

FEMALE MANAGERS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS:

BETTER NETWORKS, FEWER BENEFITS?

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Abstract

While network research has shown that certain network structures are beneficial for career progression we also find that women benefit much less from such advantageous network positions. The aim of this work is to tease out some of the underlying dynamics of these observed patterns. In a first phase an ANOVA analysis was conducted comparing the variables of the network survey to reveal any differences in network structures between male and female professionals' networks. The identified differences were the departure point to then investigate the root causes of the featured differences through interviews on networking behaviours and the company context. This study contributes to revealing some of the micro-dynamics at play that impede female managers' progression in professional service firms.

Introduction

Considerable research has been devoted to understanding the extent to which gender inequality is constructed, reproduced and built into work organizations. Evidence suggests that the causes of gender inequality are complex and various, based on organizational structures and process interactions (Ibarra, 1992). Some authors argue that gender-based societal assumptions prevent women from advancement to leadership roles (Lyness, and Thompson, 2000). Multiple studies have shown career progression is significantly related to organisational actors' networks (Seibert et al. 2001). Networks are important constituents of career paths as they deliver information and offer support and feedback (Ibarra and Hunter, 2007). Furthermore, networking behaviours such as an individual's effort to foster and maintain relationships with others are also related to perceived career success (Bensaou et al., 2014). At the same time the literature has well documented hurdles female managers face for integrating into male dominated networks (Burt, 1997). Work environments frequently reflect male culture where career progression often means to embrace male-stereotypical leadership behaviours such as competitiveness and aggressiveness (Eagly and Karau, 2002) obliging female professionals to integrate into men's networks to not find themselves excluded from career paths (Moore, 1990; Travers et al., 1997). Reduced network access, hence, creates several burdens, including limited knowledge acquisition about their organizations and difficulty in establishing working relationship, which, in turn, are related with limited upward mobility and "glass ceiling" effects (Morrison and Von Glinow, 1990; Brass, 1992; Powell and Butterfield, 1994; Lyness and Thompson, 1997; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon, 2009; O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, and Allen, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to examine how the networks of professional women, even if better in structure, fall short to deliver the benefits they have shown to provide for male professionals.

Theoretical background

Gender research suggests that men and women reap different benefits from networks which can have an impact on their career progression (Brass, 1985; Burt, 1997; Ibarra, 1997; Linehan, 2001; Brass et al., 2004; Ibarra and Hunter, 2007). One important difference how women and men manage their careers is how they form their professional networks. Men's

networks have been shown to be more widely dispersed, while women tend to form their professional networks in the same way that they form personal networks (Burt, Kilduff, and Tasselli, 2013). In the relational domain women are considered social specialists in part because such social activity matches prevailing stereotypes concerning women as communal and warm human beings (Spence and Buckner, 2000). However, even in friendship interactions, agency and assertiveness tends to be associated with stereotypical expectations concerning men rather than women (Eagly, 2009). In organizations with heightened perceptions of incongruity between gender and leadership roles prejudice can arise leading to women being excluded from high-rank positions (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Biased perceptions of women's networks affect their performance more than men's when it comes to brokerage activities (Brands, Kilduff and Tasselli, 2013). In the competitive arena of modern organizations brokerage roles are bases of power and influence (Burt, 1992). Networking behaviours such as an individual's effort to foster and maintain relationships with others are likely to be related to perceived career success. For instance, women who become active in professional societies would be expected to feel greater perceived career success as they become recognized and known by others in their profession. Yet depending on the structure of the company networks, women may perceive disadvantages in informal leadership roles (Burt, 1992). In particular, women can have a lack of access to influential networks because the composition of informal networks, which provide leadership and promotions opportunities (Burt, 1992; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Ibarra, 1992) are based on long-term male strengthened interaction (Podolny and Baron, 1997), mostly outside the company. Women's difficult time accessing important informal communication, is perceived as a barrier hindering their career progress. As such, network homophily is related with some resource benefits, increasing mobility prospects (McPherson, SmithLovin, Cook, 2001). Prior research drew conclusion that women are confined in the wrong types of networks. The presumed lack of access to some information and status in female networks is based by not being in white male networks, even though women have often high-status contacts (McDonald, 2011). In other words, the different use of social capital and different access in networks could therefore explain a significant portion of the persistent gender in career outcomes (Lin, 2001). Moreover, women have historically lacked access to important organizational roles with networking behaviours that help to build reach into the upper levels of organizations (Westphal and Milton, 2000). While women have been encouraged to engage in networking behaviours, studies indicate that even network structures that are favourable for male career progression do not provide the same benefits for women (Burt, 1998).

There are few studies that investigate why networking does not benefit women in the same way as their male counterparts. While attention is often focused on the examination of configurations of entire networks at the macro organizational level, our analysis focuses on the micro processes and ego networks of women managers working in professional service firms (PSFs). This study adopts a social network perspective to observe in detail gender differences in the networking behaviours in PSFs to develop a more fine-grained picture between network structures and networking processes embedded in an organisational context. It reveals any specific networking activities that female professionals participate in less and which factors hamper the translation of advantageous network structures into career benefits. By combining a comparison of the network structure between female and male managers with a qualitative approach that looks into the networking behaviours through semi-structured interviews, this study contributes to revealing some of the micro-dynamics at play that impede female managers' progression to the very top levels in professional service firms.

Methods

Sample

Since the current study is part of a research project that focused on early phases of careers in consulting and auditing firms, participants' age ranged between 28 and 34 years. Managers had on average around five years of professional experience at major office locations of professional service firms (PSFs) in Europe and in North America. Across the three professional service firms, the study sample consists of 34 female professionals, and 38 male professionals.

Data collection

This study uses a mixed method approach combining quantitative ego network data with interview data to better understand the mechanisms behind the differences between male and female professionals' network structures. The quantitative data was collected via standardized ego network surveys prompting participants to list and characterise the key contacts they were referring to for task and developmental advice, political buy-in, creative ideas, and external contacts helping them to achieve their professional roles. The qualitative data was collected in semi-structured interviews among female and male managers in professional service firms (consulting, law and audit). The interviews focused on their networks in their professional roles.

Interview questions sought information about work-related internal and external contacts and how professionals were developing their networks with these key professional contacts. Each interview lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

In a first phase an ANOVA analysis was conducted comparing the variables of the network survey to reveal any differences in network structures between male and female professionals' networks. The identified differences were the departure point to then investigate the root causes of the featured differences through in-depths interviews on networking behaviours and the company context in which they unfolded.

Adopting a grounded theory approach, we then analysed the interview transcripts to see if they were converging with the survey findings and which explanations emerged for the identified differences. In the first phase the interviews were carefully read, analysed and coded to label the networking behaviours. We moved back and forth between emerging data codes and categories regarding networking activities, such as attending meetings with partners, going to dinners or sporting events clients. In a second phase, we compared the categories and drew out any relations and overarching patterns between them.

Main findings

The ANOVA analysis showed significant differences between genders for the number of lower level employees and external network contacts (both significantly lower for female professionals) as well as the number of peers, partners and senior managers (significantly higher for female professionals). Females manage significantly more up ($M= 5.21$, $SD= 2.83$) than males ($M= 3.05$, $SD= 2.73$) [$p <0.02$]. However, they do not seem able to exploit the potential of these numerous high-level contacts [$p <0.04$]. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the study variables separately for male and female groups.

Another significant difference was the lower level of network hierarchy in female networks indicating less dependency on specific network contacts and hence a greater overall level of social capital. Additionally, female managers count more peers among their network contacts ($M= 3.14$, $SD= 2.80$) than their male counterpart ($M=1.97$, $SD=1.38$) [$p <0.05$]. Taken together, this suggests that from a pure structural point of view female professionals' networks

were better in terms of securing a higher number of high level internal contacts while at the same time decreasing their dependency on any one specific network contact.

On the other hand, female professionals' networks were structurally worse compared to male professionals in regards to generating support from lower level employees and to exploiting the bridging potential with external contacts. Women had established significantly fewer key network contacts for managing down ($M=0$ $SD=0$), expressed by the lower number of staff members (compared to $M=2.13$, $SD=3.34$ for male professionals) but also by fewer associates as part of their network ($M=0.14$, $DS = 0.36$ compared to $M=1.29$, $SD=0.95$). The disadvantages of fewer support staff as key network contacts translated into less time available to focus on networking due to lower levels of delegation. In this context female managers commented extensively on their observation of different leadership style expectations for female and male managers: While for male managers a forceful and highly demanding delegating team leadership style was seen as appropriate female managers tended to comply more with their own ideal but also the organisation's expectations of a more nurturing and participative team management style. This implied spending more hours with their teams accomplishing the client work together or jointly working towards tight deadlines instead of fixing a delivery deadline to the team and letting the team accomplish the work on their own. At the same time, female managers reported to receive less support from support staff such as secretaries for menial tasks.

The fewer number of external contacts, especially client contacts ($M=2.79$, $SD=1.37$ for females compared to $M=3.74$, $SD=1.2$ for male professionals) proved to be particular challenging. Client relationship and activities tend to be developed outside normal working hours and are often aimed towards male-oriented social interests. Women traditionally get less involved than men in social activities (Dinovitzer et al., 2009) which may have an impact on their chances of promotion. While only a few female managers in our study commented on less time available for client socialising due to family commitments, a majority commented on less time available due to their tendency to spend more time with their teams. Another significant theme were the various difficulties they were facing to engage in client socialising. Many female professionals reported that it was more difficult for them to entertain clients on their own and that they needed to rely on the involvement of the partners for client socialising events as they felt uncomfortable to approach male clients for "the typical male bonding going to the pub thing". Some reported examples of senior clients with an explicit preference to deal with

male interlocutors at their professional service firm. As a consequence, women socialised significantly less with clients (p. <0.02).

Insert Table 1 about here

Qualitative themes

The interviews shed light on the micro-mechanisms at play to explain these structural differences. They demonstrate how networking activities of professional women fall short to bring the advantages they have shown for male professionals. In particular, interviews provided a fine-grained picture about the difficulties female managers were facing to reap the benefits of their advantageous network structures with senior managers and partners and how the disadvantages of their network structures in regards to staff members and external contacts translated into reduced career opportunities.

Networks disadvantages

Results indicated that female professionals have significantly fewer external client contacts as part of their network and fewer internal contacts at lower levels with support staff and team members. The following paragraphs show the impact of these structural differences resulting in reduced chances for building strong client ties and less time for networking.

Client interactions

On rare occasion women managers reported instances where their competence was questioned merely because of their gender.

“It depends who the client is. There are some clients we have who won’t speak to females, not interested and there is one that I don’t know but I have heard who, won’t speak to the partner who is female and will speak to the senior lawyer because he is male so you get that, but that is usually very old, client who is 60 and different generation”. Anna S. (ConsultCo)

While the above case was seen as extreme most female managers reported that some clients were seen as more relaxed and confident dealing with male professionals, as Tamara J.

(AuditCo) illustrated:

“There is much more male bonding going to the pub thing, it is quite usual, client socialising. It’s difficult for me to call clients, especially if it’s male and invite him. I don’t tend to do that, but typically involve also the partner”.

The majority of male professionals did not express this view. They tried to gain advantages from networking with clients, relying on existing contacts by cultivating new relations inside and outside of business hours. Comparing the previous statements, the sharp contrast becomes apparent.

“I try to make contacts with the individuals, lunching the individuals, wining and dining the individuals, knowing their business, knowing what problems may arise, alerting them to where problems may arise, being involved and being available”. Bruce H. (LawCo)

“I’m trying to spend more time out with the clients and meeting them rather than sitting at my desk in the office and trying to find answers or something like that”. Alan B. (ConsultCo)

Comparing the statements of female managers with male managers about their networking behaviors we found that male managers often tried to create more personal relationships with clients such as doing sports or taking their clients out on a regular basis, as Eugene W. (ConsultCo), admitted:

“It’s lunching, it’s having dinner, it’s even just going out for a beer, and sometimes doing some sport with the client. Playing squash or jogging, I met with one client every morning and we were running every morning”.

In contrast, female professionals commented on the perceived difficulty to establish bonds with male clients.

“Drink a beer, go off and play golf, whatever...Just talk to them a little more and it is very tough, when guys go out they have this male bonding, and it is harder for a woman, I can’t actually do that and the person I am working with is also a woman, that makes it easier”. Ada B. (AuditCo)

“XYZ, is a very old-fashioned type of company, very male dominated, no females in power there at all, and they seem very old fashioned”. Laura T. (AuditCo)

Lower level of staff support

Our transcripts also revealed how female managers perceived to have less support from

support staff. At the same time, they expressed more uneasiness with delegation due to deeply rooted female role stereotypes. Interestingly these stereotypes were not only reflected in team expectations towards them but they had partly internalised these stereotypes themselves resulting in female managers spending more time to work with their staff in critical situations.

Barbara E. (LawCo.) comments how she felt less supported by secretaries in the support function:

“The only thing I notice usually is secretaries who have five people that they work for, five managers, if one of their managers is me, a female, and one of their managers is a man and the secretary is female, she will almost look after the male manager like a child, so she will do everything, she will get his lunch for him, she will go shopping for him, she will do everything”.

Many female professionals reported that they had to do more pushing and persuading of team members to get them to do what they wanted than their male peers.

“I was not like managing them I was working with them, to push them to work, to manage the budget, manage their time, it’s difficult. Not very efficient because in a way it’s difficult to push your peers, who used to be your peers”. Anna S. (ConsultCo)

“They will come back and say well, no actually I am out here doing this, or doing this and – and for me that was just like a complete – what do you mean, you are saying no? I just couldn’t believe it. But then, you know, trying to forcefully, but in a nice way, insist that they had to do it – ok, I understand that you are doing this but can you not do this – come back after that and do it then, or – whatever it is and it’s been a struggle sometimes”. Dorothea M. (AuditCo)

Even if overworked female professionals stated to delegate less to lower level employees than their male counterparts. Female managers reported ending up completing tasks they had delegated to others and managing their time according to subordinate’s priorities rather than their own which was in the end limiting their time available for networking.

“Normally, I should focus on my project work and I think that’s something that male colleagues handle differently. I think yes, women tend to do their work 100% but men they say ok you can do that and I’m the manager ok at ten o’clock I want to have the presentation my desk. I don’t care how you do this. And I think I do it differently because I think ok we have a team, we have to serve together, we do it together and I work with them. Therefore, that’s one

of the negative parts maybe. I don't have the time to network that much, maybe, like other male colleagues do". Monica C. (ConsultCo)

Difficult to reap benefits

While female professionals' networks looked favourably in terms of a greater number of key contacts from higher levels of the hierarchy, namely senior managers and partners, interviews revealed that this advantageous network feature did not necessarily translate into benefits as they encountered a lack of sponsorship from professionals at higher levels. A scarcity of role models and the difficulty to comply with the male ideal-type of a professional including anticipated difficult work-life balance for the future contributed to hamper the leveraging of otherwise favourable network structures.

Managing upwards

Even if women invested more deeply in higher ranking network key contacts with partners and senior managers, they did not seem able to really exploit the potential of these numerous high-level contacts. Lack of sponsorship was one of the barriers to female professionals' inclusion to important task assignments which hindered their professional career development, as Laura T. from AuditCo illustrated:

"Although he has given me quite a lot of opportunities in the past I wouldn't particularly be able to speak to him I suppose, about I don't know where my career is going type of thing or asking him for more that sort of advice".

While most of the female managers stated that maximizing the number of partner contacts in their networks was a conscious choice to raise their visibility within the organization they reported that this high number of senior contacts did not necessarily translate into a real support and advice for career progression. This was particularly evident when it came to having access to partner decision-making process.

"You could have a career here, but if you want partnership here, it would be a very, very hard battle and you would probably have to start now to be in the running". Chrissie W. (LawCo)

Sponsorship played an important role since well-connected partners could make introductions or provide referrals to long-standing clients, contacts that were crucial to generate revenues required to be promoted to partnership. Female professionals often lacked the support of senior managers and partners which was seen to be also reflected in a biased project allocation where process-wise the selection of project managers was reported to be driven by a pre-selection among male buddies resulting in women being staffed on less attractive projects with limited visibility, as Regina G. from AuditCo commented:

“When it comes to project allocation and staffing in my impression it’s a pre-selection of people and therefore because of this pre-selection and because you can decide with whom you want to work or not there’s already building some kind of groups that work together”.

Compared to male professionals, female managers expressed more difficulties to seek out particular high visibility projects to work on or to work for specific partners as Barbara E. states:

“I don’t know but there may be an element of choice at the partner end because originally, I was allocated to somebody else and then they changed and it wasn’t me. I think there’s probably an element of choice from their end but from our end you’re just told”.

In comparison, to raise their profile male professional had a heightened sense of understanding who the important partners and how to ensure they could establish ties with them. Bob J. (LawCo) explained:

“I think now that I have seen how the dynamics of the team work in terms of you know who is responsible for what and how things get allocated, I think you can play to it more, and you can have a bigger say in your own destiny, short term destiny in terms of which deal you get put on and all that sort of thing by speaking regularly with people and you know, doesn’t have to be about work but just maintaining your relationship”.

Male professionals tried to make sure to build good working relationships with a strong network of specific people.

“I think I have built a good relationship with all the people, I wouldn’t say with everybody, with all the people that I want to. That sounds a bit Machiavellian”. Felix C. (LawCo)

Lack of role models

The lack of female role models at the highest levels of PSFs, especially as partners, was a common topic. The lack of females in senior roles contributed to a sense of discouragement among mid-level female professionals about gaining a better position inside the firm.

“I think there is, I have heard that there is a system in place within the different teams where there is a senior associate who is a female who is meant to be a point of contact and they meet once every year or so to discuss any issues or I’ve heard that that’s been introduced but nothing happened in our team. I don’t know anything about it...There aren’t many female partners, or not many female partners. There are not many female associates in our team. I think it can be difficult”. Gloria P. (LawCo)

“We have only got one female partner in our office, and we have not got any female senior managers, so if you want to, as a woman, I think we had a complaint about this a year ago, if you want to aspire to someone, there is not a single woman in the office that you can aspire to, apart from this one partner”. Tamara J. (AuditCo)

It turned out female role models were not often seen as being suitable for the possible career development of a female manager even if they might have been confronted with similar issues, such as juggling work and personal life. Compared to their male counterparts, having so few senior women translated into a sense of lack of credibility.

“So, I think – I’m not quite tempted yet, but you never know what might – I’d like – I’ve not seen many female partners coming through. In terms of female senior managers, there are a couple and I wouldn’t call them role models. Well, they very much put themselves on a par with the guys. They are very much – I wouldn’t say masculine, but they very much compete with the guys. They’re not very feminine, they are not in long-term relationships or anything like that, they are very much, work is their life, you know, they work huge hours. And we all do at certain points in time, but not necessarily all year round”.

“Yes, they have. They have both got children. One of them is very high up in the firm. So, you know, it has been done, but it obviously hasn’t been done an awful lot if I can only see two of them then they are probably exceptional because of the fact that there are only two of them”. Lea W. (AuditCo)

Compliance with male ideal type

Coding interview transcripts across the mid-career phase the compliance with a male ideal type surfaced as another hurdle.

While networking was discussed by half of respondents as an important activity for career advancement half of the female interviewees questioned whether this was as natural an activity for women as it seemed to be for their male counterparts.

“I think when the women join this company they try to play by the male rules of the game or whatever I mean it’s always this in Germany you have to be a better man to get the same job and to get the same money”. Gloria P. (ConsultCo)

Coinciding with this finding was the recurring theme of having to adhere to a male dominated role model predominant in PSFs which required constant availability and made it difficult to identify any high-ranking role models within their organisations. Furthermore, when it came to engage in informal networks, necessary to obtain career advancement female professionals described the feeling of being somehow excluded, resulting in barriers to get access to important contacts and informal information. Female professionals felt less included and could not rely on strong ties.

“I don’t feel that I’m well integrated in male network: I think that my position as a woman in a man’s world is different than it is among male colleagues”. Monica C. (ConsultCo)

“I continue to have to support my position. If I were a new manager who were a guy – and I watch him interact with new managers, my peers who are males, it is different. They see them as buddies, ‘It’s sure, whatever you need”. Olivia R. (ConsultCo)

Over time, women stated not being able to embody the range of characteristics and behavior of stereotypical success male roles, such as seeking out high-profile projects and making their achievements more visible, as young professional describes:

“Of thing is that one of my weaknesses is that I don’t promote myself enough and that you have to do more flag-waving and go around telling people what a great job you have been doing”. Olivia R. (ConsultCo)

“Well, I would say that you could be a really good worker but if you have kept your head down and you haven’t networked, you need to promote yourself. But if you just didn’t say anything and you relied solely on your performance then I don’t think it is very hard to advance any more”. Simona R. (AuditCo)

Work-life balance

A prominent sub-theme of the compliance to the male ideal-type worker was the anticipated conflict between future caregiving responsibilities and promotion to senior roles. Female professional with high career aspirations were anticipating that family responsibilities would impede their career advancement. Time to devote in one role was seen as an obstacle to properly fulfil the other one in the same way, making it impossible to find a balance between work and family. This feeling of being overburdened coincided with the idea of leaving the firm as Rita B. (AuditCo) explained:

“I mean I want to get more experience, but will I be working with this firm in the next five years? I don’t know. Because the time that is required of me, I feel is being taken from my personal life and I want a personal life also”.

Women’s careers were also seen to be influenced not only by their preferences and aspirations but similarly by the organizations in which they worked sending strong signals about appropriate behaviours. Family life was seen as too costly in terms of promotion as it implied cutting back on long hours. For example:

“I think that’s the one thing being female in the department because you also have this underlying feeling of, will that stop me making it to partnership. It’s almost like you have to decide which way you’re going to go”. Barbara E. (LawCo).

“My lifestyle is not conducive to children, yes so that is the main issue and to make it conducive to children I would be cutting my hours down, I wouldn’t be working as hard, the firm won’t like that”.

“I think so I started to think about what I can do to change my life and I think changing my life as being a consultant, you can only change my job. It’s not possible to reduce the efforts of your pressure or whatever, you can’t do it. So, you have to come to this conclusion”. Regina G. (AuditCo).

As the work-family balance burden was mainly on women, one of the findings was that having a family and household responsibilities was perceived by female professionals as a great limitation for their career. Networking possibilities were limited as family needs arose, restricting the time spent to nurture professional contacts especially the external ones. Rebecca described:

“If you have small children at home for example, you just go home after work. And if you didn’t form this relationship with all your peers, you didn’t start from the beginning, then you wouldn’t have this circle in place”. Rebecca F. (AuditCo)

While it could be assumed that achieving an acceptable balance between work and family were strongly felt as a challenge by young female manager, observations indicate that for men this was not perceived as burden.

“Having a huge family if you’re female would be almost impossible whereas if you’re male, it’s not even an issue”. Barbara E. (LawCo).

This was also echoed by Eugene W. (ConsultCo) who stated:

“Got married, we met last year, and my wife is pregnant at the moment and this makes absolutely change in your private life and it changes also priorities, family, and things like that become more and more important but at the moment, the change in my private life did not have an impact”.

It was therefore less surprising to see that while female managers reported having a family as being too costly for career advancement there was no similar perception among male managers as Bob J. (LawCo), noted:

“Not really I mean I got married in the last year but I don’t think that has affected my professional development”.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

Although the findings of our study require further validation, we consider the results of this pilot study provide new insights into how inequality in promotion chances is created in professional service firms. Few longitudinal network studies (Jonczyk et al., 2016) have pursued the development of individual networks during the professional course. Specifically, we have not completely understood the reasons and mechanisms for gender differences in building and leveraging networks for career success.

This study contributes to painting a more holistic picture of the network(ing) dynamics mid-career female managers in professional service organisations face. Our study shows that gender inequality in professional service firms stems from two distinctive areas. On the one hand the hurdles that make the leveraging of the distinctively beneficial characteristics of female professionals' networks difficult. On the other hand, the distinctive disadvantages in terms of less support from staff levels and lower bridging potential that put female professionals at a disadvantage. While dominant male patterns of behaviour, the lack of role models as well as insufficient levels of support have been well documented barriers to female career progression our study provides us with a better understanding how these factors impact daily work practices and how work practices are themselves reinforcing the practices as for example biased project allocations.

The fewer number of external contacts to clients and other sources of external information represent a disadvantage for acquiring mandates and exploring alternative career opportunities. Our analysis shows how this disadvantage is rooted in gendered patterns of behaviours and leadership expectations. These dynamics limit the scope of what is perceived to be appropriate behaviour for female professionals and thereby make it more difficult for female managers to establish and nurture informal relationships with male clients thereby reducing women's opportunities to acquire different information and knowledge for their own growth. At the same time, we see how gendered leadership expectations allow less time for women to manage their external contacts.

This study hence corroborates the existence of gender differences in networking and supports previous research regarding gender hurdles women face on networking (Burke, et al.,1995; Moore, 1990; Burt, 1992; Ibarra, 1992; Ragins et al., 1998; Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Linehan, 2001; Singh et al., 2006; Van Emmerik et all., 2006; Ely et all., 2011). Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013; Brands et all., 2015). Our findings on the role of reduced support from partners resonate with the recent work of Briscoe and Von Nordenflycht (2014) who find important gender differences in the effectiveness of networks strategies among young professionals in PSFs. Most of the challenges associated with relational strategies, including the circulation and generation of valuable client resources within professional organizations that do not appear to help women with their career advancement. Professional relationships are deeply embedded in social relationships. As Briscoe and Von Nordenflycht (2014) show women had a harder time forming network ties to senior partners in order to be chosen to inherit

the retiring partners' clients due to homophily effects. The absence of sponsors hence creates disadvantages for women to pursue a challenging career path, as also highlighted in our study. And even when different approach is taken by female professionals, through building relationships to new clients with significant efforts, homophily still poses a challenge for females (Briscoe and Von Nordenflycht, 2014). While their quantitative study shows the value of networking strategies differs based on partner gender and females appear disadvantaged in client inheritance, our interviews add the fact that rainmaking strategies by forming and investing time in networks outside of the firm is already critical for women at earlier career stages and already then hampered by greater difficulties to build these social ties to clients.

It may also be that women don't benefit from networking activities due to gender stereotyping which is also a factor in biasing network perceptions. Building on the body of research that reveals that gender stereotypes may hamper women regarding the legitimacy engaging in networking behaviours, Brands and Kilduff (2014) found that brokerage activity is likely to be aligned with stereotypical expectations associated with men rather than women. Our findings add to that and show that female professionals may be sanctioned in their ability to assume bridging role to clients due to more difficulties to create strong client ties and a lack of time as they feel more compelled to spend more time with their teams thereby complying with and replicating gender stereotypes.

Research on gender and organizational networks has shown the existence of a prevailing model of success which is a masculine model as the self-managed nature of the career development process which necessitates a proactive approach towards career management (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Many of our interviews highlighted the anticipated difficulties to balance work and private life, but at the same time they are incapable of distancing themselves from male organizational culture and remain caught up in the problems of higher work demands, sacrificing family needs but without the certainty of success.

Limitations and future research

The data were collected comes from specific context, professional service firms. Data from other sources, such as other industries, should improve external validity. We also acknowledge the limitations of this research in terms of the small sample. Further research should aim for a bigger sample across genders to see how much commonality there is between professionals. Larger samples could ensure a representative distribution of the population.

Additionally, we encourage further investment in longitudinal studies that feature how differences in networks play out at different career stages such as senior level management. While we can figure out the career paths and their networking behaviours and gendering practise inside PSFs from mid-career professional interviewees a longitudinal perspective would indicate how long-lasting the reported differences are and how their effects possibly accumulate across career stages.

From a practical point of view the study results may inform policies and practices for organisations to better support the network development of their female managers as well as to eliminate bias from the promotion process. While the active participation of the women in networking remains a necessary condition to mitigate the disadvantage female professionals frequently suffer from in the work environment our work shows that most of the hurdles are rooted in organisational practices and cultural expectations. This implies that if professional service firms want to see real change in the representation of female professionals at higher levels only the tackling of these organisational hurdles is a sufficient condition for real change.

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Annexe

TABLE 1: Differences between male and female professionals' networks

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>F</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Sd</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Sd</i>		
# clients	3,74	1,2	2,79	1,37	5,95**	0,02
# partners	3,05	2,87	5,21	2,83	5,85**	0,02
# senior managers	2,08	2,16	3,43	1,45	4,65**	0,04
# managers	1,97	1,38	3,14	2,80	4,05**	0,05
# associates	0,95	1,29	0,14	0,36	5,21**	0,03
# staff	2,13	3,34	0	0	4,82**	0,03
# task advice	6,84	2,98	8,46	2,57	3,05	0,09
# contacts outside	3,95	3,74	2,14	2,21	2,86*	0,1
# telephone communication	31,89	13,46	20,71	10,35	7,86***	0,01
# Hierarchy	0,07	0,03	0,05	0,03	5,92**	0,02

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

TABLE 2: Gender differences in barrier to networking

	Women Networking	Men Networking
Client interactions	“Because of the kind of the job they are really-bullish. It’s just a cliché I would say. But there’s something frightening kind of. I don’t know maybe it’s just my impression but I think the network of men is different”. (Monica C.)	“Some managers I have met we have not talked about the project the whole evening. Then you start to talk about hobbies, about family, whatever, and then you say, you are playing tennis or you are playing squash or whatever, squash on a weekend or a Friday”. (Eugene W.)

Level of staff support	“Whereas female to female, they expect you to take responsibility for yourself, get on with it, you are a girl, come on for God’s sake. It’s almost as like they treat the males just like children and I really notice that a lot”. (Barbara E.)	“My network is I developed them, since from day 1, I saw that they care, saw they were intelligent, I took them under my wing”. (Arthur H.)
Managing upwards	“It occurred to me a little while ago that if I would actually have been to drop the slightly odd”. (Edith G.)	“I spend more time for example interacting with, generally with people who are more senior than me rather than people who are more junior. That is possibly a result of where I am”. (Felix C.)
Role model	“I look up to and I’d say they were role models. Among the females? No there isn’t. I think there is meant to be but I think there’s a system in place”. (Elisa R.)	“Was the guy who, he pushed me quite very hard, career-wise, he always, he probably, from the first day I learned a lot from him and he pushed a lot of my career”. (Eugene W.)
Compliance with male ideal type	“It’s a very sort of old-boys’ network type thing and all into cricket and rugby and whatever and being female as well their organisation is very male dominated and there is no females in any senior positions (Laura t.)	“It is quite interesting that she knows a lot of people. Yes, it’s interesting how the women are out”. (Alan B.)