

# INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

How Women Can Thrive in  
Professional Service Firms

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## How Women Can Thrive in Professional Service Firms

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To all the wonderful women who have  
contributed to this book in many different ways.*

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*The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and starting on the first one.*

— Mark Twain

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# FOREWORD

*By Claudia Parzani, Linklaters Regional  
Managing Partner for Western Europe*

## THE KITE

I was born in a small town where every dream seemed too big to come true.

I thought it was because I was still a child, with short pig-tails, a pink smock and a white bow. I laid the blame on my age. “I will grow up and certainly my dreams will find their own space then” – I thought – “small dreams for babies and big dreams for adults”. But, after having waved goodbye to my school uniform with a smile, I understood that the blame was not on my age, but rather on the air, on the low sky that I breathed, on what I was told and taught at home and at school. My biggest dreams, those highest, most beautiful ones, those I would have liked to see flying like a magic kite high in the sky, would never find their air. Because I was a girl. Because the wind was not for me.

## FOLLOWING THE WIND

I am not sure that I have been truly ambitious in my life, not enough according to my male friends anyway. I have never fought, not once, just for the pleasure of getting a position, a title or a role. However, I am sure that I have always been determined, determined to follow the wind and my dreams to their horizons, no matter what. Of course, while following the wind, I sometimes felt that I might fall, but I also felt, deep down in my heart, that I would always pick myself up again, perhaps not always stronger, but always with a lesson learned.

And so, following the wind, I left that small town where everyone knew each other's names, holding my head high while looking for broader horizons, for cities with a different air, for higher skies where my kite would fly in the wind.

Me, all on my own, with only one piece of luggage: my dreams. Those of the young girl I had been, those of the girl I was, and those of the woman that I would become.

## TOUCHING THE SKY

Today I am a lawyer. I love my clients, the deals that I do, I warm in finding new solutions to old problems, in changing the expected order of things into dynamic, unexpected harmony. Every morning I go to work with a smile, and in the evening, on my way back home, I realize that I haven't lost it, that it's still there, just like the rainbow-colored kite that follows me around everywhere. I work for a firm that I love and that has proven to me

time and again that it believes in women and their dreams.

But this is not enough for me. I have found the wind, I have learnt to fly high and yet I want more. Because for many years now, I wake up in the morning with the same wish burning deep inside of me, the desire to leave a better world to my three daughters, a world where women who reach important positions do not make it into the news, a world where merit is the rule and gender doesn't matter, a world where each kite can reach the wind and touch the sky.

## YOU AND ME

That is why YOU are my biggest dream now! You are the generation of women that will change the sky above our firms, above our society, above each and every country in this world.

You are the ones born with the wind in your hair and today's young girls will look at you and believe that everything is really possible, that the world truly belongs to all of us, that passion, energy and commitment can truly transform every single dream we dream into reality. And that the air that we all breathe was really made for flying.

Our firms, our society and our world need You. We cannot throw away one-half of all the talent there is, we cannot renounce the ability to see the world with new and different eyes, we cannot afford to squander the chance to take better decisions every day.

That is why today I am here with Alison and with you.

You who have bought this book or have received it as a gift from someone who loves you and wants to support you – you must be ambitious.

You have to remember at every moment of your life you have all you need to get where you want to go within yourself.

You have to be aware that the limits before you are only reflections of your tired eyes, your dark thoughts and your fearful dreams. Take a breath and take courage, because you were born to fly.

Do not swap your personal life for your career; the wisdom needed for the realization of both such dreams is already inside you.

Do not wait for the right moment; there is no better moment than this one, the bravery to take a run-up and head into the wind is already inside you.

Do not ask for the impossible, the important thing is to start to fly, the wisdom needed to find your unique piece of sky is already inside you.

Raise your hand even when you doubt that you are the right person for the task. Most probably you are the right person for it; you just need to get over your fear of flying and admit to yourself that you want that position, that title or that project.

Raise your hand when the race is about to start, do not be afraid of losing. We all slip and fall down sometimes, but in order to win you have to run, to give it a try, to get closer to the starting blocks.

Raise your hand whenever someone is asking for help. Give to those who ask, never be greedy, never be envious.

Be truly a woman, proud of your style, authentic and sincere.

Be truly a woman but have fun as if you were still a young girl. Always try to be happy, cherish the small things and enjoy the many choices you have every day.

Be truly a woman, a brave woman, continue to follow your dreams with every single beat of your heart.

And if while following your path you encounter a hurdle and fall down, feeling that the strength to raise up is leaving you, please don't give up but look for a woman like Alison or me, a woman that will always believe that you are the most beautiful mirror that the sky can have. We will help you, because your pain is also our pain, your path is also our path, your dream is also our dream.

And now please hurry and read.

I am here waiting for you, here, under this huge sky, with the cord of my kite in my hands and with the sweet and warm wind in my hair.

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# PREFACE – WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK

*After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels.*

— Ann Richards

This book is written for you if you are an ambitious woman working in a professional services firm (accountants, lawyers or consultants) and are eager to achieve career success by maximising your potential in your firm. It is practical and comes from work with over a thousand women in professional service firms just like you. In this book I have brought together all the advice and practical exercises that these wonderful women have found useful – *Inside Knowledge*.

This book is called *Inside Knowledge* because it comes from what I, and the women I have worked with, have found out from inside professional service firms. The title also refers to gaining knowledge about yourself – knowledge of what you want and what you have the potential to achieve in the firm you work in.

Whilst there are commonalities, professional service firms are different from other commercial organisations. The partners who run the business also own it and consequently the political landscape is more complex.

Professional service firms sell the skills of their people, both partners and staff, and explicitly aim to be meritocracies. Many bright, high achieving women are drawn to such organisations because of the implicit promise that, as in academia, if you are clever and work hard you will fulfil your potential. But if that is your expectation you are apt to find the reality of what goes on in a professional service firm is more complicated than you supposed. It would also appear to be the case that in this challenging environment women are not faring as well as their male peers.

If you look at the graduate intake of most professional service firms, 50% of the intake is female. If you look at the partner population, typically around 20% of the equity partners are female. Partnership is not the only measure of success and it may not be yours; however, these percentages are indicative of what is happening to women in professional service firms and of how both you and your firm lose out when your potential is not realised.

Over the past 30 years I have worked in and for professional service firms designing and running women's leadership programmes as well as coaching women and men at all levels. My experience has been that the women I work with do excellent work but often fail to actively manage their careers; to do the things, beyond the excellent work, that get you noticed, sponsored and promoted. I am often asked if I have written a book so that the women I work with can pass on the tips, tools and advice that have been honed by many years of working with more than a thousand women in professional service firms from around the world. This is that book.

## WHERE THIS BOOK COMES FROM – MY PERSONAL STORY

On 28 August 1984, I started work at Coopers & Lybrand (a precursor of PwC) at a residential course for new graduates in Manchester. As we stood at Manchester Piccadilly station waiting to be picked up we all looked cautiously at each other wondering where this career would take us.

Every year similar cohorts are assembling all over the world just as we did. Much has happened in the meantime, not least in people's expectations. The young women starting now were not even born when I stood on that station, but still their chances of their careers taking them to partnership remain remote. This book passes on all the tips I have accumulated, not only in my 17 years of working for PwC, but also in my decade of designing and running women's leadership programmes internationally and coaching women and men in professional service firms around the globe.

I remember one of our partners at that opening residential programme in Manchester asking us to look to the person to our right and then to look at the person on our left and then to understand that only one of us would be with the firm after the first 3 years of training. I made it through the training and rose through the ranks to run my own teams and a large client base before being lured into coaching, training and development.

I have run my own business as a coach working for professional service firms for 16 years, almost as long as I worked for PwC. I have loved my work inside PwC and outside it. I have worked with remarkable people across

the world and seen my coachees flourish and grow, fulfilling their potential and making me very proud of their successes.

I wish I had known in 1984 what I know now, and that is my aim; to give you all the inside knowledge I have gained for myself and from others so that you have all the information, tools, techniques and skills that I have seen being useful as a woman in a professional service firm.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is divided into 18 chapters. Each chapter focuses on a subject that women like you have found helpful to examine and work on. The chapters do build on each other but are designed so that you can pick up each one separately if that is more useful for you.

Chapter 1 analyses the context within which you work, the current preponderance of male partners and the interlinking individual, organisational and societal contributors to this slued partner population

If you are a ‘pick and dip’ reader rather than a ‘start from the beginning and work your way through’ reader, can I suggest you read Chapters 2 and 3 before you start as they give you some of the key information on why you should focus on your career now. They also set out the tools that underlie both your engagement with your career and the subject matter of every subsequent chapter.

The following chapters come in complementary pairs (mostly).

Chapters 4 and 5 are companions as Chapter 4 gets you to think about what you offer before Chapter 5 helps you explore what you want to get from that offering.

Similarly, Chapters 6 and 7 should be read together as they are about understanding where you are now. Firstly, by assessing the feedback that you have from others and then by bringing that together with all your other knowledge to take stock of your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Chapters 8 and 9 look at what you want others to say about you before we meet the political players in our world and examine the usefulness of politics. As a spoiler my conclusion is that politics is value neutral, it is just a fact of life, it is how you play it and to what end that is the real choice.

Chapters 10 and 11 are about your interaction with the outside world. Stepping forward to engage and engaging efficiently and effectively by networking.

Chapters 12 and 13 look at the importance of your development network and particularly your sponsor and how you choose your role models. Chapter 13 is particularly poignant for me as one of the key factors in me leaving PwC was what I perceived to be the lack of role models. I wish I had had the knowledge then that I do now, this chapter would have been particularly useful.

Chapter 14 stands alone. It is about finding a sustainable equilibrium that works for you, making room in the 24/7 that you have available to you for your career and all the other things you want in your life.

Chapters 15 and 16 are vital (I would say that as I am a chartered accountant). They look at your place in the firm. Your firm is a business and needs to make money,

your skills are what the firm sells. It is important that you are aware of the business benefits of what you contribute and how you can increase those benefits by building your business.

Chapters 17 and 18 look at how you engage with the firm during appraisal and promotion processes so that you are prepared and can show others what you are really capable of.

In each case the chapters have exercises that look simple but which women I have worked with have found both difficult and extremely helpful. Those women would echo my plea for you to write on this book, do the exercises as they will make the learning real and specific to you.

At the end of every chapter there is a section where I challenge you to do something different, to take action. I have also included the tips that partners have given women I have worked with over the years in women's leadership programmes. I hope these will inform and inspire you to do something different or to think about things differently.

The Appendix sets out questions from promotion panels in professional service firms. I have collected these over the years from men and women I have worked with.

## WHY FOCUS ON THE WOMEN?

The women I have worked with are exceptionally bright, creative, self-aware and fun. So are the men. However, the statistics suggest there are things that hold women back when compared with their male peers and this book

focuses on what we women can do about that. What it does not do is seek to minimise the firms' part in the failure of women to get to the top. Nor do I wish to ignore the wonderful things that women bring to their work. Perhaps that is my next job, to write a companion volume for partners in professional service firms setting out their part in this imbalance together with a book for all setting out the fabulous attributes women contribute to their firms. In the meantime, it is important for you to gain awareness of the value you bring to your firm, what might be holding you back and what you can do about it.

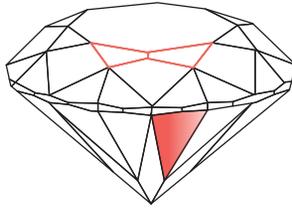
## GENERALISATIONS AND GEOGRAPHY

In writing this book I have had to resort to generalisations to make the language flow, but of course I do realise that not all women think and behave in the same way and the same is true for men. Indeed there are many more similarities than there are differences. The research suggests that there are however ways in which women tend to behave and I have used those generalisations as a learning tool. They may or may not apply to you, but I hope discussing them helps you think about how you do things.

I am also aware of the many different cultural overlays that inform who we are and how we work. The research in this field is largely based on studies carried out in the West and in particular from the United States and the United Kingdom. This is a shame and I know people are working hard gathering and analysing data from other cultures. In this book I have only used the data that

women I have worked with have found useful whatever their culture. It is also worth noting that if you work for an international firm the culture of the firm will also influence the culture of the office.

I understand that in a well-cut diamond all the faces look into the core of the diamond. In the same way there are many ways to look into and understand you and the ways that you operate at work. Your actions can be usefully examined with reference to your culture, your age, your psychological make-up and your gender. This book concentrates on the latter but other ways of looking at you are no less valid.



## FROM ME TO YOU

The book is designed with you in mind; I do hope you find it helpful. I want you to succeed and fulfil your potential in whatever way is important to you.

# CHAPTER 1

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD

If we use the analogy of the playing field as the arena we enter as we start our careers in professional service firms, is there a tilt in that field which means that the advantages naturally flow more easily towards the male players?

After one of the women's leadership programmes I ran for a professional service firm, two of the participants ran sessions for their teams on what they had learned from the programme. A number of the other women in the team thanked them profusely saying that the tools and tips were insightful, helpful and new — they had not thought about the firm and their place in it in that way before. A few men also gave their feedback to the presenters; they felt that the session was just setting out what they saw as obvious political reality. Why was there this difference in how the men and women viewed the context in which they work? What inside knowledge had the men already gained?

I do not believe that the answer to creating a level playing field is requiring women to do things differently, to simply ‘lean in’, work harder or behave more like a man. All the work I do also includes working with the professional service firm to ensure that the espoused meritocracy is enacted. Simply ‘fixing the women’ is neither attractive nor does it work, in that it overlooks at least half of the contributing factors. However, there are things that we, as women within professional service firms, can do authentically to ensure that what we do is given the weight it deserves — and that is what this book is designed to help you do.

## WHY SO FEW FEMALE PARTNERS?

In 2013 and 2015 McKinsey did some work for the 30% Club in the United Kingdom, interviewing, reviewing data and surveying many of the United Kingdom’s leading professional service firms (McKinsey & 30% Club Reports, 2012, 2015). Their conclusion was that on their first day at work a man starting in a law firm in 2015 was three times as likely to become a partner as the woman standing next to him. This meant that law firms had caught up with the accountancy and consulting firms whose men were reported as being three times more likely to make partner than their female peers in the earlier report.

Brilliance is not the only requirement for partnership. You need to have a strong business case and excellent personal skills; however, there are things that you can do

to put yourself in the best position to fulfil your potential and achieve the career success you want.

Before we concentrate on what women can take control of in the rest of this book, let us challenge some of the 'obvious' but questionable reasons given for why women do not make it to the top in equal numbers in firms that pride themselves on being meritocracies.

It could be that women are leaving when they have babies and do not return to work because they want to spend all their time with their growing children or desire to take on less challenging roles when they do return and any ambition to progress is left behind in the delivery room. This is certainly an anecdotally attractive explanation. However, in a study sponsored by EY, Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers, the Centre for Work-Life Policy interviewed a large number of highly educated women in the United States who had left paid employment and found that 93% wanted to return after a break to have children or look after elders (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). This challenges the assumption that those who have commitments outside work which take them away for relatively short periods of their careers will not want to return or will want to take a less ambitious 'mommy track' for the rest of their careers. It will be true for some but not for all. It is also worth pointing out that not all women either want to or can have children.

It could be that professional service firms' traditional business model inadvertently discriminates against women. This model requires potential partners to be working towards partnership in their thirties, precisely the time when women who are mothers are experiencing the most demanding years of motherhood. I do believe

that this is a contributing factor, but it is not the whole story.

It could be that women are simply not as bright; however, almost nobody would defend that position today, although it was a widely held belief as recently as a century ago.

It could be that women do not actively manage their careers in the way that many men do and firms implicitly expect. My experience suggests that this is certainly a contributing factor to the lack of women at the top of professional service firms. It is this that you can influence. This book is designed to show you the things that can help you ensure that you actively manage your career so that it gives you what you want and deserve.

## THE INDIVIDUAL VERSUS THE ORGANISATION VERSUS SOCIETY

I love Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), but the implicit instruction in the title tells only part of the story. Sandberg and I agree, there are things that we can do as women to 'Lean In' and the book you are reading is designed as a practical guide to help you do this in professional service firms. However, this is not enough — the organisations you work for also need to change.

Most managing partners see the business case that underlies the need for change. They recognise that their existing and potential clients want their advisors to reflect their values and diversity and regard firms that field homogenous teams as old fashioned. They also see that the female talent inside and outside the firm wants to

know what is being done to ensure the career playing field is level. After all, who would choose to pursue their career in a place where they believe they will be disadvantaged because they are a woman?

Against this push for equality is the opposing weight of individual unconscious bias and a career structure built for men in the last century (if not the century before). To give but one example, there is unconscious bias in the widely held desire for potential partners to have ‘gravitas,’ a word derived from the Latin for weight or heaviness and often associated with large physical forms and deep voices. I would suggest gravitas is a description predicated on traditionally male attributes. Unconscious bias in both the systemic processes and the plethora of individual decisions needs to be addressed to create a level playing field.

However, it is not just our firms that are designed on a male model; our societies have been built to support men in the workplace and women still do the majority of the home and child care in almost all societies.

Whilst I have strong views about the systems at play in organisations and the wider society that will have to change in order for true meritocracy to flourish, this book is about you and what is within your own power. I accept that this is only part of the story, but it is the part you can most easily affect.

Much of what I have written in this book is good advice for all who work in professional service firms; it is not that women are particularly remedial in any of these aspects, but the bare facts suggest that women are not getting the career advancement that their skills would suggest we should expect. I would propose that part of

this is that women are not as well sponsored as their male colleagues. There is a very human tendency to advise and support people that remind us of our younger selves. Whilst less than a fifth of partners are female, women are not getting the detailed sponsorship that their male peers are benefiting from.

This book is what a good sponsor should tell you early on in your career and keep reminding you of as you progress.

The only thing that is within your power to change is the way you think and behave, but that is a powerful tool in changing the reactions and relationships you have in the firm around you. I am asking you to be aware of the consequences of your actions and to consider flexing them consciously to help yourself and others.

**Tips from the top — Advice from partners to women in their firm**

‘In the past women tried to be like men, then they tried to be superwomen, now they are being normal women, and expecting the firm to help them. That makes this a good time to be a woman in a professional service firm’.

## RESOURCES

McKinsey & 30% Club Reports (2012). *Shifting the needle*.

McKinsey & 30% Club Reports (2015). *The needle starts to shift.*

Hewlett, S. A., & Luce, C. B. (2005). Off-ramps and on-ramps: Keeping talented women on the road to success. *Harvard Business Review*, 83(3), 43–46, 48, 50–54.

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