

# Self Promotion

By Rachel Brushfield

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in the British legal profession there are more women than men at trainee level, but by partner level there has been a dramatic percentage shift in favour of men.

*"The sight of a woman in the British Boardroom is rare enough; that of one in the managing director's chair is almost as exotic as a pair of nesting ospreys."* Carol Kennedy

## Why is this?

As it is a natural human trait for people to like people who are like themselves, and therefore to recruit others who are similar, it is possible that law firms will remain the domain primarily of men at senior partner level long into the future. A critical factor in altering this could be a change in the willingness of female lawyers to promote themselves.

*"I would rather move forward and fail than go backward into safe territory"* Cate Blanchette

This article, the first of two, evolved from research conducted with a cross section of female lawyers and explores the key factors affecting the ability of female lawyers to promote themselves and the impact of these factors on career progression. The factors explored are gender, age, race, beliefs, the effect of having children and communication differences.

There are many reasons to indicate that self-promotion is important, in order to ensure progression up the career ladder, to attract new clients and to get more work from existing clients. But for female lawyers, self-promotion is easier said than done.

## Why is self-promotion important?

If self-promotion was ever an optional extra in the legal profession, it certainly is not now! Fewer partner positions now exist and firms demand well-rounded lawyers, not just with specialist technical skills, but also with emotional intelligence, good people skills and client management/rainmaker abilities if they are to promote them to partner status.

Unfortunately many female lawyers not only see self promotion as an onerous task but regard it as being pushy and arrogant to sing your own praises. They are not the only losers from their reticence; their firms also lose the benefit of the skills of many of their female solicitors because over the course of their careers they slowly opt out of putting themselves and their firms forward.

*"Compared with other professions, female lawyers are typically not as prolific at self promotion, often hiding behind their firm rather than singing their own praises."* Louise Heasman, Networking Strategist, Athena

Several factors affect women's attitude to self promotion.

## Gender differences

Neurobiologist Anne Moir explored the differences between men and women in her book *'Brain sex'* Put simply, she considers that the brains of men and women are wired differently and that this affects how they behave in everyday life especially in competitive environments and situations. Law firms,

where at senior levels of influence the number of men outnumbers the number of women, can be unusually competitive environments. This affects how women behave, particularly under stress. They are neurologically primed to tend others, and although they tend to think more negatively than men they can relieve their feelings of anxiety by caring for others.

Thus they are more likely to help others than to sing their own praises. Research shows that women tend to perform worse than men in competitive situations, which might explain why there are fewer women at the Bar than men. Fearing rejection, women are more easily harmed by negative assessment. They require friendship and affiliation, whereas men are greater risk takers and are "in it to win it".

In a nutshell, women are by nature more co-operative and collaborative than men, whereas men are more competitive, more combative and are greater risk takers than women. Women hope their hard work will be noticed, whereas men are much more upfront about their achievements, about presenting a case and talking themselves up.

*"Women's skills of empathy and relationship and bridge building bring huge benefits to firms long term, but often these aren't valued by firms, perhaps because they are 'softer' and less immediate or tangible in the results they create, compared with typical male skills such as negotiation and deal making."* Caroline Wallis, Partner and Head of the Wealth Protection Team, Boyes Turner.

## Beliefs about self promotion

Women possess some strong negative beliefs and feelings about self-promotion and often assume that doing a job well will mean that clients will just flow in. They therefore conclude that they must always do client work first - because this is what goes on the timesheets and is measured - and then they'll think about promotion and marketing - if they get time. But there's never enough time. The billable hour culture only exacerbates this. Because they are driven by 'tending and befriending' women worry a lot and especially about what other people think.

*"Belief in your abilities creates energy to do marketing and is far more motivating and effective than being made to do it by your firm, because passion + confidence attracts success."* Deborah Jeff, Partner & Head of Family Law, Seddons

Data shows that women's average salary in all professions at graduate level is 10% less than men's for equivalent jobs. Being naturally risk averse, women feel grateful to be offered the job and don't negotiate the salary, whereas men who are greater risk takers ask for more money and often get it. From this initial discrepancy the gap widens throughout their careers, especially for working mothers. How ironic is it that women believe they have to work harder than men, in an already hard working profession, when their rewards are so often less?

In addition, competition between firms for higher profits means that often steps are being taken to de-equitise people at the lower end of the range of compensation. Unfortunately this tends to be women.

## Communication differences

Women talk about people and relationships, men talk about sport and things. It is easy for men to bond superficially, to find common ground quickly and then to fast track to work issues. Asking someone whether they saw 'The Match' on Saturday is less intrusive than asking whether they have any children. As many firms are still predominantly male, so women have to adapt their communication style to fit. In addition, women, especially when married, may worry about how spending time with senior male managing partners to influence their promotion prospects may be misconstrued.

## Generation differences

Younger female lawyers, members of generation Y who are under 30, find it easier than their parents to promote themselves. Children of the baby boomers and the second generation of women to enjoy equal status careers to men, generation Y have more confidence and greater expectations. There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance and it is vital that law firms give their partners training to handle younger recruits, especially in a climate of talent shortage. Generation Y want responsibility from a young age and they will vote with their feet if they don't get it. Serving time, as previous generations of lawyers have done, is unacceptable to them, as they believe in getting promoted on ability. This understandably may upset partners who have achieved their level the hard way and more slowly, and they may block the progression of rising talent.

## Impact of race

With a history of being passed over and adversely discriminated in many contexts, the current generation of ethnic minority lawyers has a strong determination to succeed. This can act as a fuel for self-promotion, driven by a hunger for achievement and equal rights. For them it has not in the past been a question of hitting the glass ceiling but being forced historically to stay in the basement because of prejudice and bias.

## Working mothers

Juggling a career with raising children and still taking the major responsibility for running the household leaves women with little time for self-promotion. Often already behind from having taken maternity leave, working mothers tend to go into 'survival mode' by keeping their heads down and focusing on client work. Indeed it could be argued that the mere fact of having children and negotiating with difficult toddlers makes women more conciliatory and open to compromise in their behaviour and thus even less competitive than they were before compared with men.

The ball left in the air by working mothers is rarely self-promotion, given all the other balls that they are juggling. If they are working part time, or three days in the office with one at home, the time left for self promotion is even more stretched and the luxury of lunch with senior partners or prospects is even more unattainable.

Somehow fathers quite simply seem to have more time to network and feel more comfortable about it. Parenthood often affects new fathers in a different way. They feel under pressure to earn more, especially if their partners are not working or receive reduced salaries during or after maternity leave. This creates a hunger for success and the greater

financial rewards that come with it which fuels their already strong competitive drive.

## The economic truth

What is the true cost to firms of their female lawyers being less good at self-promotion than men?

If like attracts like and people in senior positions tend to promote people like themselves, the diversity pool gradually shrinks. It is unlikely that problems will be solved with the same mindset that created them in the first place, so new and fresh approaches are required to make law firms fit for purpose over the next 20 years.

Women who do not achieve partner status (assuming that they want to in the first place) often suffer self-doubt which leads to lower productivity and energy wasted on worry rather than on proactive initiatives for the firm. The opportunity cost in lost billable hours is immense. We all know that success breeds success. Conversely, disappointment breeds lack of confidence, which in turn leads to feeling demotivated so that performance nose-dives and finally many women simply decide to opt out altogether. This is a high price that no firm can afford.

## Dramatic tension

Women may hate telling people how good they are, but they also hate being passed over for promotion and getting paid less than men for the same level of work. Being more emotional and anxious and influenced by what other people think of them, they will disengage, believing that they can't win. If they were able to use the energy spent on worrying and talking about their frustrations on promoting themselves instead, this would make a huge difference to their ultimate prospects.

Firms which have realised the truth of this are now offering learning and development and executive coaching programmes with the specific purpose of supporting their female lawyers. These programmes can provide a safe and confidential space and a network for women to create new strategies for succeeding in a male culture. Law firms need to change and women possess many of the skills that can make this happen. The disengagement of women and the drain of their talent has to be stopped, not just in law firms but in all professions. Like flowers not watered, they shrivel and die.

## A sound investment

Investing time in self-promotion should be regarded by female lawyers as a good steady investment. Small deposits made often are painless and will reap unexpected dividends, whereas failure to invest could soon lead to overdraft.

For firms, investing in initiatives to support female lawyers such as mentoring and executive coaching, will be handsomely rewarded by the loyalty and hard work that results, which will have a positive impact on billing. If women stop stopping themselves, the impact could be substantial.

In the next issue of Link magazine, I shall explore solutions and offer tips to help female lawyers to feel comfortable about self-promotion and suggest initiatives that will help law firms to attract, retain and develop female legal talent.

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