



# HOW TO HOLD ONTO TALENT IN THE 'PINCHED MIDDLE'

Lighten the way, lessen the load

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's a well-known fact that management consulting firms are all struggling with retaining women and promoting them to the highest ranks. Diversity at the top remains elusive, with the vast majority of firms only managing a small proportion of female partners at best.

A common dropout point is what we're terming the 'pinched middle'. These are women at manager and senior manager grade—in their late 20s and early 30s—who, just as they're expected to be at full-throttle with their career, are also becoming busier at home too. It's the point at which many reflect on the kind of life they want, the trade-offs they're willing to make, and what it takes to be successful in consulting. Unfortunately for consulting firms, an awful lot of women decide it's either not doable or not worth it, so they leave the industry altogether.

Much has been written about the problems women face, both within firms and in society at large. The reality is that consulting firms are not going to change societal norms—from why so few men take paternity leave, to why caring and looking after the home is seen as women's work—all by themselves. But there are things firms could do to make the lot of women in consulting easier.

This report, therefore, is focused on **the practical steps consulting firms can take today** to help women through this tricky stage of their career and life. All the ideas come from conversations we've had with managers and senior managers working at global consulting firms in Europe, both male and female. We use their words and stories where possible to articulate what's wrong with existing support, and what they'd like to see change to make it work better. It's backed up by the findings of a wider survey of senior managers in Europe.

**We propose a ten-point framework for change.** Some of the points are things consulting firms have heard before—and many would argue that they already offer. But there are plenty of reasons why even the best-intentioned policies aren't currently doing much to retain women in the 'pinched middle', and this report explores the key building blocks required to make consulting a more manageable—and attractive—career to them.

A key thing to note is that if firms are to succeed in establishing real change, they'll need to implement all ten points of the plan rather than a select two or three. Each is connected to the other; the points at the top around flexibility and predictability will remain only theoretically available unless the foundations beneath it are also there. When reading this report, it's important to keep in mind that **we're not recommending a tweak here, or some fine-tuning there—we're recommending an overhaul of how senior managers are assessed, what behaviours firms reward, and a broadening of what being a senior manager at a consulting firm can look like.**

So while a firm may look at some of the recommendations and think it's already got it covered, it needs to honestly assess whether it's really taking the practical steps to ensure these policies are really working. The shortfall of women at the top speaks for itself: most firms will be found wanting.

*Ultimately the lifestyle will be the reason I leave—I couldn't have a family and remain in consulting. I just don't see how I can do what I do with a family.*

*I had a bit of an epiphany when I was 33. I remember going to a recruitment event—I looked around me I suddenly realised I was surrounded by all these white collar guys. I felt I didn't fit in there, and I asked myself if this was the kind of environment I wanted to continue in.*

*I certainly won't compromise on what is important to me when it comes to my family life and if they can't accommodate, I'll just leave.*

*Most women decide to leave consulting because the hours are too demanding and it's too difficult to plan your life.*

*I've come to the conclusion that I am going to leave consulting. I wasn't sure if this was just my firm or the consulting industry as a whole, but after a couple of interviews at other consulting firms I can see that it is all just the same and I am tired of it.*

All quotes from female senior managers in Europe

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## A note from our sponsor

Consulting is a business reliant on its people, and yet ironically, that's where the industry faces one of its biggest challenges: retaining only half of the well-trained, experienced talent pool. While the industry may be successful in recruiting gender-balanced intakes at a graduate level, female consultants often end up leaving the industry at manager and senior manager grades, and are underrepresented at a leadership level. And yes, it matters: there's evidence that diverse teams perform better, are more productive, and are more successful at avoiding the perils of groupthink. As consultants, we provide our clients with the brightest and best minds to meet their needs, and that means bringing diverse perspectives to the table.

At EY, we take this important issue very seriously, and are pleased to have sponsored this important research into the challenges that can face women at a critical stage of their careers: the point where they contemplate the balance of long-term career progression with broader life plans. The findings present hugely valuable feedback for the industry as a whole and we welcome the identification of practical steps that firms can take. EY has been at the forefront of adapting our business to the challenges faced by a new generation of people, however, there's no room for complacency.

This report challenges many of the accepted norms of the consulting industry and raises important questions: which behaviours we reward, which we don't, what defines success, and what career paths can look like. Today the template for potential career advancement is too limited, and this report is full of suggestions from managers and senior managers about what firms can do to broaden it and retain the very best of all our talent.

I hope you find this report as compelling as I do.

### Adrian Edwards

Partner  
Ernst & Young LLP  
Deputy Leader, EMEIA Advisory

# SUMMARY OF THE TEN-POINT FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

## *What needs to change*

## *What happens today*

**What senior managers say would keep them in consulting**

**1 More predictability around travel and workload**

All firms have policies around this area, but many senior managers say these are only available in theory rather than in practice.

**2 Greater access to flexible working—and conversations with clients about it**

Same as above, all firms have policies around this area, but many senior managers say these are only available in theory rather than in practice.

**What needs to be in place if that's to happen**

**3 Continuity of teams to build trust in flexible arrangements**

Working in regular teams is the exception rather than the norm.

**4 Different career paths and roles that contribute to career progression**

Part-time work is available, but isn't valued and doesn't contribute towards career progression. Roles are often back-office and not client-facing.

**5 Clearer and more tailored promotion expectations about more than just revenues**

Senior managers' performance is measured on revenues, and revenues only. No consideration is given to those working part-time or returning from maternity leave.

### *Why it's not working today*

Expectation that whatever demands are made, they are accommodated, no matter how last minute.

Lack of empathy from engagement partners.

Revenues are all that matter—consultants therefore feel they can't say no.

Engagement partners fail to set expectations with clients.

'Old school' attitude that working from home isn't really "working".

Needs partner, director, and client cooperation to work—often at least one party is not supportive.

Focus on revenues above all else means personal circumstances are often ignored.

Differing attitudes among partner and director group to flexible and part-time working; finding helpful teams is still a chance event rather than the norm.

Prevailing attitude among partners that there's only one path to partnership, and it looks like the one they themselves took.

Culture that says you're not committed unless you're working full time; lack of respect and support from seniors, peers, and even juniors.

Narrow focus of annual reviews, often measures purely in revenues.

Outdated attitude towards flexible working and time taken out for family life.

Too great a focus on revenues as the only thing that matters.

Existing processes perpetuate poor attitudes towards modernising consulting working practices.

### *Practical steps required*

Agree working patterns in advance.

Make consent part of the scheduling process.

Help with childcare while consultants are travelling.

Establish trust by working with the same teams more regularly.

Extra support for those considering a sabbatical—it's often a sign of burnout.

Talk to clients—they're often open to the idea of flexible working.

Incentivise partners by including management of teams and diversity in their assessment.

Schedule meetings at reasonable times.

Pair women working part time with more experienced teams.

Scheduling teams, rather than individuals.

Give people a say—a more bottom-up approach in which senior managers can make suggestions would allow small, ready-made teams to be used over and over again.

Get buy-in from partners by making management of teams part of their assessment.

Create subject matter expert career paths.

Split sales from delivery—allow a senior manager to focus on one or the other.

Prioritise office-based roles for women back from maternity leave—but make those roles client-facing where possible.

Be clear about how these roles fit into promotion.

View career plans as life plans—look further ahead than the next end of year review.

Stop auto-populating targets.

Expand assessment beyond revenue targets.

Conduct promotion conversations in more open forums.

Don't automatically write off the years during and after pregnancy.

*What needs to change*

*What happens today*

**Reinforce change through...**

**6 Support and training around maternity and unconscious bias**

At best, patchy support in some firms for women returning from maternity.  
Some firms investing in unconscious bias training.

**7 Role models people can relate to**

Women who have made it to the top have often made choices that many others wouldn't have—as a result, they're not realistic role models. The path to partnership therefore looks pretty unattractive to many women.

**Consider...**

**8 Feeding the talent pipeline—widen the net for experienced hires**

Roughly 50:50 graduate intakes start to unbalance at manager grade.

**All of the above needs to be underpinned by...**

**9 Incentivise partners to change their attitudes**

While consulting leadership teams are very interested in the retention of women, individual partners are not incentivised to take it seriously.

**10 Empowerment—making sure people decide for themselves**

Some women feel they can't speak up because they'll be seen as making a fuss, or that if they take advantage of flexible working it'll be the end of their career (with good reason).

## Why it's not working today

## Practical steps required

Belief that unconscious bias isn't an issue.

Women not wanting to make a fuss and fearing it could damage their reputation.

Belief that having children is a lifestyle choice taken in full knowledge that it will damage careers.

Unconscious bias training for women—and men too.

Investment in programmes to support women before and after maternity leave.

Lack of openness in discussing the challenges facing women—perhaps a fear of putting younger women off if they're too honest.

Unattractive choices seem to be the only way as so few have access to flexible working and support when having a family.

Dearth of women in leadership positions can lead to a narrow perception of how to get to partner.

Many women simply think a work/life balance isn't achievable.

Open and honest women's networks.

Encouraging women to seek mentors, sponsors, and coaches.

Reverse mentoring to remind consulting leaders how tricky the 'pinched middle' years can be.

Resistance to quotas for promotions and hires.

Firms lose the women they invest in at graduate level because many believe that consulting and family life can't be combined.

Lack of realistic role models mean some don't aspire to be partner because they think it isn't worth it.

Relationships between consulting firms and recruiters is very transactional.

Implement the new working practices outlined above to retain the women firms attract at graduate level.

Incentivise recruitment partners to go deeper into the market to identify more diverse talent.

Nurture long-term relationships with the female talent pool.

Support women with role models, sponsors, and mentors.

No incentive to change. The status quo suits a lot of people, and it's easier to blame women for not fitting in.

Some partners don't think there is a problem—they don't see why women can't have the same career path as them.

Client entertainment is often centred around drinking in the pub or playing golf—women don't join in with this so much because they've often got commitments at home.

Make diversity targets part of partner assessment.

Open up promotions discussions to enable biased decisions to be challenged.

Make the management of teams part of individual assessment.

Cultural change required in the partner group at large.

Consulting firms assume their people feel empowered, and that's clearly not the case.

Firms need to offer a menu of options to help women through the 'pinched middle' years, and women should be encouraged to take advantage to make it work for them.

Setting goals which aren't just financial—recognise the value of a broader set of skills to motivate women.

Pay women more—they're still often paid less than men.

# TODAY'S REALITY

## Women in the 'pinched middle' leave consulting at far higher rates than men

All senior managers at consulting firms are busy. The expectation is that you will juggle client commitments, manage juniors, win new work, network within the firm as well as with clients, all while developing yourself professionally and keeping up with the cutting-edge developments in your clients' industries. It's the point at which most people feel the need to fully commit to consulting and carve out their path to partnership—or to get out of it completely.

Those expectations don't change whether you're male or female. But the reality is that it's mostly women that drop out of consulting careers at this stage, creating vast imbalances further up the pyramid. "At partner and director level there are hardly any women," says one female senior manager. "From manager grade is when the numbers start dipping."

There's no easy answer as to why this is: the reasons are complex, intertwined, and often difficult to separate from one another. Many lie in societal factors and the long-standing cultural expectations that both men and women have of a woman's role; problems a consulting firm will not solve. Others lie in more unfortunate coincidences: that many women are hitting this pivotal stage of their career while also deciding to start families, often requiring time out. For all these reasons, and many more, lots of women come to the conclusion that it's just unsustainable; stretched on all fronts, something has to give, and more often than not it's the consulting career.

*I absolutely agree with the "pinched middle" assertion. So often you see where there are problems that it is the woman who makes the compromise and ends up leaving the firm, to make both their lives easier. It could certainly be a more manageable career but it all comes down to leadership. The leaders set the tone and the framework for how the business will run.*

Female senior manager

*I only know of one man to also ask for reduced hours. This is very unusual in Spain as it tends to be the women that will adjust their working schedules.*

Male senior manager

*I totally agree with the notion of the 'pinched middle'. I'm a mother of two kids in my 30s. Work is very busy so having two kids in parallel is pretty hard. It's difficult to stay in contact with my family every day.*

Female senior manager

## Consulting firms are trying, but they're still missing the mark

It's not like this is 'new' news—consulting firms are acutely aware of their diversity issues, and have invested in initiatives and policies aimed at improving the balance.

Little, however, is specifically designed with the 'pinched middle' in mind. New graduates get plenty of support in the early parts of their career, but that starts to disappear further up the pyramid. "The support is missing in the middle part," explains a senior manager. "You don't get the same coaching and development support, unless you actively seek it out. It's an issue for both men and women." Others think there's a gap in specific help for women: "I don't see that there are any programmes in place to support women with balancing their work and home life; I cannot see that they are trying to make life easier," says another female senior manager.

Where there are initiatives, women often feel they're too theoretical or generic. "In the end, everyone's situation is different so solutions really need to be quite tailored," says one senior manager. Others say that initiatives aren't relevant until it's too late: "I came back into consulting after one year of maternity leave, and it was only then I realised that it was going to be very difficult to manage work and travelling alongside my family life and seeing my little boy." There's also the cruel irony that these women are sometimes too busy with everything to take advantage of initiatives on offer.

But perhaps the biggest issue is that while a firm may boast flexible working policies, or that it has fulfilling part-time roles, it can be ignored at an individual partner or director level. All it takes is one partner or engagement manager who doesn't think much of working part-time and a woman's career is on ice, or worse, over. It breeds a certain amount of cynicism; employees start to see diversity initiatives as mere slogans for the leadership or PR exercises for the firm. It's particularly frustrating for women, who know that a big consulting firm should be able to do more for them.

Because taking advantage of initiatives is still not considered the norm, existing policies haven't broken some very damaging and widely-held beliefs about consulting as a career:

- *50% of women think that people in their organisation still think that having a career in consulting and looking after a family is mutually exclusive—as do 40% of men.*

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- *58% of women feel they can't be honest about the work and home pressures they face.*

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- *41% of women think their firm only pays lip service to gender diversity.*

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- *61% of women say it is seen as career-limiting to take advantage of the opportunities around flexible working and maternity leave—and half of men agree (50%).*

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The men and women we spoke to acknowledge that being a senior manager in a global consulting firm isn't easy for men either. Indeed, many of the proposed solutions would be welcomed with open arms by men, too. But it's clear that when summing the combined pressures of home and life, men feel it less than women overall. In many cases it's because men have a partner who either doesn't work or works part time, and they take care of managing home life. "Lots of my male colleagues have wives and girlfriends who stay at home with the kids—it's a conscious decision that's been made, and it gives the man so much more freedom," says one female senior manager. It's the set-up that most men in leadership positions also have, so they never really face the same challenges that female senior managers do; they don't really have much of an idea what women are balancing at this stage in their career—they just expect them to follow the same path they did.

*As a result, just 52% of women say they are happy with their work-life balance, compared with 65% of men.*



*There are no networks or meetings or courses for women coming back into work after maternity. It's up to you to find out the information, to make contact with your boss, and to see what they can do for you.*

Female senior manager

## A framework for change

There are huge problems, but the men and women we spoke to had plenty of ideas about what needs to change—and crucially, what that should look like in practical terms.

When we spoke with managers and senior managers, the two things that nearly all women said would keep them in consulting would be more predictability around travel and workload, and greater access to flexible working. Both these things are already generally offered in theory by consulting firms, so here we look at what steps can be taken to make this work in practice. It quickly became clear from our conversations with women who had a successful, flexible set-up that there are other foundations on which it has to be built: continuity of teams who understand their personal circumstances and trust them to deliver; tailored roles for the trickiest times that still contribute towards career development; and clearer, more tailored promotion expectations.

To reinforce change, senior managers want training and coaching to help them through the 'pinched middle', and they also desperately want to see more people they can relate to in senior positions. Being able to see a path to partnership that's relevant to them is crucial, and having role models they admire who've forged a different path really helps women to believe it's achievable. To increase the chances of women making it to the top, firms should consider how they feed the talent pipeline, both organically and through experienced hires.

All of this has to be underpinned by a change in attitude among the partner group at large. While leadership teams tend to be very engaged in solving retention issues, individual partners aren't incentivised to do so; some may not even think there is a problem.

And of course, there are the women themselves. They need to feel empowered to take decisions, ask for what they need, and that they will be respected for doing so.

We've distilled this into ten key areas, which the rest of this report goes through in detail. For each we analyse:

- *Why this is important and would help keep female senior managers in consulting*

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- *How it would work—practical steps about what each could look like in a way that benefits women, the firm and the client*

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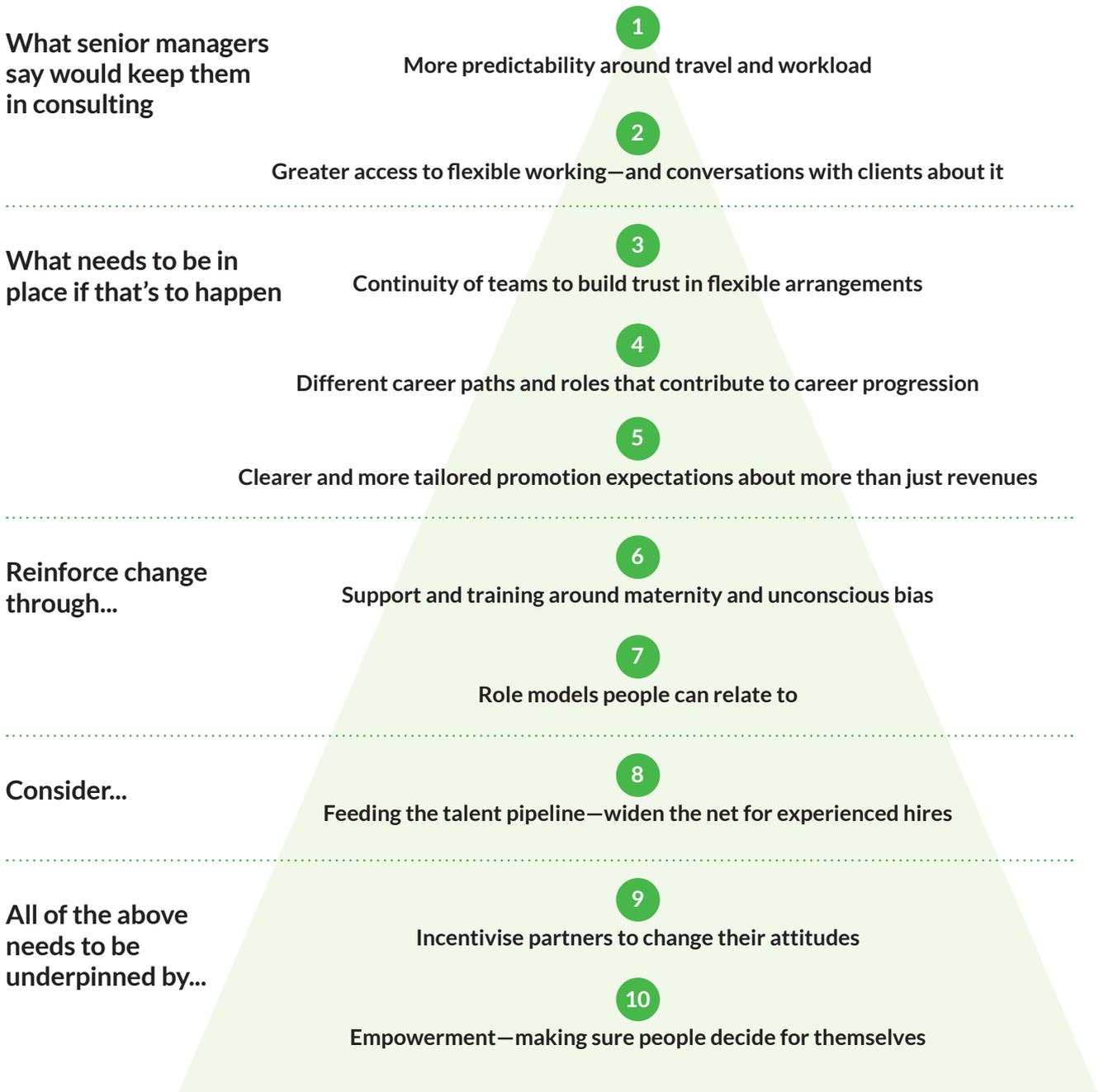
- *A brief look at what the current barriers are to achieving it.*

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*My husband works in audit and he needs to travel; someone needs to stay at home. We can't both be away all the time.*

Female senior manager



# WHAT SENIOR MANAGERS SAY WOULD KEEP THEM IN CONSULTING

## 1 Greater predictability around travel requirements and workload

### Why this matters

People in the 'pinched middle' all cite the impact that high levels of travel and unpredictable hours have on their lives. "I'd say the lifestyle is the most challenging thing—the hours can be ridiculous," says a female senior manager, sounding exhausted. "There's also so much last minute travel; in fact, even the expectation of travel is draining. Being away Monday to Friday, or Monday to Thursday isn't always doable unless you have full time support at home."

Her comments echo the views of many. 44% of the women surveyed describe unpredictable workloads as a "serious issue" for them; a further 39% describe it as "a bit of an issue." There are similarly high proportions of women describing the amount of work they have to do in the evening in such terms. Two-thirds of the women surveyed also describe facing personal issues around unpredictable travel.

Women aren't alone in this—high proportions of men also say they feel these issues too. But what's striking is how much more acute the impact is on women. Just 29% of men say that their unpredictable workload is a "serious issue" for them; only 19% find the travel to be a big problem for them.

It's compounded by a sense that a consultant can't say no to far-away projects or extra work. "Literally, whatever the client says, you have to go out of your way to do it," says another senior manager. "The expectation is that if you're asked to do something, you get it over the line—with the late nights, the travel, or whatever is required." 67% of female respondents agree that an extreme 'client-comes-first' culture means they have little say in what they do. Just 38% of women say consultants at their firm can opt out of travel if they need to; 57% disagreed.

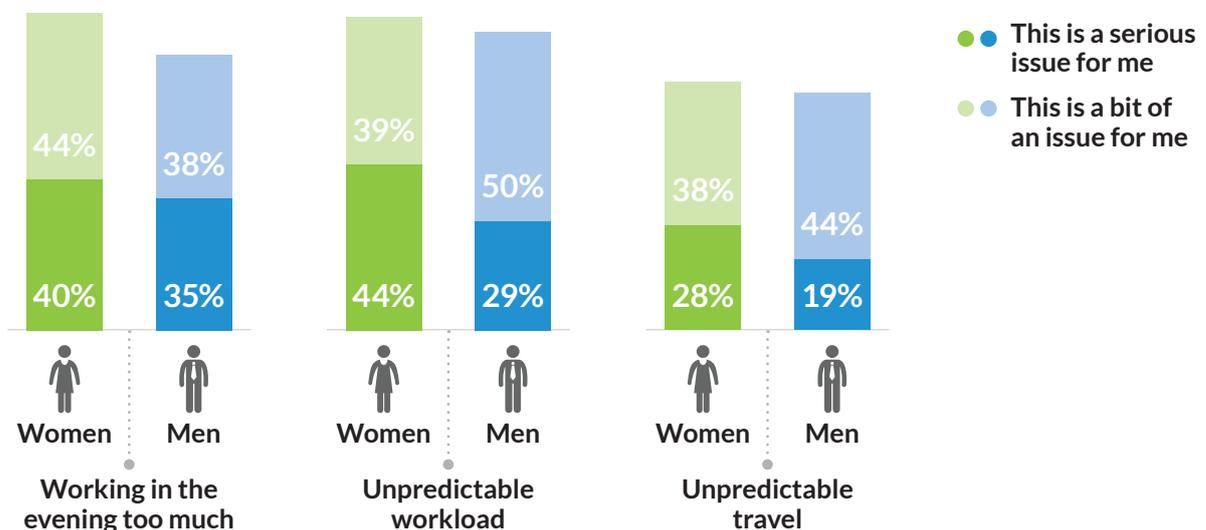
We could now spend a vast amount of time discussing the centuries-old reasons for why women feel these pressures to a greater degree than men do, but that's not the focus of this report. But to summarise from our conversations with women at this stage of their life, many reach a tipping point as they contemplate how these demands can be balanced with either having a family, or just having a life outside of work. "Ultimately the lifestyle will be the reason I leave—I couldn't have a family and remain in consulting. I just don't see how I can do what I do with a family," says one interviewee. Others described how they found it hard to keep up with just one hobby outside of work, or find the time to walk their dog; it's not just about having a family. "Most women decide to leave consulting because the hours are too demanding and it's too difficult to plan your life," summarises another.

It's not that women in these positions demand they do no travel at all. They all understand what the job requires. But without greater predictability, many feel their lives are completely at the mercy of whichever client or engagement partner they happen to be working for.

It leads to a feeling of extreme fatigue. Under pressure in so many areas of their lives, many women request sabbaticals to recover a sense of control, but also to reflect on whether a career in consulting with all its demands is what they really want. Taking time out—whether for sabbaticals or to have children—is often the point at which women throw in the towel.

Figure 1

To what extent do you personally face any of the following challenges? Comparing male and female respondents



### Barriers

- An extreme 'client comes first' culture—an expectation that everything is dropped for whatever demands are made, no matter how last minute.
- Lack of empathy from the partner group—they went through it, so everyone else should.
- A view that revenues and chasing opportunities is all that matters—partly driven by the fact this is used as the main measure of success.

### How it could work better

Although many firms have policies and practices in place designed specifically to combat these issues, there are still things that aren't working. Here are some of the suggestions our interviewees had about how to improve predictability in their lives.

**Agree basic patterns in advance:** Whether it's leaving at 4pm to pick up a child, or giving a week's notice for travel, agreeing some arrangements that bring some predictability really help—women who have these agreements are more positive about their future at the firm. "My husband is also a consultant, so we've divided the week in two parts, there are two days I can travel, and two days when he can," says one female senior manager. "My colleagues and clients know when I can travel and we arrange meetings around that." "My bosses know that I can do travel but that I need to know the dates up front," says another balancing consulting with having a family. 86% of women said that improved scheduling that made work and projects more predictable would help them.

**Make consent part of the process:** Men and women think it would be better if scheduling involved actually speaking to consultants about whether they can go on a project involving a lot of travel. It should be OK—and not

career-limiting—to say no; 55% of women say this would help a lot, while another 31% say it would help a bit. Current set-ups in some firms are so loathed they're the subject of black humour. "What happens today is you are sent an email by resourcing to say you are starting at XYZ project on Monday for 10 months and to report to ABC person, so sort out your travel to South Africa or wherever," says one male senior manager. "Internally, the name jokingly given for this is the "Message of Love." Small discussions with potential staff would really help to make this so much better."

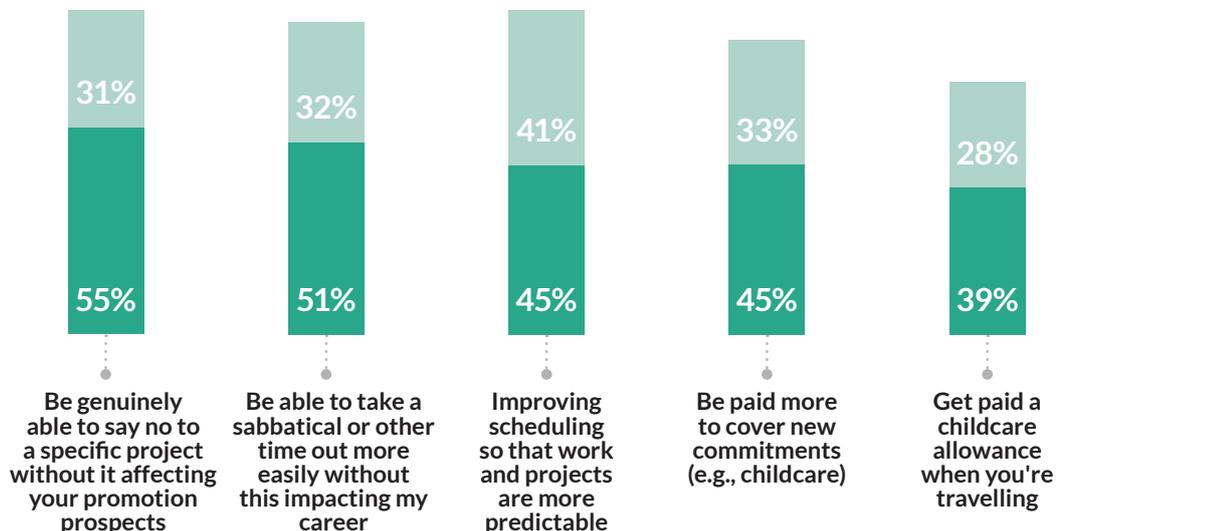
**Help with childcare when travelling:** One suggestion is developing a network of childcare facilities: "Most childcare places are fixed: what would be great would be if you could take your child to a crèche near where you've got a meeting. There should be a network of childcare facilities parents can tap into," suggests one senior manager. As well as being practical, it may help to reduce the guilt many women (and men) feel around not seeing their children enough. Another suggestion is that firms should help out with the additional cost of childcare that's incurred when parents have to spend long periods of the week away, particularly in countries where it is very expensive. Two thirds of women say that being paid a childcare allowance while travelling would help to some degree; more popular is simply being paid more to cover new commitments like childcare.

**Working with the same teams more regularly:** Partners and directors are more likely to support different arrangements if they know and trust the person involved. For many of the women we spoke to who have alternative set-ups that are working for them, this is a foundational part of it, so we explore this point in more detail below. Three quarters of women think this would be beneficial to them.

**Extra support for those considering a sabbatical:** This wasn't explicitly requested, but the sense we gathered from talking to people about why they take sabbaticals is that it's a warning sign that a consultant is feeling burnt out and may be considering quitting. Firms should take note at this stage and do more to understand why an individual feels this way.

Figure 2

### What women say would help



## 2 Greater access to flexible working—and conversations with clients about it

### Why this matters

At this point, we're sure some consulting leadership teams are bashing their heads against the wall. Surely all firms offer this already! Our staff all have laptops and mobile phones, what's the problem?

But talk to managers and senior managers, and you discover a very different reality. 59% of women (and 54% of men) say that people in their organisations don't like it "when you make a fuss about needing flexibility". On top of that, 50% of women at the senior manager grade feel they aren't in control of how their lives are organised. Despite everything firms are already doing, 54% of women say that their firms have plenty of sensible policies around flexible working—but they don't make much difference in practical terms.

It matters because flexibility on the part of the firm is intimately connected with creating more predictability

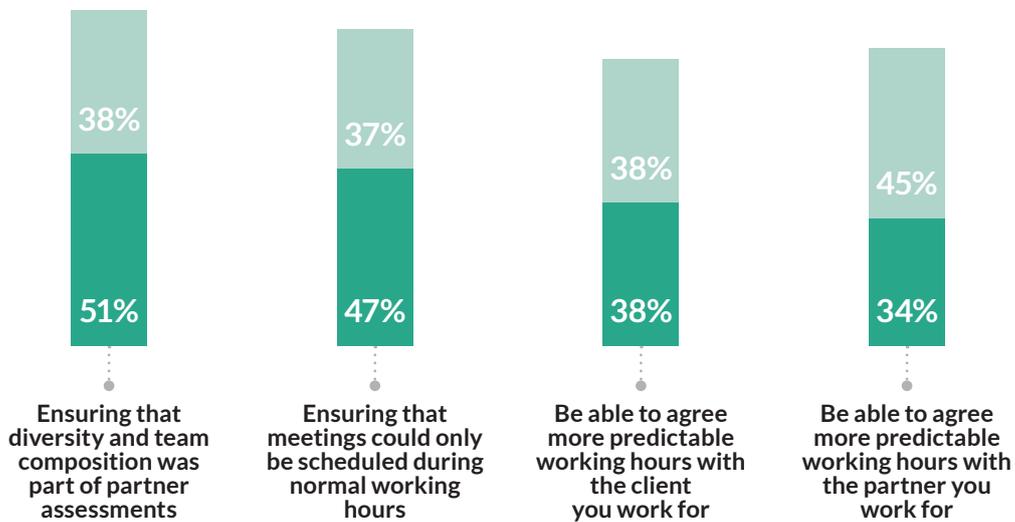
for the individual, and the men and women who have flexible working arrangements around this say it really works for them. Broadly, there are two things under this banner that managers and senior managers are crying out for: the ability to work from home sometimes—that includes being able to leave on time and log back on later, as well as entire days; and the ability to work a three or four day week—but crucially, for that not to mean putting their careers on ice. Unfortunately, today 61% of women believe that taking advantage of flexible working is seen as career-limiting.

Improving the availability of and perceptions around flexible working would be particularly beneficial for women returning to consulting having had children, but nearly everyone we interviewed, male or female, expressed frustration at what they see as overly-rigid rules about being client-side.

Figure 3

### What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



“ Consulting firms should spend less time worrying about client perceptions and more on how best to get things done. Ultimately if you deliver, the client doesn't care at all whether you are there or not. ”  
Female senior manager

“ Having a more flexible working pattern would help hugely. Being able to work a three or four day week and not be penalised would also help. It's about getting a bit more predictability in your life—you don't know where you'll be from week to week, what hours you'll be working, where you'll be based. ”  
Female senior manager

## Barriers

- **Extreme 'client comes first' culture is in some cases self-imposed by partners/directors.**
- **Currently, people feel they are not trusted to work from home—prevailing 'old school' attitude among partner group that working from home isn't really working.**
- **Perfect conditions required for it to actually happen, e.g. partner, director, and client all need to be supportive of flexible working.**



*Now with children, most days I will leave at 5pm and take over from the nanny and then pick up again after 8pm. The team now understands this too so they know I will review material later in the evening. I certainly didn't find the right model for me without trial and error. To begin with, I thought I could leave at 5 pm each day but that just wasn't feasible. Then over 3-6 months I started to work it out. I got a 2nd laptop at home so I wouldn't need to lug mine around - small things really - and I used my judgement to decide when I really needed to be there and when I didn't. It isn't easy though.*

Female senior manager

## How it could work better

**Talk to clients:** Many consultants feel that clients are actually amenable to the idea that consultants don't need to be chained to their desks and visible at all times to be delivering. "Most clients they accept it if a female colleague says they need to pick up their child," says one female senior manager, adding: "They understand—they have the same commitments too." Of course, they're not always like that—every consultant has war stories from a nightmare client who expected them to put their entire lives on hold for the project. For those situations, consultants would prefer it if partners took an active role in setting clients' expectations right from the start. "Sometimes clients expect you to be there all hours, so you have to negotiate," explains a female manager. "It would be good if this wasn't left to the team and the individual. If the firm had a policy and told clients: 'this is the way we work; these are the hours our staff work; they will work hard but don't expect them to be there all the time.'" 76% of women say that agreeing predictable hours with clients would help them.

**Buy-in at individual partner/director level:** Equally important is feeling that you can have that conversation with the partner heading up an engagement. In fact, slightly more women (79%) said having this conversation would help than those saying a conversation with the client would help. It's clear that an internal conversation is as important as the client-facing one. "You need the will from all involved parties—the partner, the client, and the person to make it happen," says one male senior manager. "Everyone needs to work together to compromise and get a solution that works for everyone."

But, as discussed above, so many feel unable to take advantage of such policies, or that they'll be seen as making a fuss. A suggestion, therefore, is that partners get a top-down incentive: that they are assessed not just on revenues, but on the management and diversity of their teams. Those that are more accommodating and reasonable towards those they employ should see the results in retention. 89% of female senior managers think this would help them to some degree; over half (51%) say this would help a lot.

**Scheduling meetings at reasonable times:** Anti-social meeting times such as 5-7pm (when children will be having dinner) should be avoided. "Sometimes my colleagues plan meetings from 5-7pm—I can't even do a call at that time because I'm with my little boy," says one exasperated interviewee. Many consultants (male and female) question the efficiency and effectiveness of imposing such meetings. Almost half of female senior managers (47%) said this would help "a lot", and a further 37% said it would help a bit.

**Policy of discretion...:** Partners should not expect in-depth reasons about why someone needs to work from home one day. As one manager puts it: "You shouldn't have to explain why you need to stay at home: Partners should just accept it."

**...combined with working with the same teams more regularly:** Partners and directors are more likely to support this if they know and trust the person involved (discussed in more detail below).

**Pairing women working part time with slightly more experienced teams:** It can be frustrating for juniors reporting into part time managers if they can't get hold of them when they need them. "Having a part-time manager can be a pain," says one senior manager. "I've had it in the past when I was a bit more junior. When you need input, you need it immediately as the pace is so fast, so it can be very frustrating if your manager is not available." Pairing women working part time with teams that have slightly more collective experience and are therefore better able to cope for a day a week on their own is vital to making it work for both parties. It shouldn't be impossible—after all, teams cope with other absences, such as holidays and compassionate leave.

# WHAT NEEDS TO BE IN PLACE IF THAT'S TO HAPPEN

## 3 Continuity of teams to build trust in flexible arrangements

### Why this is important

Many women (and men) say the main thing that has facilitated their flexible and more predictable arrangements is working for the same team of partners and directors. "There are three partners who I have worked with consistently for several years now. At first, they were worried about my different working patterns, but they know what to expect now," says one female manager. "For example, they know to email me rather than phone me, and they recognise that I will get back to something later." That trust is vital—it builds confidence that work will still be delivered, even if it's at slightly different times, or despite not being present in the office.

Delivery aside, there are other benefits. First, more regular teams means partners will know an individual's

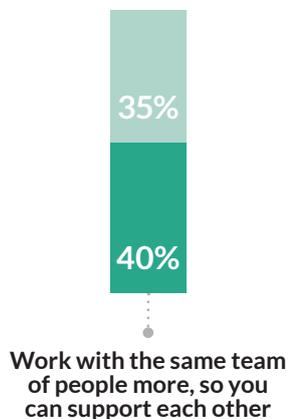
circumstances better, making them more aware of what they're asking of them. They may be less tempted to schedule a two hour meeting from 6-8pm if they know this is denying their senior managers time with their families. It starts to foster the empathy that many consultants feel is lacking.

Another upside is that it could start to break the assumptions made around maternity leave. At the moment, taking time out tends to have a huge, negative impact on a woman's career. If partners knew their staff better, they may stop seeing maternity leave as half a year 'lost' and seeing it more in the context of an individual's career plans and aspirations.

Figure 4

### What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



*“What the firm needs to do is provide a better work life balance. At the moment, to have a balance you have to find projects in your region, but the problem when you're a senior manager is that you have to chase the opportunities; I've felt that I can't say no to projects.”*

Female senior manager

*“I work away from home from Monday to Thursday, so we only have Fridays and the weekends together as a family. I miss them, and they miss me. I don't see any options to get out of this conflict.”*

Female senior manager

## Barriers

- Focus on revenues above all else—partners under pressure to sell might send their teams anywhere, and engagement managers, with a singular focus to deliver projects, tend to naturally default to using full-time employees without regard to the personal circumstances of the team.
- Differing attitudes among partner and director group about flexible working and part time work—some consultants may find themselves in great teams that really try to make it work for them, while others may find themselves stuck in a department of 'dinosaur' partners. This means that finding a helpful team can feel like a chance event rather than the norm.



*The only way to control the travel situation is to find the right partner to support you. I have only worked for one partner at my current firm. At my last firm I worked with different partners and in different offices. It made life much more difficult.*

Male senior manager



*When you work for a new partner or team, they are more hands-on because they don't know you so you have less control over your work and your life. Once you have delivered on a project, then people relax as they know what to expect from you. You get selected for another project and then you can start being a bit open with the team because you know them better. You can tell them your plans and what needs to happen to make things work for you. It is a more friendly approach.*

Male senior manager

## How it could work

**Scheduling teams, rather than individuals:** Firms could deliberately try to schedule women who have significant commitments outside work with teams they already know; 75% say this would help. For experienced hires, it's important that they're given the chance to find teams they like as they won't necessarily have the network they need when first joining a firm.

**Giving people a say:** Partners and directors usually decide who goes on what team, but creating a more bottom-up approach in which managers and senior managers can make suggestions would allow small, ready-made teams to be used over and over again.

**Buy-in at individual partner/director level:** As above: Give partners a reason to care about the way they manage teams by making it part of their assessment.

## 4 Development of different career paths and roles that contribute to career progression

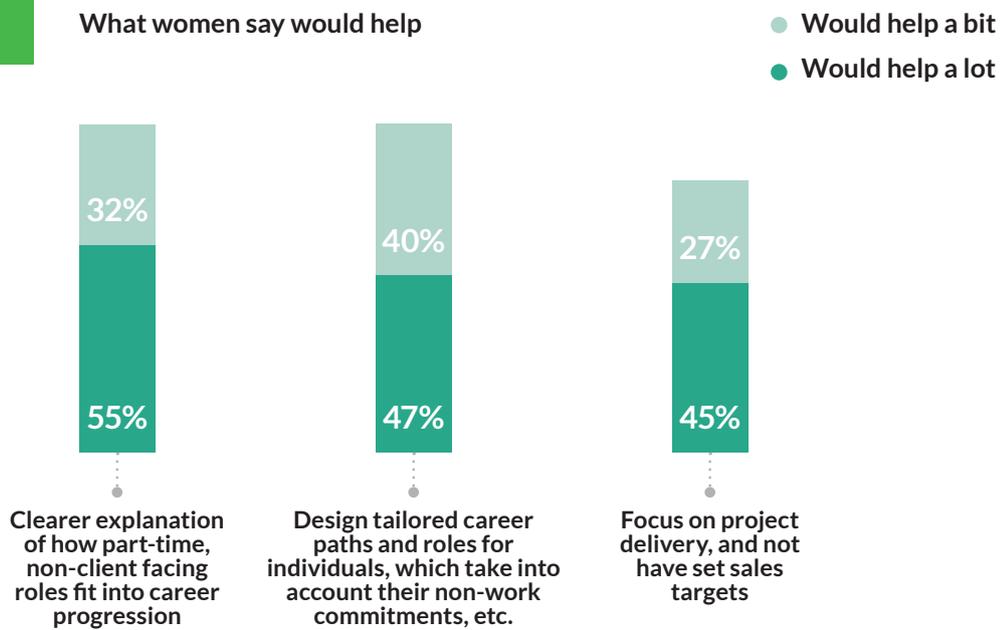
### Why this is important

“My observation is that in my firm, once these women come back from maternity leave and work reduced hours, their career has effectively stopped,” says one male senior manager. “There are no opportunities for progression for them within the organisation if they’re not working all hours.”

The perception that the years around maternity leave are effectively dead time that doesn’t contribute to career progression is widespread. Similarly, flexible working is seen as something that is more acceptable for women to do (51% of all respondents think that flexible working is more available to women than men in reality), but also carries the same whiff that the individual is somehow less committed or ambitious than a full-time member of staff: 61% of women think taking advantage of flexible working or maternity leave is seen as career-limiting.

Consulting firms need to be more imaginative about how they can accommodate flexible and part-time working into an individual’s career path if they are to do away with the prevailing view that a woman’s career is over if she works part time. Many firms are already having to rethink the traditional consulting ladder to attract people with the digital skills they so desperately need—why not put the same effort into helping the ‘pinched middle’ through this phase of their lives?

Figure 5



## Barriers

- Prevailing partner attitude that the only path to follow is the one they themselves followed.
- Culture that says you're not committed unless you're working full time; a lack of respect and lack of support from seniors, peers, and even juniors.
- Narrow focus on end of year results—often measured purely in revenues brought in—rather than in the context of someone's longer term career path.



*At the very top, they know that they need part-time employees and talented women in the organisation. But at a peer level, and even at levels below my rank, I find you don't get the same respect as a full-time employee.*

Female senior manager



*I have some quite unique experience and knowledge which has really helped—my firm is being very flexible because they want to keep me.*

Female senior manager

## How it could work

**Subject matter expert (SME) career path:** Women with particular expertise and experience, but who also need some flexibility, could be on an SME path for a few years to help them through difficult periods (for example, when juggling consulting with small children). "There's far too much emphasis on business development and firms could be clearer that there's also a subject matter career path," says one manager. "You could opt to become significant international expert in a given field, for example, which is precisely the type of role that would go with working from home." That way, they can support colleagues delivering projects on the telephone or part time, enabling greater flexibility in ways of working. Almost half (47%) of female senior managers say tailored career paths and roles that take into account non-work commitments would help a lot, and a further 40% say it would help a bit.

**Splitting sales from delivery:** Similarly, a senior manager's role could be split to focus on either sales or delivery for the period of time that more flexible working is required. Roles on a long-term delivery programme that's more predictable may suit some; others may prefer to focus on selling and business development. "As a senior manager at my firm, the role is more about selling and creating relationships and less about delivery," says one senior manager. Having a focus on one or the other may help women to have meaningful, career-advancing roles while working part time or flexibly.

**Prioritising office-based roles for women back from maternity leave:** More focused roles that can be based from the office would help to retain women balancing childcare demands with their careers. However, wherever possible, these should continue to be client-facing: too many people returning from maternity leave are automatically moved to back-office roles. "I'm doing client-related work, supporting my colleagues who are at the client with my knowledge and best practice from the office," says one female senior manager who is unable to travel for long periods.

## Clarity about how these roles fit into promotion:

For part-time, specialist, or more focused roles to contribute towards career progression, there must be a mutual understanding between senior manager and partner about how the role is furthering the individual's career, and how it fits into the partner's plans for the department. This is the part that's really lacking at the moment—a firm can have all the policies in the world, but if it's seen as time spent treading water—or worse, career-ending—then nothing will change. Well over half of women (55%) say clarity around this would help a lot; in total 87% say it would help to some degree.

**View career plan more as a life plan:** Perhaps most fundamentally, there needs to be recognition that everyone's career plan might look different—but it doesn't stop someone being ambitious or wanting challenging work. "Firms always talk about career plans, but they fail to appreciate that a lot of women's career plans are built around family and children—and that it's no less a plan because of it," explains one senior manager. "It's different, but it's a plan all the same. They always say to think outside the box and so on—they should take their own advice."

## 5 Clearer and more tailored promotion criteria that are about more than just revenues

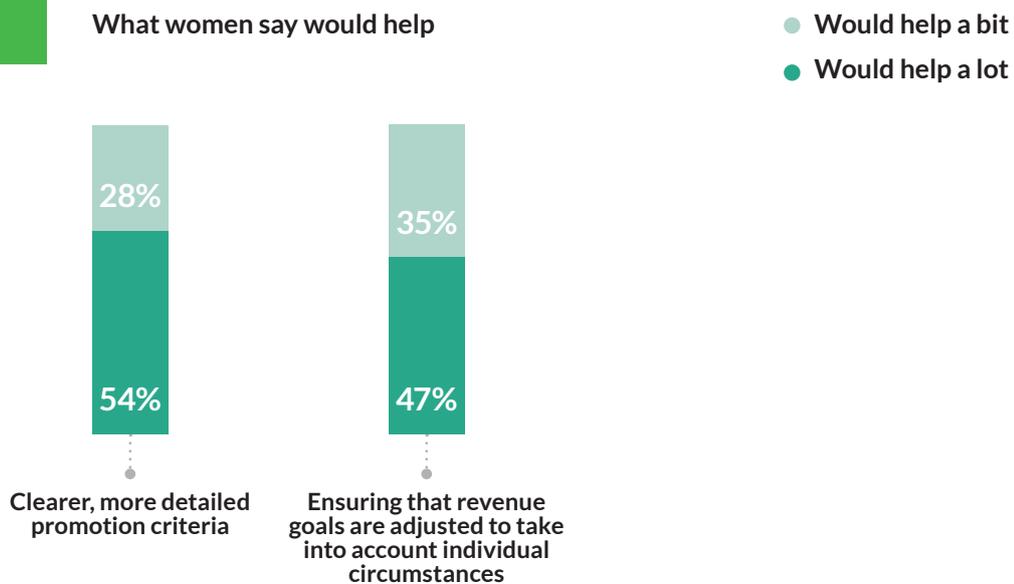
### Why this is important

82% of women in the 'pinched middle' describe being promoted as "very important" to them—higher than the proportion of men saying the same thing (68%). Despite the clear ambition, women are still not making it through to the upper reaches of consulting firms.

One reason is that, for all the rhetoric about flexibility, opinions about the contribution of those that take advantage of such policies harden significantly. Some women report that they are simply written off for a few years, regardless of previous performance; others report being treated as if they no longer exist when they take time out. Those that do try to combine consulting with families face a lack of respect for their contribution if they choose to work part time or flexibly, from both their seniors and juniors. Sadly, the prevalent view among both men and women is that taking time out for children in particular can be career-ending.

But it's not just about women and maternity leave. Some—even men—feel that the process around promotion is not a meritocracy and that partners promote in their own image. "There is definitely an old boys network, and an inner circle of trust," says a male senior manager. "More often than not, those in this inner circle are people in their own image who they can trust, see as a safe pair of hands, innately believe they will do a great job, can handle the pressure, are resilient, and they can relate to them without any additional effort." Clearer, tailored, and more transparent criteria and processes around promotion at this critical stage of any consultant's career wouldn't just benefit women—it would benefit everyone.

Figure 6



## Barriers

- **Archaic attitude of partners and engagement managers towards flexible working/time out for family life.**
- **Too great a focus on revenue as the only thing that matters.**
- **Existing thoughtless processes that suit few but perpetuate poor attitudes towards modernising consulting working practices.**



*Before I became pregnant I was on a high achievers programme, a special development programme within my firm which is the best way to be promoted to partner. When I became pregnant I lost access to that programme. Now, partner promotion is far away for me. It was close before I had a child, now it's far away. I hope my career is on ice, but it could be finished. A lot depends on how flexible working arrangements work out over the next year or so.*

Female senior manager

## How it could work

**Stop auto-populating targets:** At the moment revenue targets seem to be automated by grade in most firms, without regard for whether someone works full time, part time, is on a different career path, or has non-revenue linked goals that year. "When I got the form, it auto-populated my revenue targets as if I was working 100% of the time; I'm actually working 50% time at the moment," says one female senior manager. "So I sent the form back to my partner and asked if I was really expected to meet the same goals as someone who worked full time. I haven't had a response back yet—the question is now circulating in the organisation." It sounds simple, but tailoring goals to personal circumstances rather than focusing on whoever has the biggest absolute revenue numbers at the end of the year would make a big difference. "You're always compared with your peer group which are mostly male senior managers," explains another female senior manager. "They don't work part time, but partners still compare hard figures like chargeability and revenues without taking into account that some of the women work part time, and will therefore obviously have lower figures. When you compare on those hard facts alone, you're always going to lose out. I found it so frustrating." Just under half (47%) of female senior managers said tailored targets would help a lot, and a further 35% say it would help a bit.

**Expand assessment beyond revenue targets:** At the moment, the key measurement of a senior manager's success is the revenue they bring in—the bigger, the better. This simple yardstick doesn't work for those working part time, those who have taken any period of time out in the year, or for those more talented in the delivery of work or as subject matter experts. Consulting firms need to be more sophisticated in how they assess their talent, particularly at this 'pinched middle' point. As one senior manager points out: "Revenue figures and chargeability are important, but they're not the only thing that makes a good consultant." In all, 82% of women say clear, more detailed promotion criteria would help them; 54% say it would help a lot.

**Consider a more open forum for discussing promotions:** The behind-closed-doors approach that most firms seem to have breeds cynicism, and allows partners with archaic attitudes to continue to promote in their own image. A more open forum would allow individuals to challenge decisions and comments made about them.

**Don't automatically write off the years during and after pregnancy:** "It's so demotivating going on maternity leave—they basically say, we don't need to promote you before you go because you're going away, so this year we'll rate you as average," explains one senior manager. "Then, the following year you also get an 'average' because you've been away. It's an automatic thing—they don't care what you've done while you've been there, because you weren't there all year." A more open forum would make it more unacceptable for this to happen and easier to challenge it when these attitudes creep in. The approach should be to combine flexible working, different roles, and part time work with realistic targets that contribute towards career goals. Partners could be measured on retention of new mothers to ensure this out-dated attitude is broken.



*At our level we are now involved in the discussions about more junior staff and you see how these performance management discussions are actually conducted behind closed doors and what they say. You realise that what you thought was a fair and objective process is not at all. You ask yourself – what is this bias playing out? Is this how I get better? It is definitely not a meritocracy.*

Male senior manager

# REINFORCE CHANGE THROUGH...

## 6 Support and training around maternity and unconscious bias

### Why this is important

There were two distinct and separate areas that came up under the umbrella of training and coaching. The first was what seems to be a major gap at most firms in support around maternity. Some firms had programmes before a woman left for maternity, but not after; some the other way around; others describe basically nothing at all being in place for setting women up before they go, nor integrating them when they return.

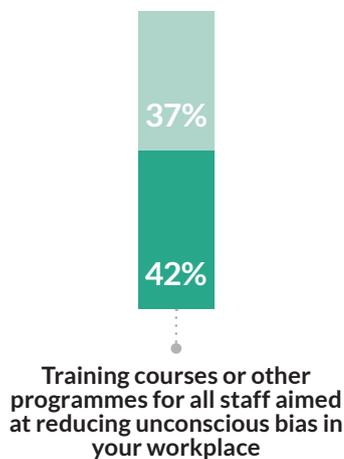
The reintegration period is particularly crucial: new to the juggling act of motherhood and trying to find what works for them from a career perspective, it can be a daunting time. It's the period in which many women reassess, after the life-changing experience of having a child. "Your job has to be meaningful, and you have to love it to go back to work and through all the effort and pain," says one senior manager. Supporting women in finding meaningful, career-building, and fulfilling roles is vital to retaining them through this tricky time. For many, there's a feeling that this is the least a firm owes them, having often devoted years of their lives to their practice areas.

More controversially—and unrelated to maternity leave—some interviewees spoke of having to deal with challenging behaviours, such as being talked over, people making assumptions about them, or being 'mansplained' to. Those that are most content with their lot in consulting are the women we spoke to who acknowledge that they speak up and challenge entrenched, domineering behaviours. Women could receive greater support in how to challenge these behaviours when they encounter them. This is, however, a controversial point—some believe that training should include men so they are more aware of their (or their peers') behaviour. And of course, not all women believe they need this kind of support, either.

Figure 7

What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



*I find it is very difficult to work with my clients, and that they often don't take me seriously. But I just work through it as I absolutely love what I do and find it fascinating, but it is not always very gratifying.*  
Female manager

*You have to fight. You have to speak up. If someone interrupts you, you have to point it out. Mansplaining—talking over women, or saying the same thing a woman has just said—is a real problem.*  
Female senior manager

*I have to speak up. I think some women don't speak up, then give up and just concentrate on their family.*  
Female senior manager

### Barriers

- A belief among senior men (and some women) that unconscious bias isn't an issue.
- Women not wanting to make a fuss—fears that it could damage their reputation.
- A belief that having children is a lifestyle choice (but only for women) which is a decision taken in full knowledge that it will damage careers.

### How it could work

#### Training for women—and perhaps men too:

Consulting firms could invest in training courses aimed specifically at countering unconscious bias and how to challenge damaging behaviour when encountered. 42% of women think this would help a lot, while 37% think it would help them a bit.

#### Programmes to support women before and after maternity leave:

Firms should make an effort to help work out how an individual will manage work and childcare commitments, and to start mapping out career goals and identifying part-time or more focused roles that will contribute towards career progression. Programmes for returning mothers should also highlight changes in the firm's structure, leadership, strategic direction, rather than leaving it to chance as to whether that's communicated.



*I managed my re-on-boarding like a mini-project plan. I kept in touch throughout, but in the two to three months before coming back I came in and met everyone. All of this was my own initiative, there was nothing from HR or my bosses. In the first two weeks back I created my own mini-induction – I sought out the people I needed to meet, I signed up for training on the new system that had been implemented while I was out. There had been a huge amount of change in a short space of time and there was a very negative atmosphere and a lot of in-fighting within the leadership, as well as leadership changes. No one really commented on my mini-induction plan, but they did give me the space to do it. I now have colleagues coming to me and asking for my advice on how I did it, as they can see that I managed it really well, where others have really struggled to on-board back into the business.*

Female senior manager



*There are no networks or meetings or courses for women coming back into work after maternity. It's up to you to find out the information, to make contact with your boss, and to see what they can do for you.*

Female senior manager



*You do get a lot of support as you are about to go on maternity leave at my firm, but no support when you come back—which really is the time when you need it the most.*

Female senior manager

## 7 Role models people can relate to

### Why this is important

As women in the 'pinched middle' are trying to figure it all out, many look up the ladder for inspiration. When they do, some say what they see is very opaque—they simply don't know how senior women balance their commitments. "The key problem for me, and others I suspect, is that I don't understand how other people balance their various commitments," says one female manager. "It's not something people talk about, perhaps because they don't want to feel judged. Not many people have 'come out' to talk about it." The subject is taboo, just not spoken about.

Others look up and see women who've made choices they don't want for themselves, or who simply aren't 'normal' enough. We heard countless stories of impressive female partners who are supportive but it nearly always came with a 'but': but she doesn't have children; but her partner stays at home; but she came back to work two weeks after giving birth. To many, those 'buts' aren't the hallmarks of a successful career—they're exactly what's wrong with the culture in many consulting firms. And for an awful lot of people these choices are unrealistic. How many ambitious, educated young women are going to end up with male partners—probably equally highly educated—that are willing to shelve their careers in favour of their girlfriend's? It's outdated to expect a single breadwinner set-up at home, for men or women.

Another issue is that female leaders are often pigeon-holed into traditionally 'female' areas, like marketing or HR, entrenching obsolete views about what men and women are good at. A women forging a career in operations

consulting, say, may feel there's little to learn from someone with success in the HR field.

With so few examples of paths to partnership available, and those that are in front of them often seeming a little extreme or irrelevant, many women come to the conclusion that staying in consulting just isn't worth the trade offs they think are required.

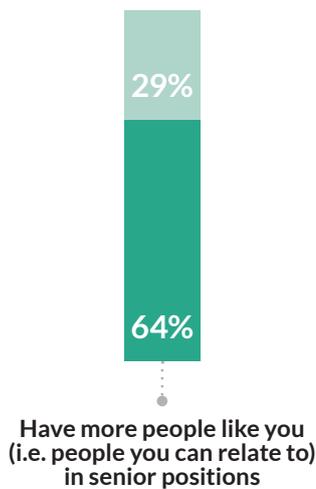
And that's such a shame, because when women do hear about other women's success stories, it makes a big difference to how they think about their careers in consulting. "Now I see that there are so many different ways of doing it," says one senior manager. "Each female partner took a different pathway to get there and each of those is respected within the firm. It's important because it gives younger women role models they can identify with, who made choices similar to what they would want." Having role models that women can relate to is the single most helpful things firms could do to retain more women: 64% say this would help a lot, with a further 29% agreeing it would help a bit; that's 93% of female senior managers in total.

Similarly, those with meaningful support in the form of mentors and sponsors—male or female—are much more positive about their prospects at their firm. "I really want to be a partner and am on track for this to happen," says another female manager. "I have a mentor, a coach and a sponsor and that has been fantastic and makes a huge difference. I have seen the impact the coach and sponsor can have and it is amazing—the 'real deal'."

Figure 8

### What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



## Barriers

- **Lack of openness**—some women we spoke to say that there are women's networks, but that senior women still disguise the choices they've made. It could be because they fear putting younger women off.
- **Women have to make these unattractive choices** because so few have access to flexible working and support when having a family.
- **Dearth of women in senior leadership positions** can lead to a narrow perception of how to get to partner.
- **There are already too many women leaving**, which engenders a feeling among their peer group that staying and balancing work / family life isn't achievable.

## How it could work

**Open and honest women's networks:** A complaint about existing women's networks is that people aren't open about the challenges they face, or that they are run by women who few people aspire to be like. Firms need to offer several different looking paths to partnership, with frank conversations about how to overcome the specific issues women face. They should also highlight the benefits of becoming more senior—rather than it being even more of the same, grinding routine, many find that they are more in control of their lives having got through this point of their career. "The higher you go in the hierarchy, the more flexible you can be with your personal time—you set the schedule and manage your time," observes one male senior manager. What's key is that women hear of others' success.

**Encouraging women to seek mentors, sponsors, and coaches:** Recognising that a sponsor, mentor, and coach could be three different people, and that all have a valuable role to play in a woman's career.

**Reverse mentoring:** It's easy for senior (and often older) people to forget how difficult the 'pinched middle' years are, so there needs to be more upward feedback, with managers and senior managers able to be honest about their experience.



*I have a sponsor who is very senior and we meet four times a year for dinner. We discuss how I can expand my network and I can talk about areas where I feel vulnerable. I go to him if I am having a difficult time and want help. People know he is my sponsor and this helps my relationship with other senior people. He also promotes me behind the scenes. For example, I have brought in significant revenue in the past year and he talks about this with other partners and makes them aware.*

Female senior manager



*I will most likely quit. I don't want the partner lifestyle. None of them are there to give their children supper at night in a relaxed manner, as even if they are, they are probably worrying about having to log back on at 9pm and work until gone midnight to make up the lost hours when they were with their children. I don't see that anyone is doing it well.*

Female senior manager



*A lot of people don't feel comfortable sharing stories about their personal lives, but it would really help to have more of them do this because, in order to visualise the path to senior leadership, it needs to be made accessible. Personal stories help people understand how they can do it.*

Female manager



*I've been lucky to have a really supportive partner who's a mentor and role model. She's very supportive and flexible, and she's got a child. But her husband is a stay-at-home father—so she's only a role model to an extent, as that's not an arrangement that I'd want for me and my husband.*

Female senior manager

# CONSIDER...

## 8 Feeding the talent pipeline—widen the net for experienced hires

### Why this is important

Although most firms start with a roughly 50:50 balance at graduate level, that balance starts to disappear at manager level. Without action, it won't fix itself.

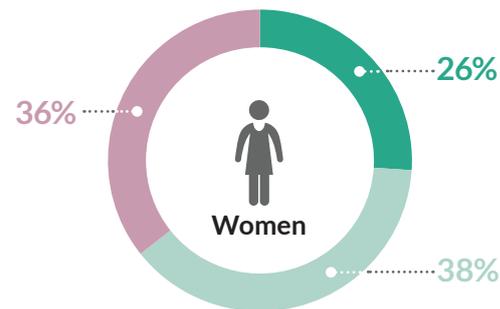
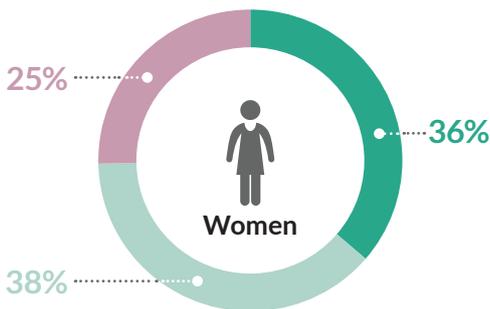
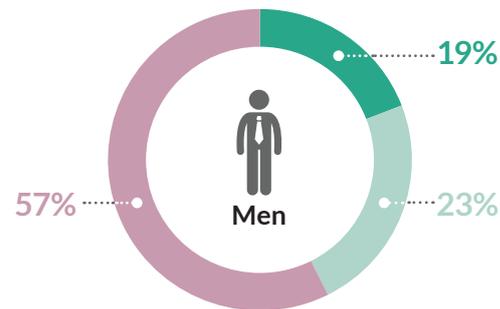
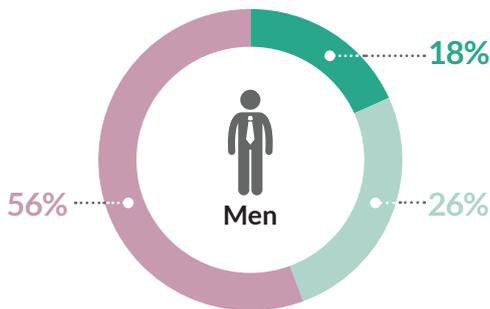
Clearly, all the points discussed above—about flexible working, more predictability, and the things that make that work—are needed so firms do a better job of retaining the women they attract at a graduate level. But firms could also turn their attention to their pipeline of experienced hires, doing more to ensure women make shortlists for more senior positions.

Views on introducing quotas for promotion are polarising. Some think it's the only way to force change; others think it's patronising and runs the risk of not finding the best person. Women in the 'pinched middle' are more open to the idea than men: 36% think it would help a lot, compared with just 18% of men. A quarter of women say they don't think it would help, while over half (56%) of men don't think it would be beneficial. Views on quotas for women recruits are split similarly. So while quotas are an option, there are things that women—and men—think could be more helpful in retaining female talent at this stage.

Figure 9

Men and women's views on quotas for gender diversity

- Would help a lot
- Would help a bit
- Would not help or not applicable



Having quotas for women being promoted

Having quotas for women recruits

### Barriers

- Resistance to quotas—many people (men and women) are against quotas as they view it as unfair on everyone.
- Current working practices lead women to believe consulting and family life cannot be combined, so they drop out.
- Lack of realistic role models means some women simply don't aspire to be partner because they think it isn't worth it.
- A resistance to change and the unknown.
- Relationships between consulting firms and recruiters is very transactional.



*In our case, we need to get more women to apply and then we need 50:50 lists for experienced hires. We have a women's network in place and we need to push that actively along with promoting women to partners. That would make a massive difference.*

Female manager

### How it could work

**Adopting new working practices to retain the women firms do attract at graduate level:** This means enacting many of the points around flexible working and different career paths detailed above.

**Incentivising your recruitment partners to go deeper into the market to identify more diverse talent and thus producing a better balanced shortlist, particularly at a senior level:** Although, a word of caution—any recruitment activity should ultimately focus on hiring the best person for the job; widen the net but do not lower the bar.

**Nurture long-term relationships with the female talent pool:** Often, recruitment firms have a fairly transactional relationship with the women they put forward to consulting firms: a vacancy comes up, then the recruiter goes to the market looking for talented women to fill it. Rather than a one-off interaction, a better approach might be to retain search partners to proactively identify and engage with the talent pool in their particular area of expertise by establishing more of an on-going programme of engagement. That way, when a vacancy comes up the recruiter doesn't have to go to the market, as they'll already know a network of women, and crucially, what motivates them. Often, it's not just about money—a firm that can offer a level of predictability might be far more attractive than one offering a big pay hike.

**Role models, sponsors, and mentors:** Women with this type of support find it very helpful for their development. Having more female role models discourages the idea that women can't combine consulting with a life outside work.

# BUT IT ALL NEEDS TO BE UNDERPINNED BY...

## 9 Incentivise partners to change their attitudes

### Why this is important

Without a change in underlying attitudes of the whole firm at all levels, initiatives and extra support for the 'pinched middle' will continue to be viewed with scepticism by the majority of consultants; diversity will continue to be something the leadership talk about, but isn't practiced consistently at an operating unit or project level.

Just over a third (34%) of female managers and senior managers say that the person they directly work for ignores the policies their firm has in place to support people in their position. That's quite a high proportion, and, given the nature of consulting—in the course of a year, someone might work for several different partners or directors—that makes it highly likely someone in the 'pinched middle' will come up against someone with these attitudes. And that's all it takes—just one person who thinks their project is the most important thing in the world can block all the well-intentioned policies from someone who needs them.

Such people might shrug and say women should 'man up', or that if they're not tough enough to do what it takes (read: do everything the way they do it) that they should get out. They don't see any issues with the status quo—after all, it has worked for them and rewarded them handsomely—so conclude that there aren't any problems.

But consider this: 86% of women say that working for a partner who had genuine empathy with their situation would help; 85% of men agree, too (in fact, it was the number one thing men said would help them). In a way, it's the simplest thing partners could change—they could talk to their staff more, find out what their personal situations are like, and ask them how they're coping. "The thing I really missed, especially around the time I wanted to take a sabbatical, was interest in my well-being coming from a male partner," explains one female senior manager. "I would have appreciated a male partner asking me how I felt, trying

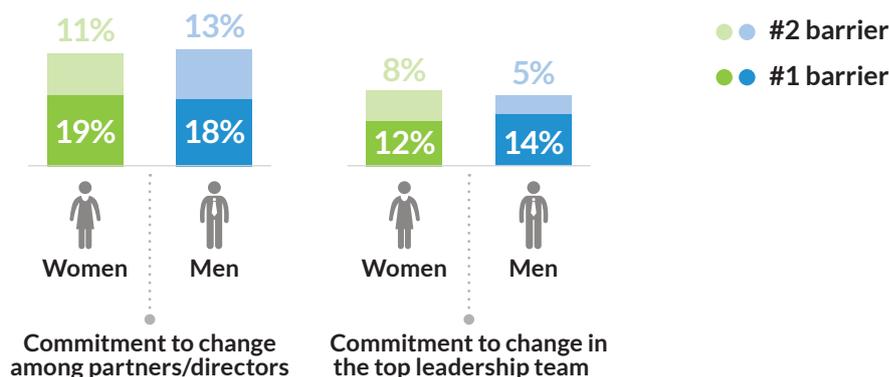
to find out what it's like being a female senior manager, and just taking an interest." People aren't machines, but if they're made to feel like one because they're not allowed a life outside of work and no one seems to care, it can be the thing that tips them into leaving.

Of course, not all partners are ice-cold slave-drivers. Plenty of partners know there is a problem and want to fix it. But even those with the best intentions can be totally out of touch. "I think the root causes of some of this behaviour is that it simply doesn't occur to senior leaders. They are so far removed from my reality or indeed the reality of others at the more junior levels," says one female senior manager. "For example, my boss is lovely, very experienced, and has been in the industry for a long time. He's independently wealthy, has no children, and really doesn't need to work. He is so removed from my reality of juggling three kids, two full-time working parents, a huge mortgage, school runs and picks up and parent evenings and sports days. His reality is that he bought a £100k car on a whim one weekend and can eat at Michelin-starred restaurants whenever he likes." Indeed, 59% of women agree that people who aren't in their position have no idea how difficult it is.

A macho, uncaring, 'Boys Club' atmosphere—whether intentional or not—isn't just off-putting for women: it's off-putting for anyone who's different. Our interviewees spoke of the difficulty of fitting in as ethnic minorities or homosexuals—one even described their state-education as something that held them back. "When I look up at the senior levels I see that it is a very macho environment and culture and I don't think this environment suits me," says a male senior manager in the UK. The narrowness of what 'fits the mould' is a real turn off for many people, and destroys their faith that consulting firms are meritocracies. If you're talented but feel your organisation doesn't value or care about you, why would you stick around?

Figure 10

Women and men see commitment to change among the partnership and director group as more of a barrier than the commitment of leadership team



### Barriers

- No incentive to change—the status quo suits a lot of people, and it's far easier to leave things as they are, and/or blame women for not fitting into the narrow definition of what it is to be a partner.
- Some don't believe there is a problem—they don't see the advantage they bestow upon people who are similar to them, or how a woman can't have the same career path as them because they generally don't have spouses who are willing to sacrifice careers in favour of looking after the home.
- Client entertainment is centred around drinking in the pub or playing golf—women, and men, often don't join in with these activities (usually because they have commitments at home), and this is where deals are often made. Naturally, this norm favours the men who are able to take advantage of it.

*The lack of support you receive is pretty spectacular. Even on a project basis, there is no informal check in about how things are going, how you are.*

Female senior manager

*There is also a conspicuous lack of ethnic minorities at the top. I believe that laziness does play a part – people don't want to look beyond the periphery of their inner circle and I think that this has implications on the quality of the work that you deliver to your clients.*

Male senior manager

### How it could work

#### Make diversity targets part of partner assessment:

As discussed above: without an incentive, partners will insist they already operate meritocratically. Partners should routinely have to explain why they do not have representative teams and what they are doing to change that.

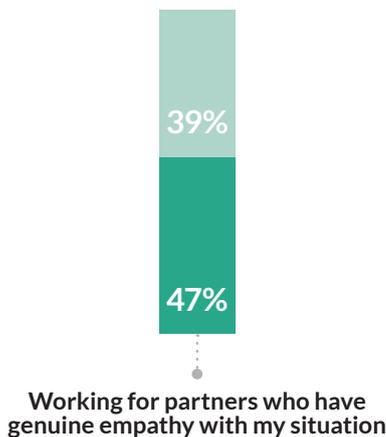
**Open up the promotions discussions:** Sunlight is often the best disinfectant—promotion decisions behind closed doors enable partners to continue to promote people of the same mould. Open forums allow biased decisions to be challenged.

**Make the management of teams part of individual assessment:** The main criteria partners and directors are measured against is revenue, and the measure of an engagement manager is to deliver the project on time, with little account taken for how they manage and treat teams.

Figure 11

What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



## 10 Empowerment—making sure people decide for themselves

### Why this is important

There's a danger in all the points we've made above that the 'pinched middle' is seen to be the firm's problem, so only the firm can provide the solution. Many of the people we interviewed didn't wait for the firm to do something, but took the initiative themselves. Looking around them, they also saw that many other people hadn't done that because they felt helpless. "During my first pregnancy, I was clear from the outset about what my plans were, when I was going to come back, how I was going to organise things—and I communicated all this very quickly," recalls one senior manager. "While I was on maternity leave I also did small pieces of work. I contrast that with some of my friends who delayed making decisions until they were on maternity

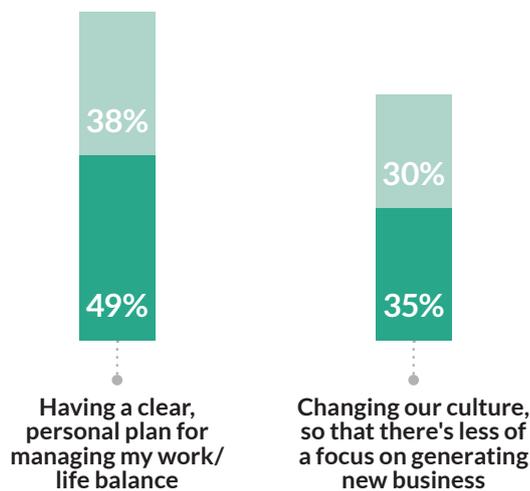
leave. They said they'd see what happened, and then the first year passed, the second year passed, the third year passed, and they lost touch."

So women don't just need choices, but the confidence to choose. Crucially, they have to feel they're in a position where they have control. At the moment, that's not how they feel: 40% think that having control over their career is something that's more true for men than women. That won't be solved by yet more policies—but it could be helped by making women believe they have the power to take advantage of what already exists.

Figure 12

### What women say would help

- Would help a bit
- Would help a lot



## Barriers

- This point is intimately connected to the previous one about cultural change.
- Consulting firms assume their people feel empowered, and that's clearly not always the case in all circumstances.

## How it could work

**Starting from a blank sheet of paper:** Flexible working and all the other options firms offer need to be a menu people choose from. Women need to be encouraged to take control, planning both their work and home lives. Just under half (49%) of female senior managers say having a clear, personal plan for managing their work/life balance would help them a lot.

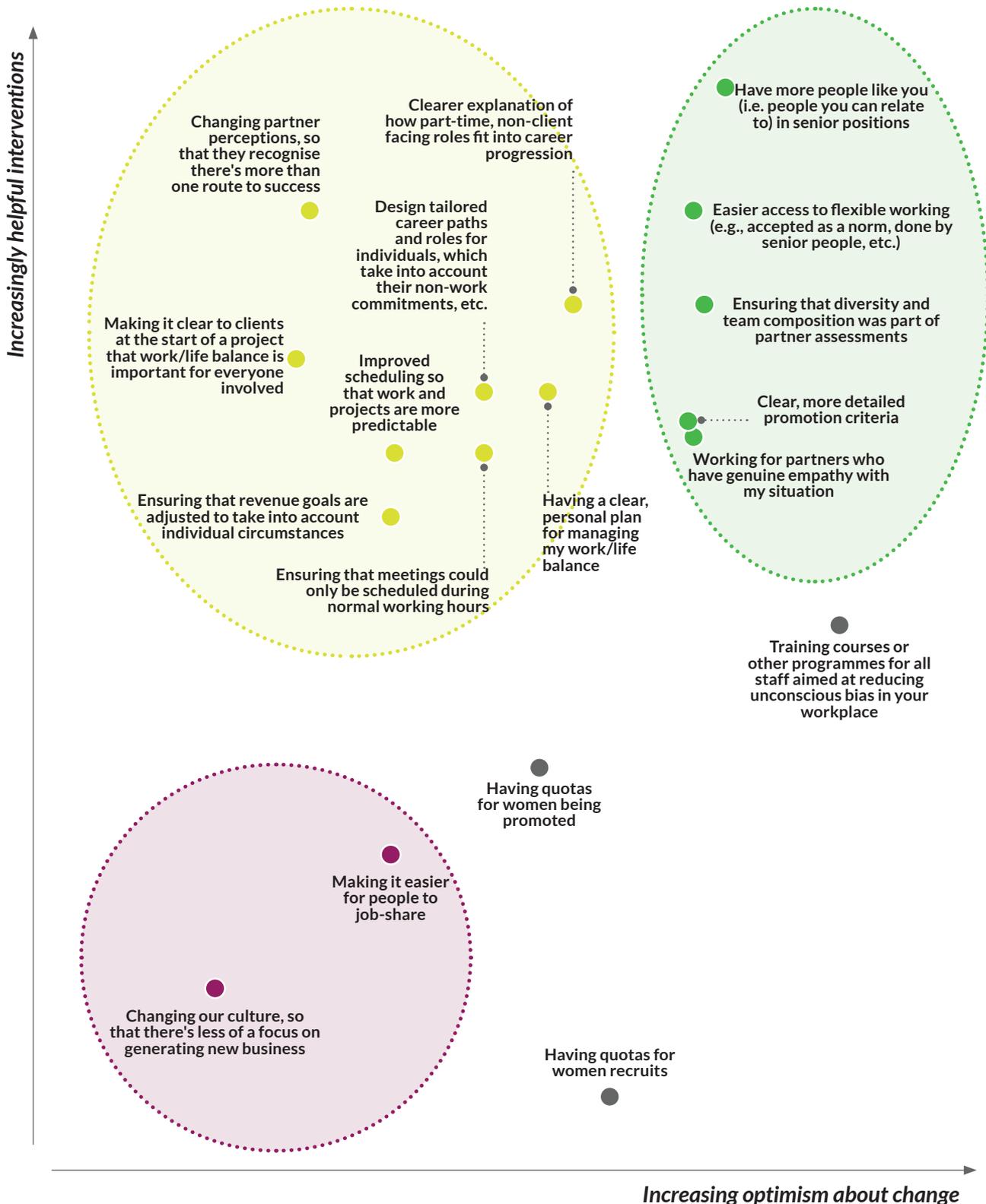
**Setting development goals which aren't just financial:** Many women in the 'pinched middle' aren't motivated by money, but could be engaged by a competency framework that encourages them to stretch themselves in other ways and that recognises the value of those other skills to the firm. Just over a third (35%) say that changing culture to focus less on generating new business would help a lot.

**Paying women more:** It's not something people liked to talk about but what some interviewees told us chimes with anecdotal information we've heard elsewhere. Women are often still paid less than men, and people who are valued less feel less valuable and empowered. They also literally have less economic power at a point in their lives when they almost certainly need more.

# CONCLUSION

Figure 13

How important women think different interventions are versus likelihood of change



● High importance, high optimism    
 ● High importance, low optimism    
 ● Low importance, low optimism

With so many suggestions made, it can be hard for consulting firms to know where to start. Clearly, all women are different, and each will need differing types and levels of support to make their career in consulting manageable alongside other life goals. In an ideal world, women would have all of the above options available to them, with the ability to customise the approach to suit individual needs. That's a long way off, but there are some things that women say are important to keeping them in consulting, but that they also think are within reach.

We've given each intervention a weighted importance score, based on the proportion of women that say it would "help a lot", "help a bit", or "not help". We've also given each a weighted likelihood of change score, based on the proportion of women that say they think each is "very likely to change", "may change", or "very unlikely to change".

At first, it looks like there's a fair bit of good news. Several of the key interventions that women say would keep them in consulting are also the ones they think are likely to change. Senior figures they can relate to is most important of all, and a large proportion are optimistic this will change. Similarly, they think it's likely that flexible working will become more normal, that partners will have more empathy in the future, and that the assessment criteria for both the 'pinched middle' and for partners will change.

But we can't help but notice that most of these interventions have long been talked about or are offered already by firms. We wonder if familiarity is what's buoying optimism here—the process of eroding hostile attitudes has simply had longer to weather away at them.

Similarly, although a divisive idea, we've heard much about the merits and problems with quotas for years now. There's medium confidence that this more heavy-handed approach might come into practice, but quotas for both female promotions and hires are considered less important to women in the 'pinched middle'.

It's the areas in the orange circle—important, but more distant—that firms really need to focus their efforts on. These are the interventions that are needed to make flagship policies at the top around flexible working and diversity work in practice—in other words, the things that will really make a difference. Troublingly, many are seen as much less likely to change. Even things that should be relatively simple, such as adjusting revenue goals for individual circumstances, are seen as pretty unlikely to change; bigger revenues will still remain better at the end of the year. Even more worryingly, while flexible working itself may become more likely, the aspects that make it a success rather than a career-limiting move—tailored career paths and roles, explanations of how part-time roles fit into career progressions—are seen as less likely to change. Essentially, female senior managers envisage being able to work flexibly, but for their contribution still not to be valued very highly, nor for it to contribute towards furthering their career. Similarly, women in the 'pinched middle' think partners will become more empathetic to their situation, but they still think partner perceptions of what constitutes success is less likely to change.

It hammers home the need to look at the foundations required to keep women in consulting, rather than just articulating policies at the top. For women to have truly manageable careers they need a combination of flexibility and predictability, but more than that, their choices need to be respected and valued. Until society changes (and we could be waiting a long time for that), the average women in the 'pinched middle' will be juggling an awful lot more outside work than the average man. The least consulting firms could do is to recognise that, take some of their own advice, and think more radically about their own business model.

## About our research

### Qualitative research

To understand more about the challenges facing women in the 'pinched middle', we interviewed 25 managers and senior managers based in Europe. Many had worked in several different countries and for more than one firm; all work for leading global consulting firms. We spoke to men and women, to gain a rounded view of the challenges. The interviews took place in July and August 2016.

Figure 14

Profile of interview respondents by gender

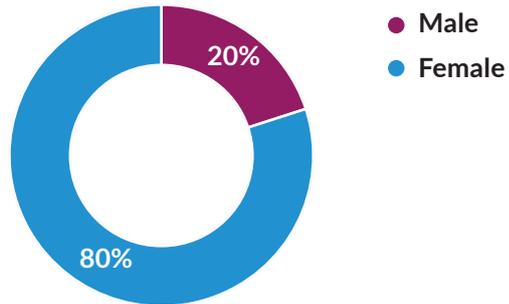
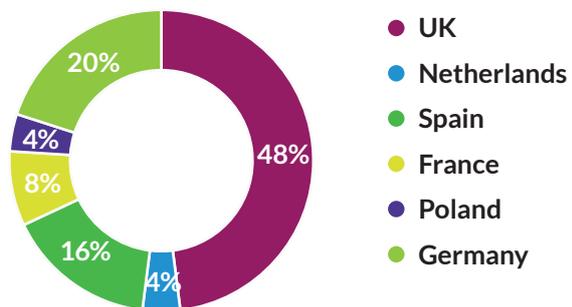


Figure 15

Profile of interview respondents by the country they are currently based in



## Quantitative research

To test some of the emerging ideas from our programme of interviews, we also conducted an online survey from October to November 2016. We have responses from 261 senior managers who work in a range of firm types and represent the full range of consulting services.

Figure 16

Breakdown of respondents by where they are based

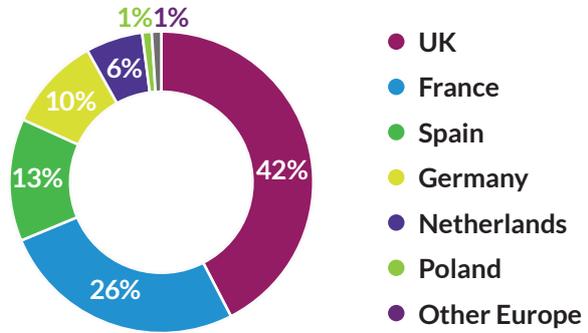


Figure 17

Breakdown of respondents by firm size

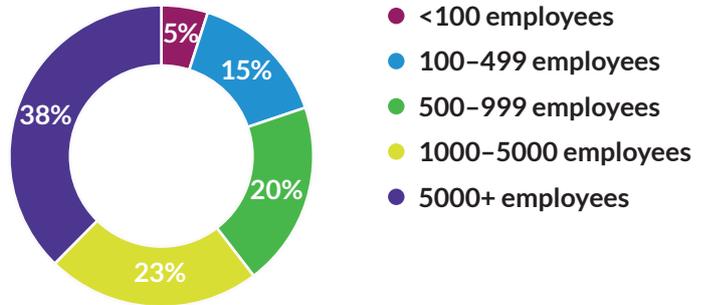


Figure 18

Breakdown of respondents by type of firm

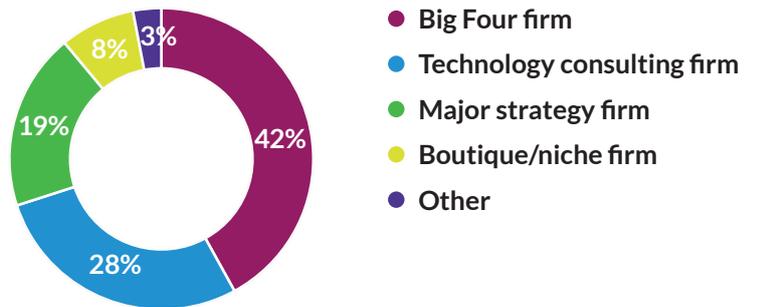
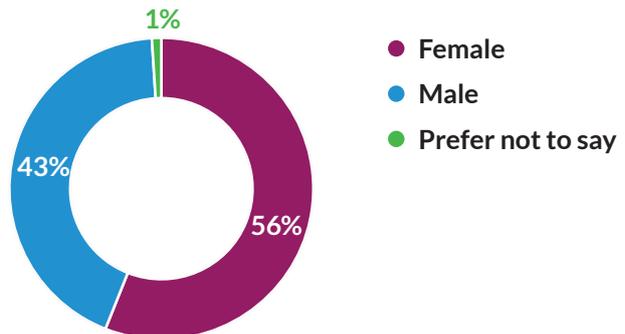


Figure 18

Breakdown of respondents by gender



## About Source

Source Global Research is a leading provider of information about the market for management consulting. Set up in 2007 with offices in London and Dubai, Source serves both consulting firms and their clients with expert analysis, research, and reporting. We draw not only on our extensive in-house experience but also on the breadth of our relationships with both suppliers and buyers. All of our work is underpinned by our core values of intelligence, integrity, efficiency, and transparency.

Source was founded by Fiona Czerniawska and Joy Burnford. Fiona is one of the world's leading experts on the consulting industry. She has written numerous books on the industry including *The Intelligent Client* and *The Economist* books *Business Consulting: A Guide to How it Works* and *How to Make it Work* and *Buying Professional Services*.

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## About Unida

Unida is a specialist diversity consulting firm that helps clients understand, sustain and promote diverse talent. We are workforce strategists with an active global community of diverse talent. Our purpose is to help make parity in the workplace a reality.

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