

Women in law firms



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Law firms have many of the right policies and programs in place to improve gender diversity, but more can be done to translate stated commitments into measurable outcomes.

As part of our broader Women in the Workplace 2017 research, we conducted a deep dive on women in law firms in North America. Out of the 222 participants in the overall research, 23 are law firms that employ more than 16,000 attorneys. These firms provided us with their talent-pipeline and programs and policies data. Additionally, more than 2,500 of their attorneys answered our experience survey. These data have allowed us to highlight unique challenges that law firms face to advance women relative to the rest of the broader corporate America (referred to as the “overall sample” throughout the report).

The survey finds that law firms are taking important steps to increase gender equality. They are providing senior-leadership support to advance attorneys’ careers and offering programs that provide flexibility and address major work–life balance issues.

But these efforts have had limited success. Only 19 percent of equity partners are women, and women are 29 percent less likely to reach the first level of partnership than are men. We found that law firms face higher attrition among women than men at the equity partner level and that the gender gap is much wider in law firms than in other industries. Women of color face an even steeper climb, with their representation dropping significantly at all levels in the pipeline. Female attorneys perceive less commitment to gender equality and a more uneven playing field at law firms than do their male colleagues.

Law firms clearly have more work to do, not just in implementing policies and programs but also in fundamentally changing nonpartner attorneys’

perceptions of their efforts. For example, female attorneys (and many of their male colleagues) fear that participating in flexible-work programs will damage their careers. The question now is how those firms that have invested in—and recognize—the benefits of gender equality translate their stated commitments into measurable outcomes.

Gender diversity in law firms’ talent pipeline

Women are relatively well represented in the professional pipeline until the equity partner level, where women’s representation drops sharply.

We measured four dimensions of gender diversity and found that law firms have room to improve along each one:

- **Representation.** Are women represented fairly at each level?
- **Promotion.** Do women advance as rapidly as men?
- **Attrition.** Do women choose not to advance at a certain point?
- **External hiring.** Are women hired at the same rate as men?

Representation of women decreases rapidly at post-associate levels. Women are relatively well represented at all three associate levels (junior, midlevel, and senior), where they account for about 46 percent of attorneys. However, this picture changes sharply as attorneys advance to more senior levels. Only 19 percent of equity partners are women, and women occupy only 25 percent of

executive-leadership positions (management committee and practice leadership). This decline at the more senior levels mirrors the overall sample, where women represent 47 percent of the entry-level workforce but only 29 percent at the VP level, 21 percent at the SVP level, and 20 percent of the C-suite.

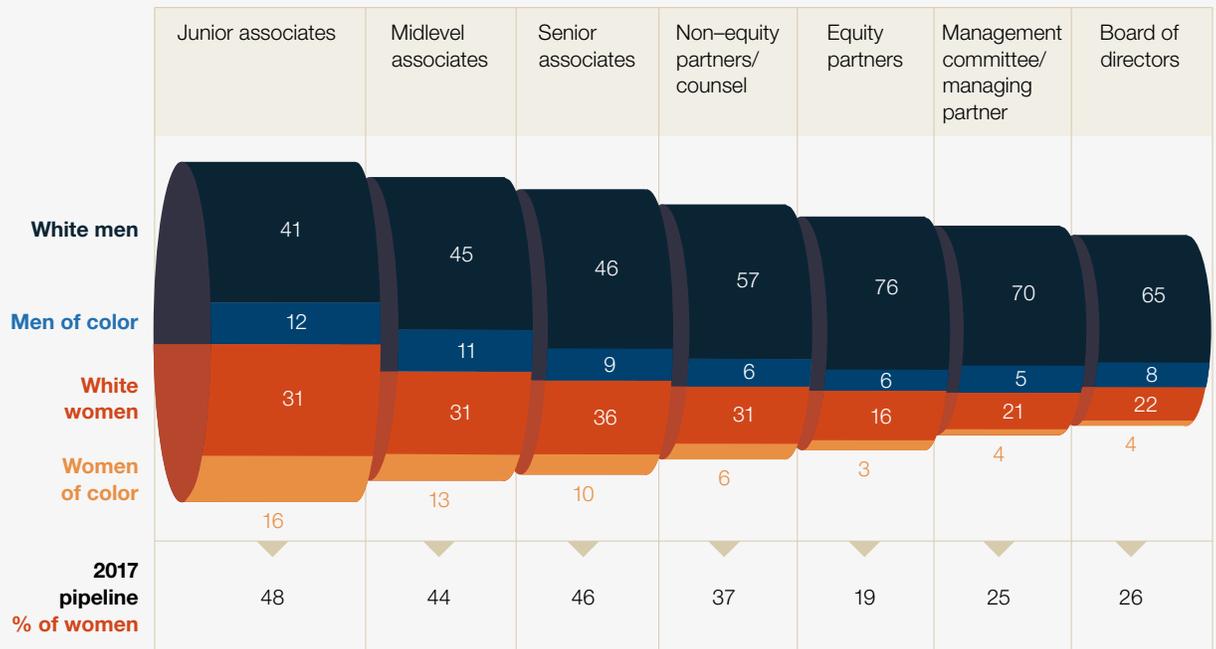
Women of color¹ are especially underrepresented in law firms. While they account for 16 percent of attorneys at the entry level, they experience the steepest decline in representation as attorneys' careers advance. Women of color account for only

10 percent of senior associates, 3 percent of equity partners, and 4 percent of managing partners (Exhibit 1). This is consistent with the overall sample, where women of color occupy 17 percent of entry-level positions but only 6 percent at the VP level, 4 percent at the SVP level, and 3 percent of the C-suite.

Fewer women than men advance at the pre-partner level, but female attorneys advance more often than women in other industries. Unlike the overall sample, where first-time promotions are the least equitable (with women being 18 percent

Exhibit 1 Representation of women decreases rapidly at post-associate levels.

Representation in law firms' pipeline by gender and race, % of attorneys by level in 2017¹



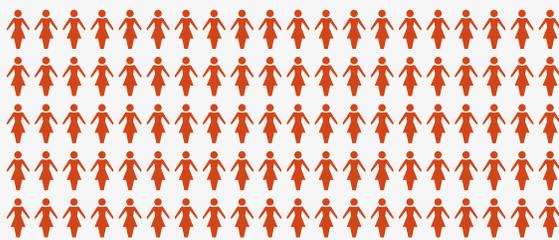
Women of color are the most underrepresented group in the pipeline at post-associate levels—behind white men, white women, and men of color.

¹Total % of women and men per level in race and gender pipeline may not sum to overall pipeline totals, as the race pipeline only includes firms that were able to supply race data. Due to rounding, representation by race may sum to 101 within some levels

Exhibit 2 Fewer women than men advance to the first required level of partnership.

For every 100 women promoted to partner, 141 men are promoted

Women Men



less likely to be promoted than men), in law firms first-time promotions are much closer to equity (11 percent gap). It is at more senior levels that the disparity grows. The more significant gap exists at the promotion to the first level of partnership,² where female attorneys are 29 percent less likely than men to gain promotion (Exhibit 2).

Attrition among women is lower than that among men, until the equity partner level. Women leave law firms less frequently than men until the equity partner level, where this one-year data sample suggests they are 43 percent more likely than men to leave. Compared with the overall sample, where differences in attrition are not significant, this gap is much higher. Given the small sample of female equity partners, more research is required to validate the trend over a longer time period and to establish the drivers for the increase.

External hires for more senior positions are less likely to be women than men. External hiring rates for women and men at the junior- and senior-associate levels are almost equal. But men are more

than twice as likely to be hired for a non-equity partner/counsel-level position. At the equity partner level, external hires are more than three times more likely to be men than women (though it's worth noting that the pool of available women is much smaller). This trend does little to correct the underrepresentation of women at the top of the career ladder.

Women of color are especially underrepresented at senior levels (again, it is worth noting that there are fewer women of color available to fill these positions). In 2016, law firms in our sample hired externally to fill 132 equity partner positions. Only four of those hires were women of color. To fully diagnose this issue, more research is needed to understand gender diversity in specific practice areas where lateral hiring is more common.

Differences in men and women's expectations and experiences

Women and men in law firms have very different expectations for promotion and length of service. Work–life balance, a law firm's

demonstrated commitment to diversity and equity, and senior-leader support exert a powerful influence on attorneys' ambitions and desire to stay.

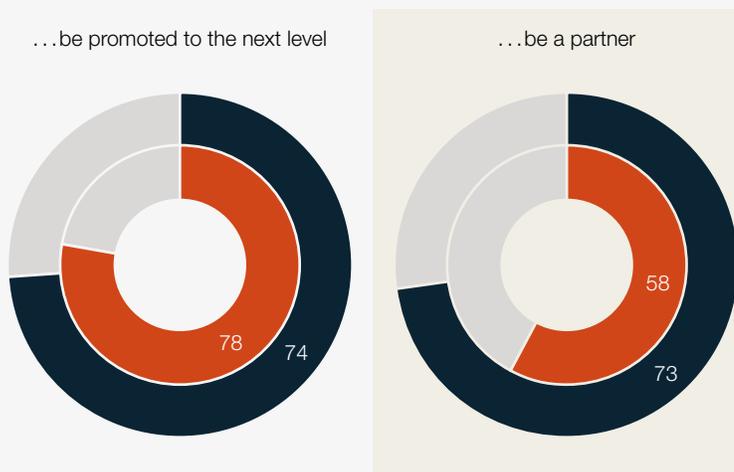
Women want promotion to the next level as much as or even more than men but are less excited about making partner. Across the associate levels, women express a strong desire for promotion to the next level. But when asked specifically if they want to make partner, the desire drops sharply compared with men (Exhibit 3). This drop mirrors the pattern observed across the overall sample, but more women in law firms (58 percent) want to reach the partner/SVP level than do women across the overall sample (40 percent).

Women expect to spend less time at their law firms than their male counterparts do. Only 54 percent of women plan to stay with their law firm for at least five years, compared with 63 percent of men who do (versus 56 percent of women and 58 percent of men across the overall sample). Less than half of women (43 percent) and of men (45 percent) who expect to stay with their firm for two years or less plan to work at another firm, suggesting issues other than gender diversity, such as job fatigue or a realistic view of the likelihood of making partner.

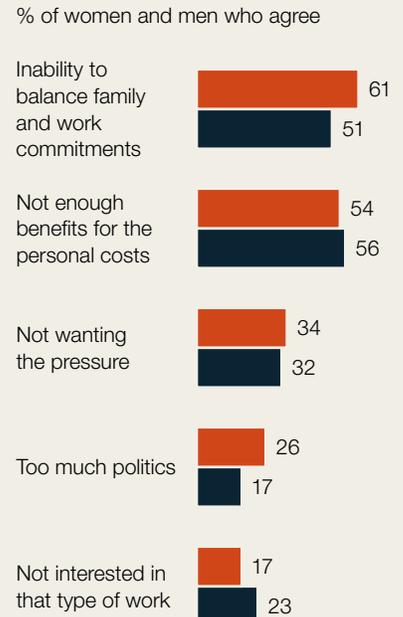
Female attorneys feel forced to make significant trade-offs between career success and their personal lives. Only 44 percent of women believe

Exhibit 3 Women are less excited than men to make partner.

% of women and men who want to...



Top reasons why respondents do not want to be a partner



that they can have both, compared with 60 percent of men who do (versus 61 percent of women and 67 percent of men across the overall sample) (Exhibit 4). Almost half of female attorneys call prioritizing work–life balance one of the greatest challenges to their professional success, on par with undermining peers. The difficulty of balancing work and family is the number-one reason that women do not want to make partner (61 percent), followed by inadequate benefits for the personal costs (54 percent) as the number-two cited reason. Men cite the same top two reasons, but in reverse order, ranking the personal

costs first (56 percent) and the difficulty of balance second (51 percent).

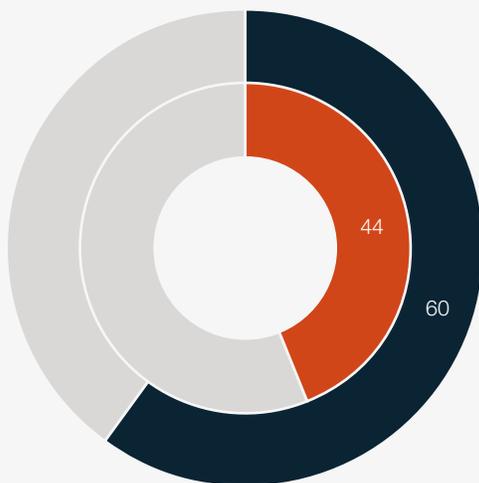
Women are not convinced by law firms' statements of commitment to gender diversity.

While all law firms call gender diversity a very important or a top priority, only 36 percent of women believe that gender diversity is a priority for their firm, compared with 62 percent of men who do (versus 45 percent of women and 59 percent of men across the overall sample). And less than half of women say that their firm is doing what it takes to improve gender diversity, compared

Exhibit 4 Women believe there are significant trade-offs between career success and their personal lives.

Attorneys can have both a successful career and a full personal life

% of women and men who agree



Behaviors attorneys believe would jeopardize success in their firm

% of women and men who agree

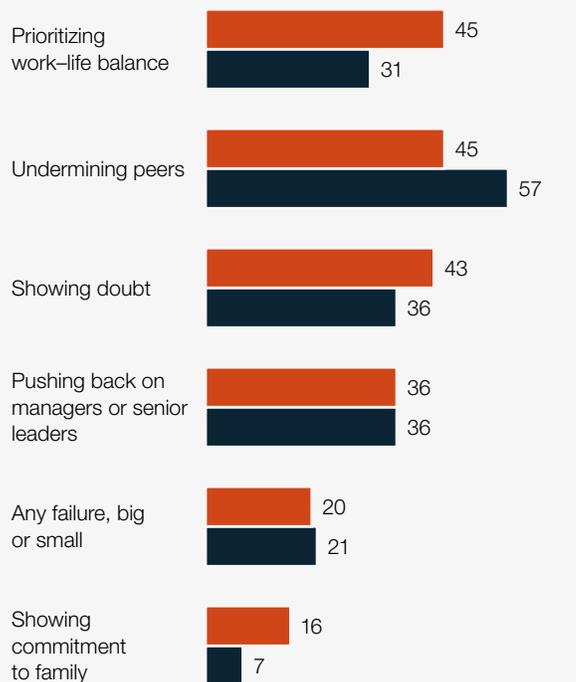
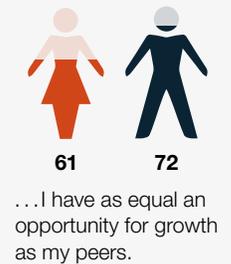


Exhibit 5 Women see the playing field as uneven.

Women are less likely to think they have an opportunity to advance...

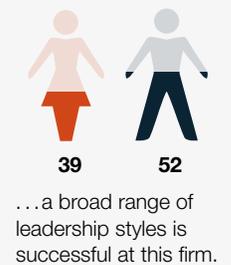
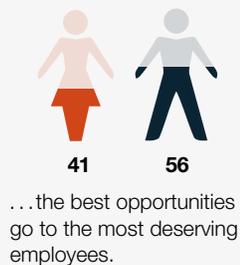
■ Women ■ Men

% of women and men who think...



...and that their firms treat their people fairly

% of women and men who think...



with more than two-thirds of men who do. These numbers mirror the overall sample findings.

Lack of effective communication probably plays a role in attorneys' perceptions. Most law firms (96 percent) say that they have articulated the business case for gender diversity—but employees are not convinced. Only 22 percent of women and 44 percent of men agree that partners communicate the importance of gender diversity (versus 30 percent of women and 42 percent of men across the overall sample). These perceptions differ markedly from the views of practice leaders—60 percent of whom believe the communication

is effective (versus 48 percent at the VP level and above across the overall sample).

Women see the playing field as uneven. More than 60 percent of women surveyed think that their gender will limit their advancement opportunities; only 14 percent of men have such a concern (Exhibit 5). Women are considerably less likely than men to think that promotions and assignments at their firm are based on fair and objective criteria. The strength and depth of client relationships is perceived by female attorneys as the number-two factor in the partner-election decision (second only to profitability), and they believe

they have fewer opportunities than male attorneys to network with clients (57 percent compared with 67 percent).

Senior leaders at law firms provide more informal support to women than in other industries. Women in law firms are more likely than men to say that their supervising attorney or partner has helped their career. More than half of women (58 percent) and almost half of men (48 percent) credit their supervising attorney or partner with advising them on advancing their careers, compared

with 40 percent of women and 44 percent of men across the overall sample.

At the same time, more men than women believe they receive adequate coaching in their firms.

When asked about the most important success factors, women ranked senior-leader sponsorship (including coaching and growth and development opportunities) second only to delivery of exceptional results. Law firms lag behind the overall sample on coaching, and female attorneys have lower coaching expectations than male attorneys

Exhibit 6 Women have lower coaching expectations than men.

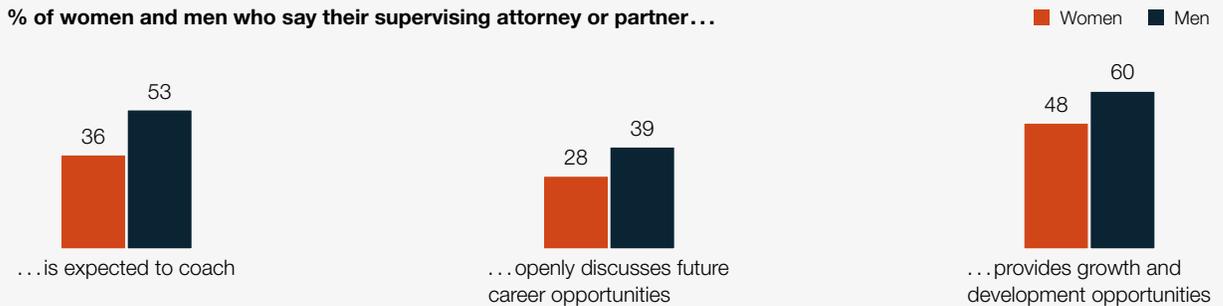


Exhibit 7 Many law firms have programs and policies to support work-life balance.

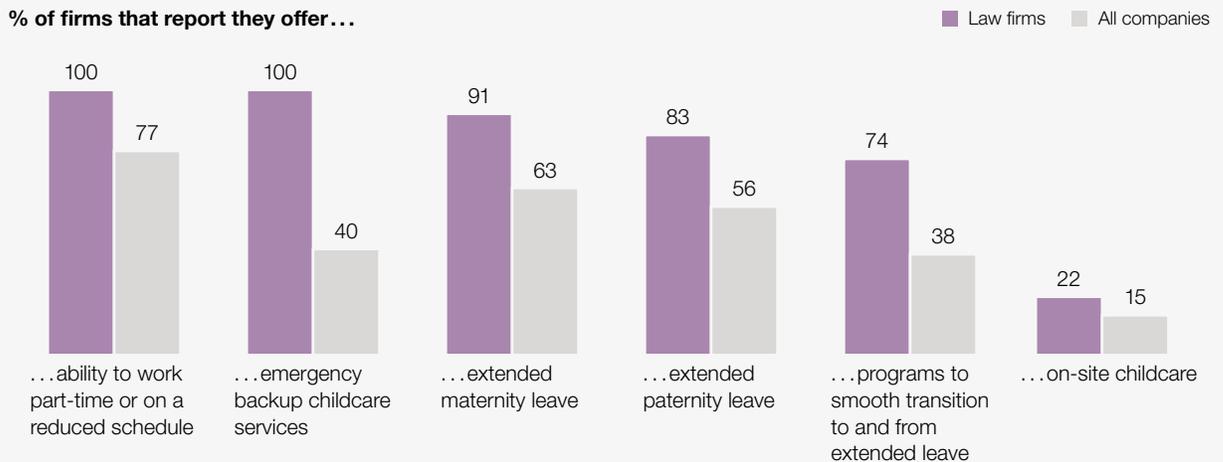


Exhibit 8 Attorneys worry about the consequences of participating in flexible-work programs.

% of women and men who think...



do. Only 36 percent of women expect coaching, compared with 53 percent of men who do (versus 57 percent of women and 62 percent of men across the overall sample) (Exhibit 6). While law firms outpace the overall sample in providing growth and development opportunities, female attorneys are still 20 percent less likely than their male counterparts to credit their supervising attorney or partner with providing such opportunities.

Diversity policies and programs

Law firms are taking important steps to improve the experience of women but have more to do.

Law firms lead the way in implementing programs and policies to reduce bias in recruiting and promotions. Almost 90 percent have hiring strategies that target underrepresented minorities (versus 66 percent across the overall sample), and 83 percent have level-specific programs to improve promotion rates for women (versus 56 percent across the overall sample).

Many law firms have programs that provide flexibility and address major work-life balance issues. All the law firms surveyed offer the option of working part-time or on a reduced schedule (versus 77 percent across the

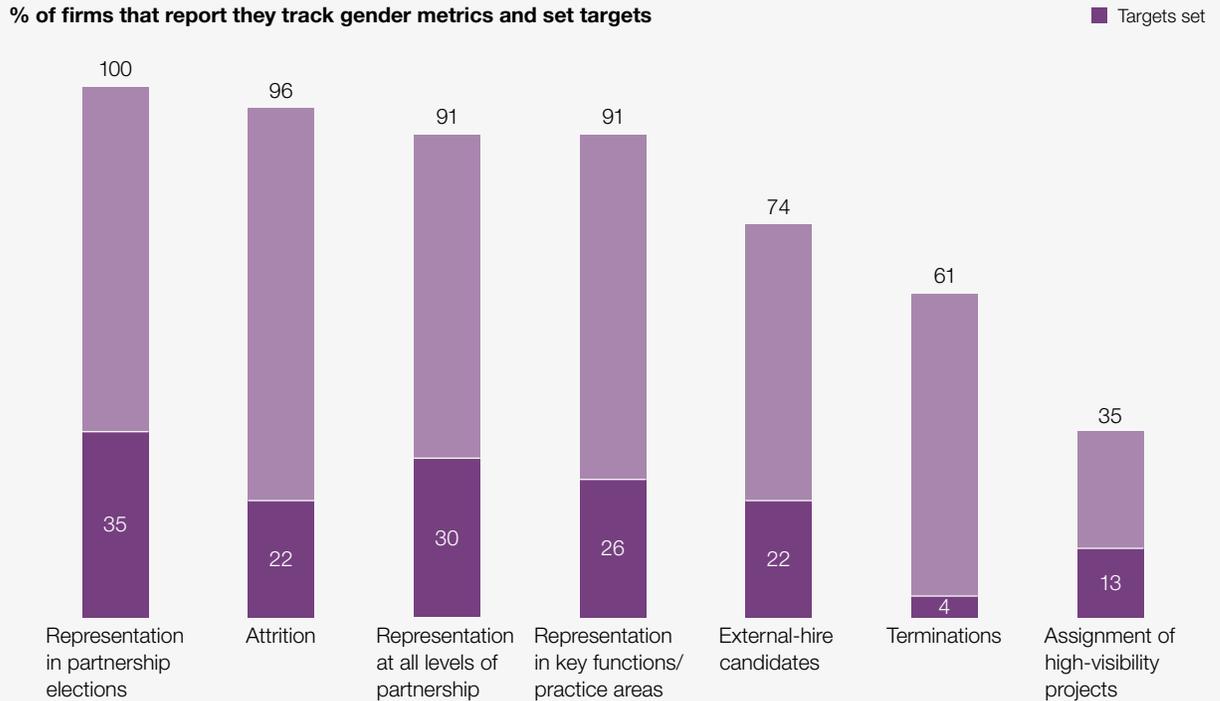
overall sample) (Exhibit 7). Most law firms allow telecommuting (versus 75 percent across the overall sample).

Most law firms (91 percent) offer maternity leave that exceeds government requirements, and most (83 percent) offer paternity leave that also exceeds those requirements (versus 63 percent and 56 percent across the overall sample). All of the law firms surveyed provide emergency backup childcare services (versus 40 percent across the overall sample). But only 22 percent of law firms have on-site childcare, and none subsidize regular childcare (versus 15 percent and 18 percent of organizations across the overall sample).

Attorneys worry about the consequences of participating in these programs. Seventy-five percent of women and 74 percent of men in law firms believe that participating in a part-time or reduced-schedule program will have negative impact on their career (versus 68 percent and 71 percent across the overall sample) (Exhibit 8). Attorneys are also considerably more likely than employees across the overall sample to think that taking maternity or paternity leave will hurt their career. Female attorneys cite their inability to generate billable hours during a time of leave as

Exhibit 9

Most law firms track gender diversity metrics, but few set targets.



the number-one source of damage, followed by perception by others at the firm.

Law firms lack the gender-equality targets and senior-leadership accountability that would enable the tracking needed to ensure real progress.

None of the law firms surveyed have mandated diversity slates for open positions (versus 30 percent across the overall sample). All the law firms track gender diversity in partnership elections, but only 35 percent set targets (versus 18 percent across the overall sample) (Exhibit 9).

Only 43 percent say that they hold senior leaders accountable for performance against gender-diversity metrics, and even fewer use financial incentives. Attorneys perceive little emphasis on results, significantly less than across the overall

sample. Only 5 percent of women and 9 percent of men see leaders regularly held accountable for progress on equality, compared with 16 percent of women and 22 percent of men across the overall sample. Most law firms (87 percent) offer unconscious-bias training, but only 30 percent require program participation.

Priorities to improve gender diversity

Law firms should ask themselves some key questions as they confront a need to get more out of their investments in diversity.

Programs and policies may demonstrate a commitment to equality, but they won't deliver the required outcomes on their own. Getting male and female attorneys at all levels of the firm to own this issue together appears to be

the only path to making a change toward gender equality in law firms. Our research findings suggest that addressing the following questions could help law firms focus their efforts on the biggest challenges:

How do we make flexible-work programs a real option? While most law firms offer flexible-work programs, many attorneys still fear that participating in these programs will damage their careers. More needs to be done to make these a viable option. Law firms must make these programs culturally acceptable and even encourage attorneys to take advantage of them.

Where should we invest to strengthen coaching and formal sponsorship? Law firms are relatively in line with other industries here (that is, approximately 30 percent have formal sponsorship programs). The challenge is how to catalyze senior-level connections that can accelerate women's careers with long-term benefits to retention and recruitment.

How do we drive accountability for gender diversity? Until firms find ways to make diversity a firmwide issue, not a “women's issue”—and an issue that galvanizes the partnership and demands accountability for progress—they will likely struggle to translate programs and policies into results.



Law firms clearly take gender diversity seriously and have made efforts to increase their diversity. But challenges remain, and the law firms committed to superior performance and employee satisfaction will act to address them. We hope that the information and ideas presented here provide useful guidance on moving forward. ■

¹ Women of color includes Black, Latina, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or mixed-race women.

² Promotion rates are calculated as the number of attorneys promoted to the first required level of partnership—whether non-equity partner or equity partner—at their firm divided by the number of attorneys eligible for that promotion, excluding any permanent positions not eligible for promotion into partnership.

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