

Gender balance: Closing the leaks in the talent pipeline

Brought to you by the **InterLaw Diversity Forum**, the UK MDS Knowledge Sharing webinars aim to increase access to knowledge, best practice, and practical insights that help to drive progress in relation to inclusion and culture in the legal sector.

When it comes to shifting the dial on gender, what does it take to achieve meaningful change?

In 2013, 29% of Irwin Mitchell's Partners were women – already placing the gender balance in the firm's Partnership comfortably ahead of the pack at the time. But in the twelve years that followed, the percentage of women Partners within the firm has doubled.

At our latest UK MDS Knowledge Sharing webinar, the InterLaw Diversity Forum were joined by the Irwin Mitchell team to explore the factors contributing to their journey towards gender balance.



Alison Eddy,
Partner Ambassador
for Inclusion



Nicola Handley,
Partner, Asbestos and
Occupational Lung Disease



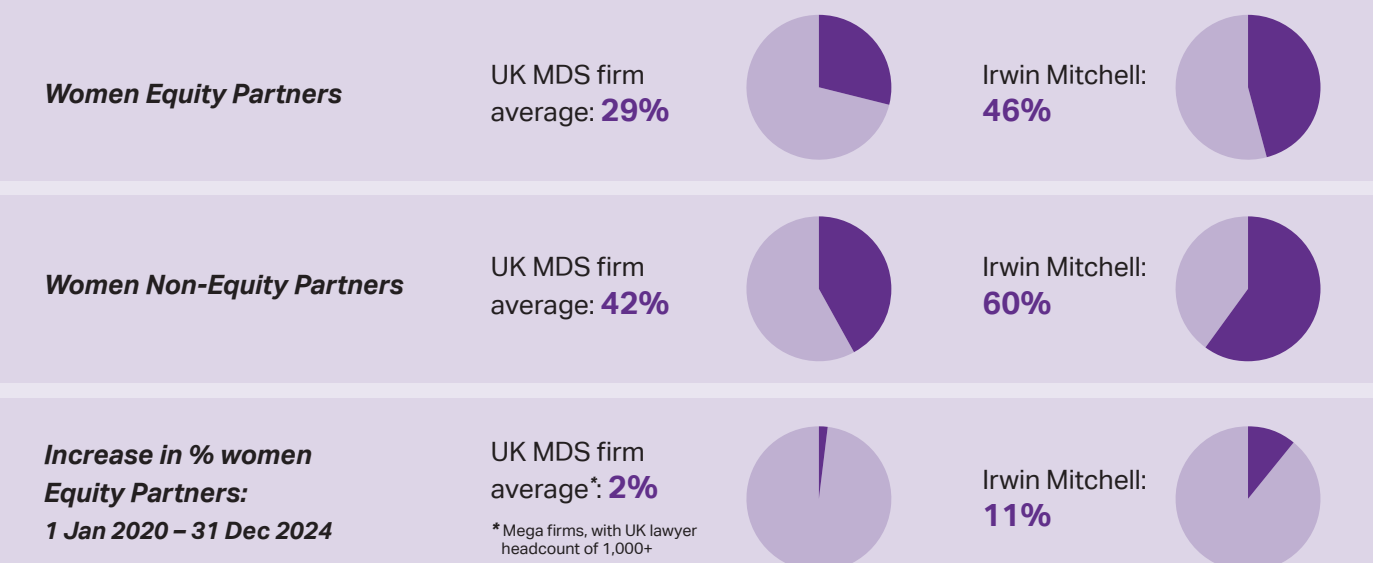
Anne Kavanagh,
Partner, Medical
Negligence



Louise Lumley,
Chief Client Officer

There is no silver bullet when it comes to achieving gender balance in the legal sector. But a theme underpinning the discussion was the authenticity of Irwin Mitchell's person-centred approach. By focusing on talent at an individual level, the firm's progress on gender has not been held back by industry norms.

Data from the [UK Model Diversity Survey](#) makes clear that Irwin Mitchell stands out from the crowd when it comes to the representation of women. The percentage of women Partners at Irwin Mitchell exceeds that of any other UK MDS law firm participant. Across the first five UK MDS cycles, the gender balance among promotions to Partner at Irwin Mitchell consistently reflects the gender balance in the firm's talent pipeline.



Four factors supporting long-term change

"Leadership is really about creating opportunities for others to thrive."

Alison Eddy, Partner Ambassador for Inclusion

1. Investing time in engaging women to understand the barriers

Inspired by the Law Society's **Women in Leadership in Law** programme spearheaded by Christina Blacklaws, Irwin Mitchell held a series of roundtable discussions in 2018 exploring career barriers experienced by women in the firm. The findings prompted a marked change in relation to board engagement and strategy. Tackling barriers head on meant adopting policies and practices that, at the time, were not commonplace across the sector.

2. Policies and processes underpinned by trust and empowerment

"We've challenged our own thinking on traditional industry practices to remove barriers and to make a difference." Lou Lumley, Chief Client Officer

The firm was an early adopter of flexible working. Pre-pandemic, 43% of Irwin Mitchell's workforce worked flexibly. And in a market where in-office mandates are becoming the norm, the firm has taken a more individualised approach. "It's about trust and empowerment. There's no *one size fits all*." Trust works two ways, of course. The firm is honest and realistic about the challenges in finding a balance between work and home. A commitment to promoting relatable role models and an acknowledgement that perfection can be an unrealistic aspiration is leading to a more open and 'human' dialogue on the issues that matter to colleagues.

3. Challenging industry norms

"I'll never forget my first interview at Irwin Mitchell. I said to the Partner 'I'm interviewing for a secretarial role, but I want to let you know that I'm going to be a lawyer.' He wasn't fazed by that. It demonstrated from the outset that the culture here is different." Nicola Handley, Partner

One of the most powerful takeaways from the discussion was the impact of the firm's person-centred approach. Focusing on the individual – rather than being limited by industry norms – has paved the way for a more pragmatic and individualised approach to flexible working and billable targets. But it has also equipped Irwin Mitchell to take a human approach in the moments that matter, and influenced the firm's approach to talent development. The personal experiences shared during the discussion highlighted that the firm's person-centred approach has reduced the risk that exceptional female talent may be overlooked.

"I sort of thought I had missed the boat somehow. Fortunately for me, my line manager constantly checked in. Had my ambitions changed? ... I was promoted to partner at the age of 55. I didn't think that would happen for me. Now I lead the largest Medical Negligence team in London. We're a high performing team and we're a diverse team."
Anne Kavanagh, Partner

4. Balance over dominance

"Our gender group first and foremost is a gender group. We know we need to be balanced."
Alison Eddy, Partner Ambassador for Inclusion

While our discussion focused on steps the firm has taken to remove barriers for women, it was clear that the overarching ethos of Irwin Mitchell's approach is fair treatment. Male leaders have played an active role in supporting and enabling change at a strategic and at an individual level. But the firm also acknowledges the importance of proactively addressing norms that can hamper the experience all colleagues, and strives to apply an intersectional lens to their approach.

Putting pragmatism and trust at the heart of flexible working

Irwin Mitchell's **Flexible by Choice** framework supports decisions around where, how, and when colleagues work. But it is not a 'one size fits all' policy. The number of set days in the office differs from team to team, based on business needs and the nature of services provided to clients. Irwin Mitchell recognises the benefits that office working can bring in terms of collaboration and connectivity, but taking a balanced approach has helped to maximise the positive impacts of flexible working for both the business and colleagues.

A tailored approach to billable hours targets

Irwin Mitchell's person-centered approach extends to billable hours targets. The firm does not apply 'one size fits all' targets. Instead, expectations around billable hours are tailored to an individual's working pattern and their role.. This means taking authorized leave (from holidays and voluntary activities through to medical appointments and IVF treatment), as well as continuous professional development requirements and the individuals' role accountabilities (from supervision to business development), into account when targets are set.

The UK Model Diversity Survey ("UK MDS") is helping to build entirely new insights into the trends shaping the UK legal sector talent landscape. Over 30 major law firms participate in the UK MDS, providing headcount, hiring, promotion and leaver data spanning sex, race & ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and socio-economic background. In addition to providing valuable benchmarking insights, the programme has helped to highlight the firms who are leading the way in terms of fair and inclusive treatment of talent.

To find out how to take part in the UK MDS, either as a law firm participant or a client signatory contact Jonathan.leonhart@interlawdiversityforum.org.

