you need to be part of the gang.'**

(Female Consultant)

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## PROMOTION VIA SELF-PROMOTION

With the exception of one person, all interviewees highlighted the need to take a proactive approach and to “self-manage” one’s career within the firm. They perceived the firm as distant and uninvolved in these matters, and explained that consultants often do not work closely with their staff managers and only see them once or twice a year. Consequently, they have to take close personal charge of their career management. Leaving one’s progress in the hands of others generally means that it would stall:

**‘The firm is very detached. If you expect to be seen and encouraged that you’re doing the right thing by the partnership, you won’t be; you’re basically left to get on with it and in essence you sink or you swim.’**

(Male Principal Consultant)

**‘You have to get around and knock on doors and just be in people’s faces and say ‘I’m here, can I help?’ Get involved in something, anything, just to get on the radar screen.’**

(Male Principal Consultant)

Interviewees highlighted the need to actively advertise one’s achievements and ensure that senior members were kept aware of them. In particular, it was important to keep key individuals informed that one was performing above and beyond the call of duty. ‘Don’t be a hero and keep it to yourself’, cautioned one male Principal Consultant, and one woman consultant also stressed that:

**‘You shouldn’t go away on three-year projects, and if you are – you’re out of sight, out of mind. Doesn’t matter how many millions you are bringing in, what really matters is that the people are there working next to these partners saying, “Isn’t it about time you made me a partner, or I am going to leave.”’**

(Female Consultant)

In other words, career advancement within the firm depended on an active process of ‘impression management’: advertising one’s availability, commitment and – most importantly – ambition and drive:

**‘Don’t always do the minimum, make sure that you always do the maximum and absolutely kill yourself. Just take on a bit more than maybe you necessarily need to do to show that you want to progress, that you want to move on.’**

(Female Consultant)

**‘In fact, you need to be heroic. You need to take on anything. You don’t even want to show a glimmer of anything which would be negative to your portfolio and even if you are going to say, “No”, be really clever about it and find someone else to do it rather than just say a flat “No.”’**

(Female Director)

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LEAVING ONE’S PROGRESS IN THE HANDS OF OTHERS  
GENERALLY MEANS THAT IT WOULD STALL

And yet, it appeared that women interviewees were markedly less easy than men with the proactive, self-promoting nature of the career advancement process within the firm. Half of the female sample indicated that in their view, men were better than women at actively self-promoting:

**‘... it comes back to the fact that you’ve got to put your flags in the ground and I never did. I never said I want to be a Director until I came back [from maternity leave] by which time I was quite a long way down the track. I was almost embarrassed to say that and I sort of thought... how pushy does this sound... also the sense that if I was good enough they will see it anyway, why should I need to say it.’**

(Female Principal Consultant)

**‘You get some very ambitious women here, but generally you get more males who are ambitious, I think women are still more sensitive and less likely to, you know, jump on other people’s toes or whatever... being competitive is valued in this company, you have to be ambitious... I think in this firm otherwise you will never move on – you will get to a certain level and you will stay there.’**

(Female Consultant)

And another interviewee confessed:

**‘I absolutely cringe, it tends to be people just saying how wonderful they are, or telling the partner how wonderful the partner is. It’s just obvious and I find it really difficult.’**

(Female Principal Consultant)

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WOMEN INTERVIEWEES WERE MARKEDLY LESS EASY  
THAN MEN WITH THE PROACTIVE, SELF-PROMOTING  
NATURE OF THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROCESS

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## SOMEONE TO SEE YOU THROUGH

Interviewees believed informal relationships to be no less important than formal procedures in determining the outcomes of the promotion process:

**‘I think it’s fair to say that those people who are exceptionally driven and have spent a lot of time with the relevant partner get promoted. GCF [a formal competence-based promotion system] was supposed to get rid of all of that. If it wasn’t written down on paper it wasn’t supposed to be acceptable in the progression discussions, but ultimately they sit huddled in a room and they discuss your performance and then they have people’s opinions.’**

(Female Director)

Networking was discussed by three-quarters of respondents as an important activity for career advancement. However, half the female interviewees questioned whether this was as natural an activity for women as for men:

**‘The people that get promoted quickly are exceptionally effective networkers. Interestingly that doesn’t suit women. We can’t go up**

**and tell someone that we’re really brilliant; it’s just not in our make-up. For years, I believed there was no difference between men and women but that was just naivety. I suddenly started to find out that women do actually operate in a different way, not a worse way, just different to men. One thing we’re not good at and I find that I suffered from since being here, we’re not really good at telling people that we’re really brilliant, we expect everyone to notice because we work really hard.’**

(Female Principal Consultant)

Another key route to promotion was obtaining the personal support of a sponsor. This, again, reflected the relatively unmanaged nature of career advancement within the firm, whereby individual partners have sufficient power to advocate on behalf of their protégées and ensure their advancement. Three-quarters of the interviewees highlighted this aspect:

**‘You can see other people doing it and you suddenly think how has that person got there? And you just think, ah! Well that is because they have attached themselves to these two or three people, they always work on their jobs, you can see they are always doing the extra stuff in their own spare time, and just think this is how it goes.’**

(Female Director)

But exactly how one can secure the support of a sponsor was considered an elusive question:

**‘I suspect that if you need to ask someone, ‘Will you be my sponsor’, I guess you’re in the wrong place. There’s something about someone organically coming forward and saying, ‘You’re my kind of guy, you’re my kind of gal, I’m going to take you to the stars’. I suspect there’s something more chemical about it.’**

(Female Director)

Interviewees were also clear that sponsorship per se was not enough:

**‘You need sponsorship from the right people and there are some people who, if you’re aligned with them, you might as well forget your progression path.’**

(Female Principal Consultant)

Studies have found that female managers, more than male managers, tend to believe that their excellent performance and commitment would be noticed by senior managers and result in promotion. They are more likely to believe that hard work and achievements, in themselves, will lead to promotion. However, our study shows this belief to be wrong. Informal processes such as networking and sponsorship are also highly significant in promotion processes, and create a considerable disadvantage for women.

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INTERVIEWEES BELIEVED INFORMAL RELATIONSHIPS TO BE NO LESS IMPORTANT THAN FORMAL PROCEDURES IN DETERMINING THE OUTCOMES OF THE PROMOTION PROCESS

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NETWORKING AND SPONSORSHIP PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN PROMOTION PROCESSES, AND CREATE A CONSIDERABLE DISADVANTAGE FOR WOMEN

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## BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

In recent years a number of PSFs have introduced formal measures and programs to combat sex bias, including:

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Quotas or targets with regard to the proportion of women in the firm

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Mentoring programs targeted specifically at women

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Assertiveness training for women

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Deloitte, for instance, has a 45% target for its female graduate intake per year and has introduced a new system of five-member regional boards, at least one member of which must be female.

Formal measures such as gender targets are welcome, if only for the signals they send out, but in themselves they are not enough. Targets and quotas, while much-trumpeted, are superficial solutions that treat the problem after the fact rather than prevent it. In this respect, they are rather like the injections and drugs that are given to a failing patient. Our research suggests that different methods should also be applied, aiming to transform the masculine model of success in PSFs and the largely self-managed nature of career advancement within these firms. PSFs should also consider how to transform the patterns of sponsorship and networking within them, so that women's disadvantage would be eliminated.

Our research indicates that women's difficulties in advancing to the top of their organizations are not the same in all organizations, and that there is case for a more differentiated approach to the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon. Deeper, individual diagnosis is needed. It is vital, firstly, to look at the gender distribution within a firm and to see at which level 'the women disappear'. Then, going on from there, it is necessary to expose the unacknowledged attitudes and processes that may contribute to this situation.

Change is warranted not only for the sake of women in PSFs; it is also in the best interest of PSFs as business organizations. Many of those commissioning professional services are aware of the need for diversity, and will increasingly assign work to those firms whose ranks are more representative of the various groups in society. Furthermore, barring women from the senior levels of PSFs results in a sorry waste of much-needed professional talent and creativity. A homogenous professional staff often entails a homogenous, unimaginative set of professional solutions. In today's complex business environment, organizations are increasingly looking for creative and differentiated solutions. Providing those, in turn, demands a more balanced and diverse workforce.

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The Insights series aims to provide accessible summaries of recent research by members and associates of the Novak Druce Centre for Professional Service Firms at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. Each Insight focuses on a particular issue in the management of professional service firms and offers a fresh, up-to-date reading of this issue.

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