

Women in Consulting

Insights from The Barton Partnership's roundtable discussion
in New York

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On Wednesday, July 17th, The Barton Partnership hosted a roundtable discussion to address the challenges and opportunities for women navigating career growth in consulting. The conversation focused on effective strategies for career advancement, the importance of mentorship and networking, and creating a supportive environment with flexible work arrangements. Attendees shared invaluable insights on the critical role of sponsors in career progression, the importance of work-life balance, and how firms can better support women, particularly at senior levels.

What follows is a summary of the key points discussed during the session:

#1 Challenges and Strategies for Career Advancement

Retention Challenges at Senior Levels:

- Participants discussed the high attrition rates among women at the Senior Manager and Principal levels. The primary reasons identified were the demanding expectations of consulting roles and the lack of adequate support and mentorship to help women navigate these challenges.
- To combat this, some firms have set specific diversity objectives for leadership roles by 2025. This approach aims to hold leadership accountable and drive tangible improvements in gender diversity.

Mentorship and Sponsorship:

- Firms have introduced mentorship programs for women at critical career junctures. These programs provide support and guidance, fostering a sense of connectedness and sustainability in their careers.
- Participants emphasized that having sponsors who actively advocate for female consultants is crucial, helping women navigate their career paths and providing the necessary support to advance. Effective sponsorship includes career advice and active promotion of women's capabilities and achievements within the firm.

Commercial Empowerment:

- Participants noted that it is essential to empower women to take control of their commercial success by involving them in client relationships and sales. This strategy helps women build the confidence and skills to influence their work terms and conditions. Participants shared that women can significantly enhance their career progression and job satisfaction by gaining exposure to client interactions and business development activities.

#2 Flexible Working Models & Inclusive Leadership

Hybrid Working Models:

- Hybrid working models have proven beneficial for many female consultants in achieving a better work-life balance. However, participants noted that finding the right balance between work demands and personal responsibilities remains challenging. Ensuring that remote work does not lead to isolation or reduced collaboration is essential.
- Clear guidelines and expectations around remote work can further enhance its effectiveness. Additionally, maintaining productivity and client satisfaction while working remotely requires continuous attention.

Inclusive Leadership:

- It is important to encourage a variety of partner archetypes (e.g., delivery-focused, sales-focused, or a combination). This recognizes the different strengths and leadership styles that individuals bring to the table. Participants discussed the benefits of having diverse role models who reflect multiple paths to success.
- Addressing the “ideal worker” bias, which favors extroverted personalities, is necessary. Firms are working towards valuing different leadership styles and providing more constructive coaching. Participants highlighted the need for training programs focusing on inclusive leadership and unconscious bias.

Career Path Clarity:

- Establishing clear career paths and actively supporting top performers from the manager level is essential. This includes designated coaches and structured programs to guide women through their career journeys. Participants noted that clear promotion criteria and regular feedback can help women stay motivated and focused.
- Identifying and supporting high performers early in their careers helps build a pipeline of future leaders. This proactive approach ensures that women feel supported and valued throughout their careers. Regular assessments and talent reviews were noted as critical to this process.

Support for Working Parents:

- Providing flexible work arrangements and practical support for working parents is critical. Ensuring these policies are actionable and not just theoretical is crucial for their success. Participants cited enhanced parental leave, childcare support, and flexible scheduling to accommodate family needs.
- Having visible role models and sharing success stories within the firm helps more junior women see viable career paths and feel supported. Participants noted the importance of showcasing diverse success stories to inspire and motivate employees at all levels.

Setting Boundaries:

- Female leaders emphasized the importance of setting boundaries and serving as role models. Demonstrating that it is acceptable to prioritize personal time helps more junior women establish their boundaries.
- Balancing client needs with personal boundaries is critical. Participants discussed the necessity of managing client expectations while maintaining personal boundaries to avoid burnout and over-commitment. Effective communication with clients about availability and deadlines is key.
- Establishing a culture where taking personal time is respected and encouraged helps maintain a healthy work-life balance.

#3 Strengthening Diversity & Promoting Career Advancement

Empowering Self-Advocacy

- Participants highlighted the importance in fostering a culture where women feel confident and empowered to advocate for their needs and aspirations.
- Creating a supportive environment where women can share their experiences and strategies for managing work and personal life is beneficial. Peer support helps women navigate challenges and feel less isolated. The value of peer mentoring programs and informal support networks was highlighted as a key element in empowering women to succeed in their careers.

Attracting Diverse Talent:

- Firms are exploring non-traditional recruitment paths to attract diverse talent. This approach includes hiring industry executives, women returning to the workforce after a break, and focusing on less traditional profiles. Events aimed at increasing brand recognition and connectivity with potential female candidates are also being piloted to broaden the talent pool.
- Building brand recognition through events and networking opportunities can help attract diverse talent. These initiatives foster long-term connections and demonstrate the firm's commitment to diversity. Consistent engagement with diverse talent pools is crucial for maintaining a strong pipeline of potential candidates.
- Rehiring former employees who have previously left the firm can be highly effective. These individuals bring back valuable skills and experience and are already familiar with the firm's culture and expectations. By maintaining strong relationships with alumni, firms can facilitate their return, benefiting from their enhanced expertise and continuity.

Customized Onboarding and Training:

- Providing tailored onboarding and training for individuals transitioning from industry to consulting can help them succeed. Participants discussed the need for practical training on consulting-specific skills and support from experienced mentors. Tailored onboarding programs can help new hires acclimate quickly and effectively.

Roles that leverage individuals' strengths and provide the necessary support can help integrate diverse talent into the firm. This approach ensures that new hires are set up for success and can contribute effectively. Participants shared examples of creating customized roles for strategic hires to maximize their impact.

Ensuring Inclusivity at Internal Events:

- Participants agreed on the importance of attending internal events and developmental activities designed to support women. They emphasized the need for firm leaders to encourage and facilitate participation.
- Ensuring that male leaders also attend events focused on diversity and inclusion sends a strong signal of support. It helps create an environment where everyone values and promotes inclusivity.

Practical Solutions for Talent Management:

- Participants discussed hiring individuals with strong industry experience but limited consulting experience and surrounding them with support to leverage their strengths effectively. This can help bridge the gap between industry expertise and consulting skills.
- Providing support structures for senior hires from industry helps them transition into consulting roles successfully. This includes practical guidance on consulting processes and tools. Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship and peer support for senior transitions.

The roundtable highlighted the importance of structural support, self-advocacy, and innovative recruitment strategies in advancing women's careers in the consulting industry. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, firms can help women navigate the challenges of balancing personal and professional responsibilities, ultimately leading to greater retention and career satisfaction. Participants emphasized the need for continuous efforts to address biases, support flexible work models, and create clear pathways for career advancement.

About The Barton Partnership

The Barton Partnership is an award-winning executive recruitment and consulting services firm providing permanent search and independent consulting services across all aspects of Strategy & M&A, Data & Analytics, Economics, Disputes, & Investigations, ESG & Sustainability, and Transformation & Change. We have offices in London, New York, Paris, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Sydney. Our clients include FTSE listed and Fortune 500 companies across all sectors/industries; SMEs, Strategic, Innovation & Management Consulting firms (large and boutique), Public Sector, Global Financial Services, Private Equity and Venture Capital organizations.

Our network represents talent across Strategy & M&A, Digital, Data & Analytics, Economics, Disputes, & Investigations, ESG & Sustainability, and Transformation & Change.

Through a curated network of more than 8,500 independent consultants, we provide clients with individuals and teams for business-critical projects across North America, and Asia Pacific. In 2023 we were ranked Gold for Consulting Networks in the Leading Management Consultants report by the Financial Times for the second consecutive year.

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