Impressing for Success:

A Gendered Analysis of a Key Social Capital Accumulation Strategy

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Abstract

Social capital theory assesses the career benefits that accrue to individuals from the stock of relationships they have. Such benefits can be in the form of guidance and advice, access to key projects and assignments and help with setting up business deals. However, when assessing whether such career-enhancing resources are available equally to men and women, we find that gender impacts on the access to and accumulation of social capital. The article seeks to address two key research questions. The first is whether women are aware of the need to accumulate social capital to advance their careers and the second is whether they use impression management techniques in order to assist them in doing this. Findings are reported from a study in an international consulting firm with 19 female consultants. In respect of research question one the findings indicate that women in the sample are aware of the need to accumulate social capital to advance their careers; with particular emphasis being placed on the importance of gaining access to influential sponsors. In respect of research question two, the findings confirm that women in the sample do perceive the necessity to utilise impression management techniques to help them to accumulate social capital. This is done in a defensive way and is linked to ensuring that one is seen as ambitious, likable and available. It is argued that these are key organizational norms, and it is perceived that in order to accumulate social capital, women need to actively work to dispel the negative stereotypes that attach to them because of their gender. The article calls for greater recognition of the impact that masculine organizational cultures have on the career development of women, who not only have to perform at a high level but are also required to expend additional energy conforming to masculine organizational cultures they have had little say in creating.

Introduction

The literature on social capital accumulation indicates that the accumulation of social capital can be a source of competitive advantage both to individuals and their employing organization (Tymon and Stumpf, 2003). Nevertheless, the literature also indicates that there may be gender-related issues

which influence the nature and effect of women's social capital accumulation activity (Bourdieu, 1984; Palgi and Moore, 2004).

The article considers the importance of social capital accumulation as a career-enhancing strategy with particular focus on the influence of gender on this process. To assess whether there is a gender differential in social capital accumulation activity in relation to career advancement, findings are presented from a study in which female members of a consulting firm were interviewed to determine whether they perceived that the accumulation of social capital was necessary for their career advancement and whether they utilised impression management techniques in order to accumulate access to key social networks.

The findings revealed that women in the sample were aware of the need to accumulate social capital and their efforts focused particularly on developing a relationship with influential organizational sponsors. The findings also indicated that impression management techniques were used to overcome credibility (Burt, 1998) issues that women faced in the organization and which it was perceived needed to be managed in order to advance successfully.

The structure of the article is as follows. The next section defines and discusses the concept of social capital and considers it as a career enhancement strategy. The following section explores the link between gender and social capital and indicates the particular issues faced by women in seeking to accumulate social capital. Impression management is discussed as a possible way women may overcome some of the credibility issues they face as a consequence of the dominance of masculine organizational cultures. The research site, sample and methods are discussed in the following section, after which the findings are discussed. The final section draws together the threads of the argument.

Social capital and career development

Social capital theory relates to an individual's position in a social network of relationships and focuses on the resources contained in, accessed through or stemming from these networks. Individuals are able to derive value from trust, reciprocity, information and co-operation from these relationships. Social network structures have been shown to enable individuals' to gain access to resources that are of benefit to their career success in terms of salary, promotions and career satisfaction; mediated by access to key information and resources which in turn depend upon career sponsorship. Baker (2000) also draws attention to the importance of developing and leveraging social capital in relation to career advancement, arguing it is not simply what you know but also whom you know that leads to career success. Cross and Prusak (2002) agree, showing that much work is now achieved through informal social networks and is no longer solely conducted through official hierarchical channels. Tymon and Stumpf (2003) argue that contemporary career success depends on the nature and quality of personal relationships and the stock of the combined resources accessed via these relationships is what we now refer to as social capital. In terms of what these resources are, Baker (2000) suggests they include information, ideas, leads, business opportunities, capital, emotional support, goodwill,

trust and mutual co-operation. Burt (1992) contends that good relationships enable one to call on others for support, which ranges from advice and information to help in setting up deals and transactions. Empirical evidence also shows that managers' social capital, especially their relationships with people in other organizations, aids advancement. These relationships can provide valuable information, special access to help and resources and career sponsorship.

Social networks can arise formally, that is, based on specific formal relationships or they may emerge informally; for example, based on discretionary interaction (Ibarra, 1993). Social networks can arise from either a working or a personal relationship. Such network ties can be instrumental (providing information, expertise and professional advice) or expressive (where friendship and social support are exchanged) (Ibarra, 1993). Studies have shown that access to social capital becomes particularly helpful when seeking to advance to senior management positions (Tharenou, 2001) and also to boards of directors. Managers with more social capital get higher returns on their human capital (the sum of an individual's knowledge and experience) because they are well positioned to identify and develop career-enhancing opportunities. For example, knowing the right people and being well connected can provide access to opportunities essential to gaining relevant skills and experience. A study by Kilduff and Krackhardt (1994) indicates an individual's reputation for performance in an organization is dependent upon a combination of their actual performance and the extent of their associations with prominent others. Thus, social capital is the contextual complement to human capital in explaining advantage.

In further assessing the resource-based nature of social capital in respect of career advancement, Lin (2001) argues that social resources (such as social capital) are of greater importance than personal resources (such as human capital) in their potential usefulness to individuals for career development. One reason for this is the concept of structural-hole networks. These provide vital information to those able to access them and provide managers with an opportunity to build and develop their image with each contact (Burt, 1998). 'Structural holes' refers to the distance between non-redundant contacts in an individual's networks. Redundant contacts are those which lead to the same people and the same information. Thus, for individuals to increase the size of their network without adequate consideration of the diversity of contacts leads to inefficiency through wasted time and effort. However, the more structural holes in individuals' network the wider access to information they have and the greater their ability to act on the information. Burt (1992) found in a study of 547 managers in a high-tech firm that those managers with networks high in structural holes were promoted more quickly and when they were younger than their peers.

Lin (2001) thus contends that such interactions are undertaken in order to gain valued resources, the attainment of which requires access to others in key social network positions (especially those with more or better resources). So an important feature of these networks includes association with others who have better social status. In Lin's view (2001) social capital operates in a pyramidal structure, analogous to the hierarchical structure of organizations. The closer to the top of the structure one is able to get, the greater the control of valued social capital resources. Tymon and Stumpf (2003) argue

that deepening existing relationships and actively developing new ones is as important to an individual's plans for career advancement as any investment in human capital.

Much of the extant literature has largely ignored the role of gender in the accumulation of social capital (Broadbridge, 2007). Thus, having established the resource-based nature of social capital and its importance in respect of organizational career development; attention in the article now turns to the issue of whether access to and involvement with key social networks is equally available to men and women.

Gender and social capital

Bourdieu (1984) maintains that women have fewer social resources than men, and that this may contribute to their paucity in senior organizational positions. Eagly and Carli (2007, pp. 144–5) assert:

> Gender affects social capital: women usually have less of it. One interpretation is that men excel at strategically building crucial professional relationships…. Despite this perception that women 'don't get it,' women as well as men are generally aware of the importance of social capital.

Thus, the perception that women are not as effectively networked as men may be accurate but this position is a consequence of a number of underlying organizational processes rather than a reflection that women do not understand the reality of how organizations work (Eagly and Carli, 2007). For example, a particular issue with networking activity is that it frequently exacerbates the long work hours that present particular obstacles to women (and men) with family responsibilities. Managers in such situations may be fully cognizant of the value of networking in enabling them to build social capital, but decide that at this point in their life they are unable to meet this particular requirement for career advancement and they therefore choose not to 'play the game'.

It is thus suggested, (Burt, 1998) that women may have a legitimacy or credibility problem in the organization. This is evidenced in his research which finds women are not as successful in career progression terms when they rely on building their own social capital but when they borrow the social capital of key organizational sponsors they advance more rapidly. Burt (1998) concludes that access to key sponsors' entrepreneurial networks is associated with early promotion for women, while for men promotion emanated from their personally established entrepreneurial networks. So women's progression can be based on their association with an established manager and the links provided to their networks; this indicates the critical importance for women to be visible in their organizations and to gain strong organizational sponsorship (Broadbridge, 2007); though how possible this is for women is an issue discussed by many.

Burt (1998) contends that though women may build similar networks to senior men, the consequences of their networking activity are different to those for men. Lin (2001) and Tharenou (1997) indicate that women face a significant deficit in their accumulation of social capital, with Lin noting that even when job or promotion candidates present with similar human or social capital, employers are likely to respond to them differently because of their sex. This supports Burt's (1998)

view that women have a legitimacy problem in the organization. For example, there is much evidence to support the contention that men are routinely offered more career-enhancing experiences and challenging assignments than women (Agars, 2004; McQuarrie, 1994) and that women may miss out on such opportunities as they are frequently excluded from important decision-making meetings and therefore less visible in the organization (Jackson, 2001).

There is also evidence to suggest that women are often excluded from both formal and informal networks (for example, Coe, 1992; Charlesworth, 1997; O'Leary and Ickovics, 1992; Ohlott *et al.*, 1994; Travers and Pemberton, 2000) which negatively impacts on their ability to accumulate both human and social capital. Studies also indicate that women have historically faced exclusion from access to important organizational circles (Kanter, 1977; O'Leary and Ickovics, 1992; Powell and Mainiero, 1992; Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989). For example, Metz and Tharenou, (2001) found that women reported gender discrimination as the most frequent barrier to their advancement. Although engaging in networking behaviour is one means by which women facilitate their advancement, the barriers they face are more difficult than those faced by men. Women in organizations tend to occupy less influential positions with fewer resources to offer others (Brass, 1984; Kanter, 1977). This poses a problem suggested by social exchange theory (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959): that men will view women as less attractive exchange partners. Effective networking relationships are based on reciprocity, whereby managers give to and receive assistance from one another with the expectation of receiving help in the future (Kaplan, 1984).

It is also clear that female managers have fewer women to interact with in social networks in their organizations and receive less support from those women, relative to the size and support received by male managers from men in their networks (Rothstein *et al.*, 2001). Although female managers compensate for these differences in network composition and function by interacting with more men in their networks and obtaining more diverse types of support, female managers have to engage in behaviour that is different from that of male managers to obtain this equal support. Rothstein *et al.* (2001) found that female managers cross more organizational levels than male managers to obtain this support and, generally, these levels are lower in status and power than the equivalent networks of male managers.

This lack of access has meant that women tend to create different networks from men (Ibarra, 1993). A study of 57 women and 55 men in mid-career in large organizations found that women's networks were mostly comprised of women and men's networks were mostly comprised of men. When seeking to explain this, the work of Moore (1988) is instructive. When women work in male-dominated contexts most networks, particularly influential ones, are entirely or almost entirely composed of men. In male-dominated networks women tend to have less legitimacy and influence and as a consequence benefit less than men from their participation. A woman seeking to break into a male-dominated network can also face difficulties if men focus their networks on typical masculine activities, for example, sport (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In such instances women can gain more from a

strong and supportive one-to-one mentoring relationship with a well-placed individual who possesses greater organizational legitimacy; most typically a man (Moore, 1988).

It is thus apparent that women face additional hurdles when they seek to develop social capital than their male counterparts. Burt (1998) points to the issue of credibility for women in organizations, with the effect this can have on their ability to gain access to both formal and informal organizational networks. He also indicates that women are more likely to benefit in career terms from borrowing the social capital of a career sponsor rather than attempting to build it themselves. Jackson (2001) and Broadbridge (2007) concur; stating that women seeking to enhance their social capital and gain access to influential social networks will need to secure strong organizational sponsorship and ensure they are visible. However, what is less often discussed is how women are to overcome the credibility issue and gain access to strong organizational sponsors in order to gain visibility and access the benefits of formal and informal social networks either directly (through their own membership of such networks) or indirectly (by borrowing the social capital of their sponsor). The use of impression management techniques, the process whereby individuals seek to influence the perception of others about their own image (Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995) has been shown to facilitate career success (for example, Kilduff and Day, 1994; Singh *et al.*, 2002), and it is to a discussion of the concept of impression management and its link with career success that attention in the article now turns. Could this be a mechanism by which women gain access to the organizational resources required to enable them to overcome the credibility issues discussed?

Impression management and career success

As far back as 1890 James noted that individuals had multiple selves in describing human behaviour. Thus, James argued that we all have multiple selves, instead of a single unified self-concept, and we choose to show different selves according to the demands of the situation. These ideas were developed by Goffman (1959), the main proponent of the sociological conceptualization of impression management. He stated that impression management consists of attempts to establish the meaning or purpose of social interactions, guiding our actions and enabling our better anticipation of what is expected of us and what to expect from others. Assessing self-presentation, which enables individuals to define their place in the social order and set the appropriate tone and direction of an interaction, thereby enabling a suitable performance of role-governed behaviour, then becomes important.

However, while sociologists view impression management as an aid to social interaction, social psychologists have interpreted it to be something quite different. They see impression management as being employed to advance individuals' interests and to be directly related to the achievement of specific, goal-oriented purposes such as influencing others to gain power (Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995). The prime reason for paying attention to our behaviour, and attempting to manage the impression we create is that through the construction of desirable social identities, our public selves come closer to our ideal selves. We influence how we are perceived and therefore, the way in which others treat us. Leary and Kowalski (1990) argue that impression management can be used to advance subjective

wellbeing in three distinct, yet interrelated ways: firstly, by maximizing the individual's reward-cost ratio in social relations; secondly, by improving self-esteem; and thirdly, by aiding in the construction of desired identities. The effect of such behaviour may directly impact on material outcomes; for example, giving the impression one is competent can lead to material benefits such as a salary increase, better working conditions (Leary and Kowalski, 1990) and access to promotional opportunities. Impression management is a managerialist interpretation of Goffman's (1959) work (Greener, 2007). Gardner and Martinko (1988) explicitly advocates its use as a series of strategies for achieving managerial success. This implies that impression management behaviour may be consciously controlled; thus becoming part of a manager's 'behavioural repertoire that may be manipulated to influence both organizational and personal success' (Gardner and Martinko, 1988, p. 321). In terms of what these strategies are, a number are typically discussed in the literature, for example, self-promotion, ingratiation and visibility (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1981; Godfrey *et al.*, 1986; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995).

This literature review has indicated a number of ways in which social capital accumulation is problematic for women. The literature review has also shown, however, that social capital accumulation is important for career advancement, with some arguing it is at least as important as the acquisition of key human capital resources (for example, Tymon and Stumpf, 2003). It is thus posited that impression management techniques may be utilised by women to assist them in overcoming the credibility issues they face in accumulating social capital. To assess whether this is indeed the case, the research questions addressed in this study are:

1. Do female consultants perceive social capital to be necessary for their career advancement?
2. Do female consultants perceive the utilisation of impression management strategies to be necessary in aiding their accumulation of social capital to advance their careers?

Research site, sample and methods

There are to date few studies that have actively assessed the perceived impact of social capital accumulation strategies on organizational career advancement. Though the literature is clear that the impact of social capital accumulation activity can be far-reaching, studies which assess this through case studies, that is, exploring the perceptions of a number of individuals on the way in which career progression systems operate within their organization, are rare. The present study has adopted this approach.

Research site

The research was conducted as a single-site study in Consultco (pseudonym). Consultco is one of the world's leading providers of management consulting and technology services and advises many of the largest and most successful organizations, including governments and their respective agencies. It was felt that this consultancy firm would be an appropriate site for a study of this nature, as Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) have observed a gender bias exists in such firms when it comes to the

process of promotion to a partnership. In this study the bias was manifest through a largely self-managed career development process and the presence of a prevailing model of success, which is a masculine one. Kay and Hagan's (1998) study reports similar findings. They found higher standards were applied to female partner candidates than their male counterparts. Women were required to demonstrate a higher work commitment and display especially enthusiastic advocacy of their firm's culture, that is, 'to embody standards that are an exaggerated form of a partnership ideal' (Kay and Hagan, 1998, p. 741).

Methods and sample

A qualitative approach was adopted for the research project. The aim of qualitative research is to collect data which are as rich as possible, (Lofland and Lofland, 1984) and which enable the researcher to address the research questions posed. To gain access to data techniques such as in-depth interviewing are typically employed with small samples of people, as working with larger groups is overly time-consuming and potentially damaging to the research through data overload. The advantage of using small samples are used is that many variables can be held constant to avoid extraneous factors intervening and distorting the findings of the research in a way that is impossible for the researcher to clearly identify. Controlling the number of research settings is one way of reducing the negative impact of extraneous variables and the dilution of the overall analysis (Cresswell, 1998). Cresswell further argues that including multiple cases leads to a lack of depth in any single case, and though generalizability may be compromised, this is a term which generally holds little meaning for most qualitative research (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). To address these issues, a single site was chosen for the data collection.

The research questions this study seeks to address require the views of a number of consultants to elicit their understanding of the conditions necessary to advance in their firm. This necessitated a sample drawn from the overall population to reflect a broad range of views on this topic. The names of potential interviewees were generated by the researchers presenting the key aims of the research project to representatives of the human resources (HR) departments in the five main business units in the UK division, and jointly agreeing how potential interviewees would be identified and approached. The HR representatives were provided with key criteria against which the sample were to be selected. These were respondents from all the key business units in the practice and from diverse ages, length of service and grade range. The HR group stipulated that all contact with potential interviewees should be made from within Consultco. Lists of potential interviewees meeting the stipulated criteria were passed to an administrator who contacted those on the lists by letter, indicating the aims of the research and asking for their assistance. Interview times and dates were then arranged with those agreeing to participate in the study. A total of 34 interviews were conducted; 19 with female consultants and 15 with male consultants. The focus of this study is on data collected from the 19 interviews with female consultants. The interviews were all conducted by the same interviewer (who is one of the authors of this article). Each interview lasted for between 1 and 1.5 hours and all interviews

were fully transcribed. The table in Appendix 1 provides details of the 19 female interviewees. Appendix 2 provides an interview guide.

To gain the full extent of their understanding, the questions were framed as 'advice to a friend'. However, it must be noted that the findings reported here are limited to the way in which the 19 female consultants perceived career advancement to operate in Consultco, and cannot be extrapolated further to assert that their views are evidence of the behavioural patterns employed to actually aid career advancement in the firm.

The interviews were analysed using Nvivo qualitative data software. To manage the complexity of the rich text of the documented interviews the researchers utilised the core elements of Nvivo. Of the many paths available in applying this software tool, a three-stage process was found to be the most effective. The first stage was free coding, which involved the researchers categorizing the data by utilising a bottom-up approach where common recurring themes or key messages emerged across interviews and were categorized as nodes, that is, data containers free of hierarchical organization. The next stage involved shaping the data held in free nodes into sets. A set is a grouping of documents or nodes in order to work with them as a unit. This set formation enabled the shaping of results by generalizing and grouping nodes around common themes and messages. The final stage involved model creation. The set formulation process provides a clear link to the creation of models. Continuing the visual method enabled by the Nvivo system, the sets act as the main ingredients for searching for perceived patterns and relationships between different ideas and themes emerging from the interview text. This process was iterative, as ideas changed and understanding improved after periods of reflection. This cycle of set creation and modelling was a valuable aid to seeing links and creating a live model for concept clarification and acted as a base for future theorizing.

Findings

Research question 1: do female consultants perceive social capital to be necessary for their career advancement?

The findings in relation to research question one show that women in the sample are aware of the importance of social capital accumulation in their firm and they link the activity directly with career advancement. The necessity to accumulate social capital is discussed in relation to two key issues. The first concerns an awareness that the firm is relatively unmanaged and, as a consequence, informal processes operate alongside formally stated career development policies; such that those relying solely on formal process could find they do not progress at the rate they may wish to, and they may be left behind. The interviewees also noted that social capital accumulation was essential for advancement and it was perceived that in the context of the firm the main route to access social capital resources is through strong organizational sponsorship. This, once again, related to the relatively unmanaged nature of the firm and the partnership structure, whereby individual partners have sufficient influence and power to advocate on behalf of their protégés and ensure their advancement. The findings for research question one are presented in relation to these two issues.

Know the rules of the game. In advising their fictional friend, 17 of the 19 interviewees noted that understanding the way in which promotion operates in the firm was essential. The interviewees were clear that an informal system of career advancement operates alongside a more formally stated process. It was also evident from this group that the informal nature of the process was wholly dependent on relationships; those formed with colleagues but most importantly, with influential others. The ability to form such relationships depends on those in senior positions viewing the individual as ambitious and committed; someone they can rely on who will not let them down. The following quotes are typical of this view:

> I don't think you have to be here very long before you realize that forces other than the formal system are operating as well and you'd know if they weren't in your favour, and I guess you maybe see other people benefiting from that if you're sort of stuck on the bench twiddling your thumbs.

> Maybe no one here matches the theoretical profile, its hanging out there and being met by no one. But it is there so you need to approximate it.

> I think you have to show loyalty and commitment to the firm and be ready to comply with the majority of their wishes.

> [You need] an ability to deliver work and not cause them any problems; that comes very high on the list. So people who bring them problems and not solutions or if you cause them grief by getting into difficulties on the job, so they have to come and sort it out; this isn't highly valued.

Critical importance of sponsorship. The interviewees agreed that having a sponsor in the firm is critical to advancing. Sixteen of the 19 interviewees discussed this issue, focusing on the reasons why sponsorship is important, the process by which a sponsor is acquired and giving advice on ensuring that the right sponsor is chosen.

Benefits of sponsorship. Here discussion centred on the benefits a sponsor could bring to the individual in terms of their career progression in the firm. It was evident from interviewees that sponsors could provide access to valued resources, rewarding projects and assignments and also preventing the individuals they sponsored from facing negative situations in the organization:

> [T] he question I have is less around the promotion process but is around the exposure to opportunities, and this is really where the informal thing kicks in because, although we have formal allocation of these assignments, you need the network and sponsorship to get a track record.

> You can see other people doing it you suddenly think, 'How has that person got there'? And you just think, 'Ah! Well, that is because they have attached themselves to these two or three people, they always work on their jobs, you can see they are always doing the extra stuff in their own spare time', and you just think, 'This is how it goes'.

> It does sound a bit sycophantic really in that its 'jobs for the boys', but it isn't really like that. It's more a question of if you're good and you know the right people, you'll get on well.

I think it's fair to say that those people who are exceptionally driven and have spent a lot of time with the relevant partner get promoted.

GCF [the formal competence-based promotion system] was supposed to get rid of all of that. If it wasn't written down on paper it wasn't supposed to be acceptable in the progression discussions, but ultimately they sit huddled in a room and they discuss your performance and then they have people's opinions.

We are trying to bring some control lines in but it is still a partnership. So things like promotion processes are very tricky, because at the end of the day it is down to individual messages and I know that strings can be pulled and partners are still quite powerful in that sense.

[I]t has a lot to do with sponsorship. I suppose it's about making sure the people who make the decisions see you as the sort of person they can trust.

A person who works hard and has good sponsorship because they have promoted themselves effectively will get on above a person who just worked hard

Interviewees also pointed to the dangers of not having a sponsor, to assist in avoiding negative organizational outcomes:

Sponsorship is very important to get on, I think, in this company, and in fact you know we had some redundancies and there were a couple of people that seemed absolutely fine; their utilisation was good, you know, they were visibly well-balanced people that were liked, and the only reason you can potentially think of why they were chosen is that they didn't have the sponsor; so it is very important.

Acquiring a sponsor. Interviewees discussed the process by which sponsorship is acquired. It was acknowledged that all members of the firm should automatically have a sponsor simply by being part of a group. However, it was also accepted that this is not how the process works, and individuals needed to take active control of the process:

Well, you ought to naturally have one by being in a certain group, because every group is headed by a partner. Now, of course, that isn't necessarily true because every partner has a favourite.

It's fairly clear: you know who's going to make the decisions, you know who's going to influence the people who are going to make the decisions, you know the powerful people and you would work on them.

Sponsorship, I suppose it's to do with making sure people who actually start making decisions, making sure that you're the sort of person they can trust. To make them do that you have to work hard, be reasonably visible and need to deliver what's asked of you.

Asking someone to be your sponsor was seen as naive. There is a view that if you have to ask you have somehow missed the whole point about sponsorship:

I suspect that if you need to ask someone, 'Will you be my sponsor', I guess you're in the wrong place. There's something about someone organically coming forward and saying, 'You're my kind of guy,

you're my kind of gal, I'm going to take you to the stars'. I suspect there's something more chemical about it.

Acquiring the 'right' sponsorship. Having established the need for sponsorship and discussed some of the ways in which sponsorship is acquired, interviewees cautioned that an astute reading of the 'worth' of a potential sponsor is also required. They were clear that sponsorship *per se* is not enough; it has to be the right kind of sponsorship from people who themselves are well thought of in the firm, and are thereby able to deliver positive career benefits to their protégés:

> [It is] important to have strong sponsorship and to identify who is a good partner to work for and who is a bad partner to work for; who will support you to the death, and who are the people who, once you've worked for them, will never recognize you in the street again.

> [You] certainly need a sponsor, and in turn they need that sponsor to be well sponsored and well thought of and finding out who is well thought of is not always easy.

> You have to have good sponsorship from somebody whose weight and influence are recognized and beyond principal [consultant level] it is absolutely vital to have solid sponsorship that is completely committed to you.

> You need sponsorship from the right people and there are some people who, if you're aligned with them, you might as well forget your progression path.

> I would say, 'Pick the right sponsor', and by sponsors I don't mean people who you think are supportive, but people who are in the right position in the organization and people who have some clout at board level. Work only on their projects, and on high profiled projects, make sure that you market as much as possible what you have done.

Research question 2: do female consultants perceive the utilisation of impression management strategies as necessary in aiding their accumulation of social capital to advance their careers?

Women consultants discussed the importance of impression management in their understanding of how the promotion process works. Of the 19 women in the sample, 16 discussed the subject. In this discussion, three key issues emerged. These are presented below.

Impression management of ambition. To advance, it was felt to be important to be clear about ambition. It was perceived that the firm values ambition, and that while those who are not overtly ambitious have a future with the firm, clearly articulated ambition brings its own rewards. The following quotes illustrate these points:

> You shouldn't go away on 3-year projects, and if you are you're out of sight, out of mind. Doesn't matter how many millions you are bringing in, what really matters is that the people are there working next to these partners saying, 'Isn't it about time you made me a partner, or I am going to leave'.

Be open about ambition with the right people. Just putting a marker on yourself as being very ambitious makes sense, because although most people don't want to stand still, there's a big difference between most people and the person who is very ambitious.

If you're ambitious and want to get on, in very basic terms, it's about being perceived to have a strong track record in terms of winning and delivering work. It's being perceived to be a safe pair of hands, and on top of that, at the senior level, having gravitas and having the expertise, skills and attitudes that the firm respects and needs.

The need to be liked. Likeability was thought to be extremely important in terms of career advancement. Being 'one of us' enhanced likeability and ensured a smoother career path. The following statements illustrate these points:

I've always thought that a lot of it is definitely likeability. I'm from a bit of the organization where I think a lot of the partners like what I call a 'good bloke'. Someone who will go out drinking, play snooker, and I can spot a mile off the type of person who's going to appeal to that sponsorship group and 10 to 1 you'll see them in the room and think, 'That's inevitable'.

There is a sort of [Consultco] person, and if you are too rash, too critical of people, then I think it is a case of being a bit alternative, but you have to be alternative with a commercial end. But I think if you are critical and not constructive, then that is probably a bad thing. There has got to be something about you they like. People talk about you informally, but you don't find out. It's not written down anywhere.

I've never blended in this firm or taken time out to drink with my work colleagues after work. I've worked hard and most of the people who go out drinking after work are men, but then most of the people around here are men anyway, but I think there is a show of being one of the lads and I think to make partner you need to be part of the gang. The most major thing is just time, commitment to the firm to show that the firm comes first.

Impression management of availability. Female consultants also recognized the importance of impression management to avert negative comment. For women, this centred on not being seen as being too needy or high maintenance, and when conflicting priorities arise, being careful about how being unable to meet work priorities is handled. Impression management is seen as an essential process, useful to the individual in constructing an impression of themselves consistent with prevailing norms and criteria for success, and also as a helpful mechanism whereby extremely busy people are able to make quick assessments of the individuals around them:

I used to say to people, 'Consider when you're on a project where, let's say, next week you can't be there, whether you really need to tell people why you can't be there'.

I think it's definitely a requirement to show great commitment to the firm, which means not having children, or if you do have children, keep extremely quiet about that. Its long hours and not just that; flexibility, foreign travel, being able to drop everything and go off to the other side of the world.

Not everyone would agree with me on this, but I've always felt that people do not want the full you in the working environment.

In fact, you need to be heroic. You need to take on anything. You don't even want to show a glimmer of anything which would be negative to your portfolio and even if you are going to say, 'No', be really clever about it and find someone else to do it rather than just say a flat 'No'.

When I was promoted to director, I was five months pregnant, and I didn't tell them because if they knew I was pregnant, no way. Two days later, I apologised and said, 'Look, I should have told you before, but I didn't', and, in fact, I remember not telling anybody until I had my pay rise, because I knew it would impact it.

Discussion

The article has demonstrated that social capital accumulation strategies can assist in career advancement (Baker, 2000; Burt, 1998; Lin, 2001; Tymon and Stumpf, 2003). Evidence has been presented that when seeking to access key social capital accumulation techniques, for example, social networks and sponsorship, women experience particular issues (for example, Broadbridge, 2007; Burt, 1998; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Ibarra, 1993; Lin, 2001; Moore, 1988). It is posited that women may turn to impression management techniques in order to assist them in overcoming some of the gender-based hurdles identified and gain access to influential social networks or individuals. The research questions the article sought to address are, firstly, do female consultants perceive social capital to be necessary for their career advancement? Secondly, do female consultants perceive the utilisation of impression management strategies as necessary in aiding their accumulation of social capital to advance their careers? The discussion will focus on each research question in turn.

Do female consultants perceive social capital to be necessary for their career advancement?

The findings in relation to research question one provide clear evidence that women perceive social capital accumulation to be essential in respect of their career advancement in their firm. To do this it was necessary for them to understand the organization well in terms of informal processes and the way they operate. This point is also highlighted in the work of Eagly and Carli, (2007) who indicate that while women may be perceived to be unaware of the need to develop and accumulate social capital, they are in general just as aware of this as men. That they are unable to gain access to such resources as readily as their male counterparts is thus more likely to be a consequence of a number of underlying organizational processes that impact negatively on their ability to access these networks. (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The women in this study exemplify this point. They are keenly aware of the need to access and accumulate social capital, and fully cognizant of the fact that formal processes do not work in the firm as they should. They point to the relatively unmanaged nature of the firm, and a partnership structure that enables powerful partners to advocate positively on behalf of their protégés. This issue is widely discussed in the literature in relation to promotion to partnership level. For example, Mills (1985) claims that internal connections have long been recognized as playing an important part in promotion outcomes when making advancement decisions:

> [M]any firms depend solely on knowledge of the hiring manager: whoever has the vacancy to fill promotes or transfers a person he or she already knows well, or depends on friends and acquaintances in the company to suggest likely candidates for the job. (Mills, 1985, p. 122)

Malos and Campion (1995) report that in professional service firms upward mobility decisions are often subjective and political, and that the criteria for promotion are frequently only partly understood and are often inconsistently applied. One reason for this may be the influence of personal connections in promotion decisions. Unlike technical ability, which can be evaluated using some method of performance appraisal, that is, the job has either been adequately performed or it has not; the influence of internal connections is highly subjective and difficult to measure. To suggest that new recruits spend time establishing networks and developing relationships with senior organizational members may seem questionable and, to many, highly intrusive. It is for this reason that this aspect of advancement is rarely stated but it is implied by the behaviour of those who succeed. It is argued (McLean, 1998) that the higher up the firm one progresses, the more important subjective criteria become and objectively based criteria like technical skill diminish. In such an environment, the ability to develop and leverage social capital becomes essential and women in the study are well aware of this.

The second issue to be discussed in relation to research question one is the key issue of sponsorship. The findings presented show a clear understanding from women in the sample that in order to gain access to key social capital resources and networks, strong organizational sponsorship is required. This would support Burt's (1998) conclusion that access to sponsors' entrepreneurial networks is associated with early promotion for women, while the promotion of men is more likely to stem from their personally established entrepreneurial networks. So for women to progress it is particularly beneficial to be associated with an established manager and the links this provides to their social networks. It thus becomes critically important for women to be visible in their organizations and through this to gain strong organizational sponsorship (Broadbridge, 2007). Once again, the women in the sample were keenly aware of this issue. They spent much time discussing the issue of sponsorship and went into significant detail in respect of the key benefits of sponsorship and also the process of acquiring a sponsor. However, when offering advice to a friend on how to progress in the firm, the women were particularly mindful of the fact that not just any sponsorship would do: the time and energy spent developing a relationship with a sponsor has to be with the right kind of sponsor. This is perceived to be someone who is themselves well thought of in the firm, has access to key career-enhancing resources (for example, to challenging and career enhancing assignments) and who has 'clout at board level'.

The key necessity to focus effort on the right sponsor, may support the points made by Burt (1998) and Moore (1988). This once again picks up the issue raised by Burt (1998) who points to the issue of credibility for women in organizations, which in turn can affect their ability to access formal and informal organizational networks. He asserts that women are more likely to benefit in career terms from borrowing the social capital of a career sponsor rather than seeking to develop it themselves. Moore (1988) supports this point, indicating that women wanting to break into male-dominated social

networks are likely to experience difficulties and may find the development of a strong mentoring relationship with a supportive and organizationally well-placed individual a more fruitful approach.

Do female consultants perceive the utilisation of impression management strategies to be necessary in aiding their accumulation of social capital to advance their careers?

Having established that the women consultants in the sample perceive the accumulation of social capital to be necessary for their advancement, research question two sought to ascertain if impression management strategies are used to aid in the accumulation of social capital. Here again, the findings were clear and showed a strong perception in the sample of the necessity to utilise impression management strategies in order to access key social networks and, most importantly for this sample, strong organizational sponsorship. Interestingly, the findings indicate that the sample of women consultants perceive the necessity to use impression management approaches in rather a defensive way, to dispel negative gender stereotypes that may otherwise accrue to them and impede their ability to access key social networks and thereby accumulate social capital. The findings reveal three main areas in which those in the sample believe that time should be spent ensuring that one presents an impression in the organization that would overturn specific negative gender stereotypes. These are in the impression management of ambition, likeability and of availability. Each of these was discussed in turn.

In respect of the impression management of ambition, the women in the sample indicate that this is important and aids career progression. The point is made that the firm values ambition and those seen to be proactively aligning themselves with this particular norm are themselves positively viewed. Constantly asking for promotion, being clear about ambition and ensuring that one does the things consistent with being ambitious (for example, working long hours and taking on extra work) are perceived to be positively viewed in the firm. However, the question is then asked, why might women perceive that they actively need to manage this process. Why might their ambition be questioned?

Research clearly indicates that active strategies such as self-promotion are both intuitively and normatively more acceptable for men than women (Miller *et al.*, 1992). Men are culturally conditioned to take personal credit for their achievements; to compete intra-sexually for economic resources (Buss, 1988). They are socialized to be individuals, to lead and to compete hierarchically for positions of power and influence; that is, agency characteristics (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987). This is not so for women. 'Women co-operate and men compete' is a clear and powerful message, that women learn to accept from an early age (Nelson, 1978). Women's focus is on similarity; things that bring people together and connect them. They are also urged to advocate for others and not themselves (Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996). So women are raised with a community rather than a self-centred focus (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987). Women may also avoid proactive self-promoting behaviour for interpersonal considerations, believing that those who behave out of role risk social censure (Deaux and Major, 1987; Eagly, 1987; Huston and Ashmore, 1986). Thus, self-promoting behaviour may be rejected by women for fear they may be perceived as unfeminine, pushy, domineering and

aggressive; characteristics that make them unsuitable for many occupations they may wish to enter (Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996).

However, what is also evident is that women behaving confidently and assertively do not have their behaviour evaluated in the same way as men adopting identical behavioural patterns (Butler and Geis, 1990; Costrich *et al.*, 1975; Heilman *et al.*, 1989). Assertive women are less popular than men (Costrich *et al.*, 1975); self-confident women score highly on their performance but are not liked by their peers (Powers and Zuroff, 1988). Thus, because obtaining social influence requires not only competence but social attraction (Carli *et al.*, 1995), women employing the proactive influencing styles such as openly articulated ambition, may suffer a backlash, whereby their performance evaluations are positively affected, but this is done at the cost of social rejection (Rudman, 1998). The women in the study are thus advised to bear this in mind; having read their organization, and perceived that overt ambition is desirable; they would be wise to be cautious and to balance the positive affect of conforming to this particular organizational norm against potential censure or backlash for behaving out of their gender role.

Women in the sample also indicate that likeability is important, and advise others to ensure that they manage the impression that they are considered to be likeable by influential others. It is believed that this will help them to develop key relationships and assist them to gain access to influential social networks and or to positively viewed sponsors. As one of the consultants remarked, people want to work with others they like; they want to spend time with people that they can rely on, not just to get the job done but to have a good time with, too. So in the sample, interviewees talked about the 'good bloke', the person to play snooker with, and the need to go out drinking and socializing. In terms of social capital accumulation, it is unsurprising that likeability is an issue. Social capital is about the stock of relationships an individual has and the career benefits to be derived from those relationships; since as human beings we are more likely to form relationships with people with whom we feel we have something in common. However, for women this can be problematic when much of the time spent developing these relationships revolves around typically male pursuits, for example, playing snooker and drinking. This is a point also made by Eagly and Carli (2007). They agree that gaining entry to male networks can be difficult, particularly when men centre their networks on masculine activities. They give the example of a woman in corporate finance who found herself excluded from a weekly event on a Sunday evening when all members of the department played basketball. As someone who did not play basketball she did not attend, but she knew that this then meant that she was excluded from a key social network, which had a serious impact on her ability to develop relationships with her workmates.

The final piece of advice in relation to research question two was for women to manage the impression of their availability. The women in the sample indicate that they perceive availability to be important in their firm, and a demonstration of commitment and professionalism. Advice was given that even if one could not be available all the time, women should carefully manage the impression that they were available so that their absence was not negatively perceived and 'the full you' is not

evident in the workplace. Constant availability may be a particularly gendered issue and an organizational norm that women find particularly difficult to comply with. Eagly and Carli (2007) indicate that workplaces may appear to be gender neutral but in fact they are not. Underlying an impression of neutrality there is frequently an implicit model of the ideal employee. This employee is continuously available and willing to make other personal sacrifices for the benefit of the organization, such as travelling at short notice and relocating to address a key organizational problem. Implicit in the model of this ideal is an employee with minimal outside responsibilities, and the person most able to match this ideal is someone with either no or very limited family obligations. The model is predicated upon the people at the top of organizations who themselves have made these life choices and thus expect this from aspiring executives. Women are typically less able to fit the model because they are generally less able to shift their family obligations to their spouses. Even women who do not have children are unable to fit the ideal if it is perceived that they are potential mothers (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Conclusion

The article has sought to assess the extent to which a sample of women consultants were aware of the career advancement benefits of social capital accumulation strategies, and if they were, whether they used impression management techniques to enable them to access key social networks. The findings show that women are keenly aware of the need to accumulate social capital to advance their careers and that the method they feel would be most fruitful to them in achieving this is acquiring an appropriate sponsor in the firm and borrowing their social capital to advance their career prospects. The reasons given for this may be those indicated by Burt, (1998) who suggests that women are likely to progress faster in their careers if they borrow the social capital resources of an influential organizational sponsor than if they seek to build and develop such resources themselves. This point is endorsed by Moore (1988). However, Burt (1998) also suggests that women have a credibility issue in organizations and this impacts on their ability to access key social networks or influential organizational members. The article thus posits that in order to overcome this credibility issue women may use impression management techniques that help them in overcoming the negative gender stereotypes which attach to them.

Once again, the sample of women consultants perceived this to be the case. The findings show that when advising a friend on how to advance in the firm, the women in the sample are clear that impression management needs to be used as a defensive strategy to overcome negative gender stereotypes. These were in relation to the impression management of ambition, likeability and availability. It is thus apparent that women face additional hurdles in their attempts to advance in their organizations. Not only must they work hard and be technically excellent, they must also take on the additional burden of dispelling negative gender stereotypes. This is particularly prevalent in male-dominated environments where, as a respondent to a survey of women professionals in Boston commented, 'while men create the culture, women adapt to it'.

We acknowledge the limitations of the study. It is important to note that the data presented in the article are of perceived attitudes towards the functioning of the process of promotion to partnership, and cannot be extrapolated to account for actual or observed behaviour. This is beyond the scope of the current study and the information to support such findings was neither sought nor obtained in the interviews. It is also important to note that this is a small study, conducted within one professional service firm. The findings cannot therefore be generalized beyond this context, and more work is required in other areas of the professional services before wider generalizability can be assured. It is also important to note that the views presented are only those of the female sample and no comparison has been made with the male sample, a proportion of whom may have held similar perceptions.

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Appendix 1

Details of interview sample

Grade	Age	Length of service (years)
Principal	32	4
Director	40	9
Principal	38	2
Principal	50	18
Principal	32	5
Consultant	29	3
Principal	36	7
Principal	38	4
Director	38	10
Consultant	30	2
Consultant	32	6
Consultant	28	4
Consultant	39	11
Consultant	32	8
Director	36	7
Consultant	28	3
Principal	43	15
Consultant	30	3
Director	50	22

Appendix 2

Interview guide

Before I begin, I would like to tell you a little about the study. I am interested in understanding your perceptions of how the promotion to partner process operates within this firm, with a particular focus on behaviour you observe that is successful or unsuccessful in respect of career advancement. So I am particularly interested in talking through with you how you understand the promotion to partner process, what you feel is valued in respect of gaining partnership positions in the firm and discussing examples of behaviour you have seen to be successful and that which is not successful in respect of gaining career advancement. Please be assured that all information will be kept completely confidential.

1. If an ambitious friend were to ask your advice on how to gain promotion to partner within the firm, what advice would you give them?
2. Why would you focus on these things? (Go through each one the interviewee has listed)
3. How do you know they are useful, can you give me examples? (Go through each one the interviewee has listed)
4. If your friend did these things, how would they benefit? (Go through each issue the interviewee has listed)
5. Are there other things you would advise your friend to do? (Repeat cycle in respect of why each one is important, how it will help and seeking examples)
6. Are there things you would advise your friend not to do; things which would be career limiting?
7. Why would you advise against these things? (Go through each one)
8. What would be the consequences for career advancement if your friend did one (or more) of these things?
9. Can you give examples?
10. Do you think promotion as it operates within the firm is fair?
11. How do you make this assessment?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add in terms of your understanding of the way in which the promotion to partner process operates within the firm?