

Senior Talent Leaders in Consulting - A Roundtable Discussion

October, 2025

On 16th September, The Barton Partnership hosted a roundtable with senior talent acquisition leaders from across the consulting sector to discuss the evolving dynamics of recruitment and retention. The conversation focused on diversity and inclusion, gender representation, the impact of AI on hiring models, and the use of new assessment tools. Here is a summary of the key points discussed during the session:

#1 Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Recruitment

Shifting Priorities:

- Two years on from DEI being a headline issue, participants observed that it is now embedded in everyday recruitment practices rather than treated as a standalone initiative.
- Graduates and more junior hires continue to expect visible diversity in the workplace, often raising it as a decisive factor in joining a firm.

Targets and Processes:

- While some firms experimented with quotas, most have moved towards strengthening pipelines and processes, with outcomes treated as the byproduct of consistent, inclusive practices.
- Participants agreed that strengthening pipelines and improving the quality of recruitment processes is more sustainable than pursuing rigid numerical targets.

Implementation Challenges:

- Stakeholders still expect quick results, creating tension between the speed of hiring and the time needed to deliver diverse shortlists.
- Running diversity-only searches is less common than in previous years, with concerns raised around tokenism and intent, whether firms are acting to satisfy optics or to build genuine inclusion.

#2 Gender Representation & Career Progression

Persistent Challenges at Senior Levels:

- Female representation at Partner level remains a challenge for consultancies, with participants acknowledging progress had been made, albeit at a slow pace.
- The absence of senior female role models continues to limit the pipeline for future leaders, with debate over whether true 50/50 parity is realistic given the structural demands of consulting.

Organisational Practices:

- Equal maternity and paternity leave policies have been introduced by some firms, offering up to six months' fully paid leave. Uptake has been strong, suggesting cultural change, though the long-term effect on retention and progression is not yet clear.
- Participants noted that even supportive policies, such as extended leave, can sometimes create challenges for teams, reinforcing the importance of balancing employee support with business needs.

Maintaining Standards:

- Participants cautioned against lowering the bar for diverse candidates, warning that this risks undermining both new hires and existing high performers.
- Lateral hiring of high-potential Directors overlooked at larger firms was cited as a way to improve senior-level diversity. However, this can create internal tension if promotions are perceived as bypassing established career paths.

Hybrid Working:

- Most firms have adopted hybrid models, typically one to three days in the office, though client site demands often take precedence.
- Office time is seen as essential for junior consultants to learn, build networks, and feel connected; without it, some risk becoming disengaged.
- Firms are testing different approaches to encourage interaction but generally avoid strict mandates, seeking to balance cultural benefits with flexibility.

#3 The Impact of AI on Hiring Models

Graduate Recruitment and Business Models:

- The discussion highlighted the challenge of balancing long-term graduate pipelines with the short-term efficiencies created by AI.
- Some firms have paused or slowed graduate hiring to assess AI's long-term impact, while others continue to prioritise "homegrown" talent to maintain the pyramid structure. Participants warned that cutting entry-level hiring could weaken the development of future leaders.

Adoption in Consulting Work:

- AI is being used for research, data analysis, and efficiency gains, though uptake varies. Some firms have developed proprietary tools for confidentiality, while others permit consultants to utilise platforms like ChatGPT or Copilot.
- Concerns remain over preserving foundational consulting skills, with firms encouraging juniors to use AI while still training them to verify and challenge outputs.

Recruitment Processes:

- Firms are divided on AI use in recruitment. Some encourage it as evidence of adaptability, while others restrict it to ensure fairness.
- Identical AI-generated case studies were cited as a growing issue, prompting firms to introduce more interactive, dialogue-based assessments and live questioning to test critical thinking.

#4 AI Assessment Tools & Internal Efficiencies

Policies and Guardrails:

- Firms are beginning to define acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI, with “guardrails” that set expectations for both employees and candidates.
- Policies are viewed as evolving, adapting as technology develops and as stakeholder expectations shift.

Fairness and Accessibility:

- Participants noted early evidence that men were more likely than women to use AI in assessments, and that access to tools varied across educational backgrounds (e.g., private vs. state schools).
- This raised concerns that AI-enabled processes could reinforce existing advantages rather than level the playing field.

Assessment Approaches:

- Recruitment processes are being reshaped to counter misuse of AI, with firms placing greater weight on live interaction, scenario-based questions, and probing the depth of reasoning.
- Interviewer training is seen as essential to ensure robust early-stage assessments, with some firms experimenting with incentives to drive consistency and quality.

AI Talent and Internal Use Cases:

- AI is also being applied within talent functions, from sourcing candidates outside LinkedIn to transcribing meetings, scheduling interviews, and generating market intelligence for briefings.
- Many innovations are emerging bottom-up, with teams experimenting with practical use cases, sometimes through internal competitions to build AI-driven tools.

Hiring Tools:

- Firms are increasingly deploying psychometric and personality assessments such as Hogan to evaluate senior candidates. While often used for development and succession planning, some are now being introduced into the hiring process.
- Concerns persist over candidate resistance, with fears that such tools could be perceived as intrusive or discriminatory.

The discussion highlighted the extent to which consulting firms are balancing continuity with disruption. DEI has shifted from a headline initiative to an embedded practice; yet, senior gender representation remains largely static. AI is reshaping both recruitment and delivery models, although its full implications for graduate pipelines and consulting careers remain unclear. What emerged was a pragmatic outlook: firms are refining policies and processes step by step, seeking to preserve fairness and credibility while adapting to rapid shifts in technology and market demand.

About The Barton Partnership

The first call for people driving value creation, strategy and transformation, worldwide.

The Barton Partnership is a specialist strategic talent solutions provider, seamlessly bridging the gap between strategy and execution. We offer fully integrated consulting services, interim and independent consulting, and executive search solutions to our global client base.

Since 2007, we have partnered with FTSE-listed and Fortune 500 companies across all sectors and industries; SMEs, Strategic, Innovation & Management Consulting firms (large and boutique), Private Equity and their Portfolios, and Global Financial Services. We combine deep sector expertise with our specialist functional focus, at scale. Our Consulting Network is ranked in the Financial Times UK's Leading Management Consultant Report, and we were recently recognised by Forbes as one of the World's Best Management Consulting Firms for a third consecutive year.

We combine the precision of a boutique specialist with the reach and expertise of a global search firm. Our integrated approach uniquely aligns talent strategies with business goals, ensuring every placement — interim, permanent, or consulting — delivers measurable impact for our clients.

As a B-Corp™ certified business, we hold ourselves accountable to a higher benchmark of sustainable business practices, committed to driving positive change for our clients, community, and the environment.



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