



# Professional services focus: How a post-COVID-19 operating model could help create a more diverse leadership pipeline

Professional services firms that take advantage of changes to working models created by pandemic-fueled disruption could end up with a competitive edge in attracting and retaining top people from all backgrounds.

Professional services organizations in the United States have made significant commitments and are increasing their efforts to attract, develop, and retain a diverse workforce and, by extension, develop a diverse leadership pipeline. Numbers reported by some leading firms show that those efforts are starting to pay off—compared with corporate America overall—but the numbers are still quite low. According to a recent PwC report, of the firm's US leadership teams in 2020, 30% of employees were non-white, and 30% women.<sup>1</sup> And according to the American Bar Association's most recent National Lawyer Population Survey, only 37% of lawyers were women in 2020, and an overwhelming 86% were white.<sup>2</sup> Those numbers compare with an overall US corporate pipeline, reported by McKinsey & Company, with 36% of entry-level workers being people of color and 47% women; in the C-suite, those numbers shrink to 15% and 22%—and only 3% were women of color.<sup>3</sup>

Many professional services firms have seen that an operating model reliant on long hours, extensive travel, and the necessity of living near an office has been a deterrent for some job seekers and current employees. Yet most firms were unable to change that model, given pre-pandemic client expectations and a talent development process based on individual mentoring on projects at client sites. Now, with old working norms out the window, firms are in a prime position to rethink their standard ways of working for the long term.

<sup>1</sup> *Building on a culture of belonging: 2020 PwC Diversity & Inclusion Transparency report*, PwC, August 26, 2020, pp. 15–16, pwc.com.

<sup>2</sup> ABA National Lawyer Population Survey, The American Bar Association, 2020, americanbar.org.

<sup>3</sup> *Women in the Workplace 2020*, McKinsey & Co and Leanin.org, September 30, 2020, p. 8, mckinsey.com.

Those that take advantage of this opportunity could end up with a competitive edge in attracting and retaining top people from all backgrounds. And though sustainable success with D&I will take much more, firms that seize the possibilities of a new working model and make an intentional commitment to D&I a part of how they implement it can jumpstart their leadership pipeline improvements.

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## A working model for the future

Like the leaders who built on last year's unanticipated digital and remote work gains,<sup>4</sup> professional services leaders should carry some of what they've learned forward. Based on what they've found can work, firm leaders may consider making changes such as the following permanent:

### Reduce requirements to work at client locations

We have seen that rigorous traveling obligations tend to dissuade many talented candidates from pursuing opportunities at professional services firms—especially opportunities higher up the ladder. Because women tend to carry greater caretaking responsibilities—whether for children or aging parents or both—such requirements can be a particularly high barrier for them.

By carefully rethinking which tasks will be done more effectively in person at client sites and what work can continue to be done remotely, firms can limit travel to, for instance, every other week, and thereby open up the talent pool. The past year has shown that projects that require a large number of interviews with client executives or employees, or projects that require bringing teams or larger groups together, can be done far faster remotely than in person. In addition, remote working allows professional services firms to connect their own experts from anywhere in the world to clients they might not otherwise have been able to serve.

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### Institutionalize remote mentoring and team building

Many professional services firms rely on in-person, in-the-moment mentoring to develop their people, but the pandemic changed how mentoring happens. Early on, many senior firm leaders struggled to find ways to support and develop their junior team members. Now, many have found that remote mentoring through video, for example, is part of the solution to their problem. Another important piece has been making development more intentional—something that happens not only in the midst of project work but also through scheduled mentoring sessions.

Finding the right balance for a hybrid work model will also help firms create an effective mentorship structure that can provide employees access to a broader range of mentors and other senior leaders than ever before. Indeed, we've seen that virtual work has, in some ways, leveled the playing field by eliminating long-standing silos and eroding close inner circles built simply out of proximity. Firms can build off of these changes to create more equal and inclusive mentorship structures. In addition, many firms have found that they can offer high-potential employees a broader range of stretch assignments and job rotations with a more flexible work model. We have seen virtual team building yield similar benefits, allowing global teams to come together more easily and more often.

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Taken together, such changes will allow professional services firms to create a more sustainable operating model that will give them an edge in attracting and retaining the best people. They will be able to engage not only traditional candidates but people who haven't previously been interested in professional services. Those groups include former employees who liked the work but not the lifestyle, caregivers who can't be away from home for long periods, and people who don't want to live in a city where the firm has offices. For example, Accenture announced in February that it would hire 150 mothers for newly created roles in technology, strategy, and consulting, and that the new employees would be supported with flexibility, support, training, and mentorship.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Shaloo Kulkarni, Eric Skoritowski, and Scott Snyder, "Achieving digital (re)acceleration," Heidrick & Struggles, May 14, 2020, [heidrick.com](https://www Heidrick.com)

5 Vanessa Yurkevich, "Accenture to hire 150 moms for 'highly coveted roles,'" CNN Business, February 18, 2021, [cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com).

## Making the most of the changes

To ensure that these new and improved ways of working last and effectively improving D&I, firm leaders should begin with the following two steps:

### **Make a formal commitment to retaining new ways of working**

Firm leaders will need to be intentional about implementing process and working-norm changes throughout their organizations. One crucial area of change will be how they assess performance and handle promotions. For example, we expect the steps many firms have taken toward real-time, rather than annual, performance reviews will be extended, and that promotion steps may become more flexible in terms of timing. Another crucial area of change will be in firms formalizing how roles have been redefined, including expectations for travel and working hours. Finally, most firms will need to take a fresh look at how they assess and maintain their talent pipeline in the context of these new ways of working.

### **Make a more intentional commitment to D&I**

Many firms have already made formal D&I commitments, and some, such as PwC, are beginning to report on their progress. Those that haven't can start by setting a quantitative goal for diversity and clearly communicating to all relevant parties how greater diversity will lead to their strategic success. All firms should consider reporting progress on their demographics. Doing so internally can demonstrate the firm's commitment and create a sense of common purpose, and doing so externally, even when the numbers aren't where leaders would like them to be, creates accountability and shows employees and potential new and diverse hires that the firm takes its efforts seriously, understands where there is room to grow, and is transparent about its progress.

Firms should also consider rewriting leadership performance expectations. More and more often, we hear firm leaders express concern about whether or not their senior executives are leading with an inclusive mindset, bringing people together and fostering diverse inputs. But fewer firms have such expectations as part of their formal leadership requirements. By building such characteristics into leadership job descriptions and performance goals—and potentially even linking diversity goals to leadership compensation—firms can formalize their commitment to D&I at the highest levels. Such commitment will highlight for employees at all levels, as well as other stakeholders, that the firm is determined to make progress.

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Professional services firms that take advantage of the opportunity presented by changes in working norms created by the pandemic could end up with a competitive edge in attracting, developing, and retaining top people from all backgrounds. By seizing the possibilities of a new working model, embracing flexible, remote work, mentoring where possible, and making an intentional commitment to D&I a part of how they implement these new policies, firms can create a more sustainable operating model and build their leadership pipeline into one more diverse and inclusive of a broad range of employees' needs.

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## About the authors

**Gustavo Alba** is a partner in Heidrick & Struggles' Miami and New York offices and the leader of the Business & Professional Services Practice.  
[galba@heidrick.com](mailto:galba@heidrick.com)

**Rebecca Glick** is a principal in the Chicago office and member of Heidrick Consulting.  
[rglick@heidrick.com](mailto:rglick@heidrick.com)

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## Managing Partners of Heidrick Consulting

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Andrew LeSueur  
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alesueur@heidrick.com

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dseale@heidrick.com

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Markus Wiesner  
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mwiesner@heidrick.com

### CEO & Board and Team Acceleration

Alice Breeden  
London  
abreeden@heidrick.com

### Organization Acceleration, Culture Shaping, and Diversity & Inclusion

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Costa Mesa  
rgailey@heidrick.com

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Sharon Sands  
London  
ssands@heidrick.com

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tmurray@heidrick.com

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gkittle@heidrick.com

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Regional Managing Partner  
dcrawford@heidrick.com

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Mike Foley  
Regional Practice Managing Partner  
mfoley@heidrick.com

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