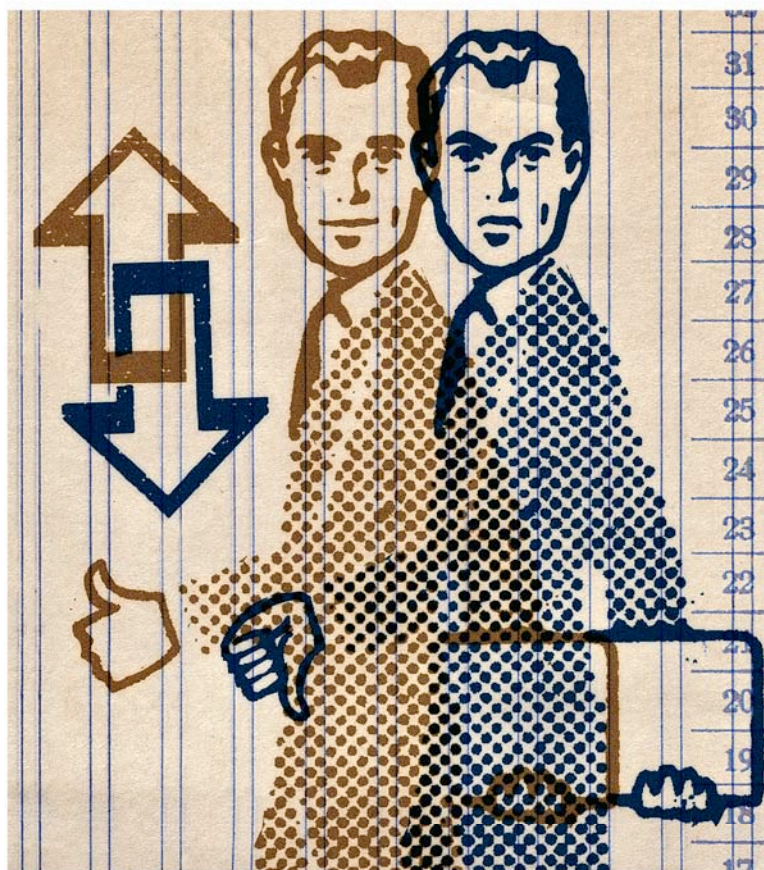


By Larry Richard and Lisa Rohrer

A Breed Apart?

How personality characteristics influence who becomes a lawyer—and how far they rise.



Are there certain personality characteristics that drive people to succeed as large law firm lawyers? As consultants, we often hear lawyers suggest that management techniques and strategy approaches that work in other industries just do not apply to law. “Lawyers are unique,” we’re told. Is it true that lawyers, and large law firm lawyers in particular, are a different breed? We recently set off to find out by personality-testing nearly 1,500 lawyers in four large international law firms.

The personality test we used was an instrument developed by Hogan Assessment Systems, a company whose tests are widely employed across industries to identify and develop leaders who will thrive in various organizational settings. As part of a larger assessment program, the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) measures an individual’s strengths in seven key traits [see “About the Traits,” page 44].

We asked associates and partners to take the test in late 2009 and early 2010 with the hope of understanding not only basic personality traits, but also differences between men and women lawyers, between associates and partners, and across practice groups and geographies. The result? In short, lawyers are different from the general population as well as different from other kinds of profession-

als. But perhaps more interesting is the way that various groups of lawyers differ from each other.

Table 1 [page 44] shows a comparison between the average scores of the lawyers in our study with the average scores of the general population on the seven HPI scales. (All scores are shown in percentiles.) Lawyers score lower on every trait except “learning approach,” which measures an interest in education, ideas, and analysis. This is consistent with previous studies showing that the defining trait of lawyers is a love of analysis. But we would also expect lawyers to be high on “prudence,” which measures self-control and conscientiousness, and yet lawyers score lower on this trait. Lawyers also score low on “adjustment,” which measures the degree to which one is steady in the face of pressure, and on “ambition,” which measures the amount of social energy one likes to expend in influencing others. Lower scores on “ambition” are somewhat surprising, given the amount of influencing of others needed to succeed at a large law firm. Finally, lawyers have a reputation for being

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low on “interpersonal sensitivity,” and this stereotype is ratified by the Hogan data.

To tease apart these traits further, we looked at differences between partners and associates. Personality traits are generally stable over time, so we would not expect personality traits to change dramatically as someone grows older. Therefore, if we see differences between associates and partners, these distinctions may indicate that certain personality traits are highly associated with the ability to make partner, or with an interest in pursuing partnership.

Table 2 [lower right] shows the difference between associates and equity partners. The four traits marked with an asterisk are statistically significant, indicating that the difference between the two groups is meaningful and likely not due to chance. Table 2 starts to indicate which personality traits are associated with success in law firms, assuming that success is defined as equity partnership. Not surprisingly, equity partners score higher on “ambition” and “adjustment” than associates, which suggests that associates who are steady under pressure and enjoy influencing others are more likely to become partners.

While we’re on firm ground in reporting these measured differences, it’s always hazardous to speculate about why such differences exist. One possible explanation for the higher “ambition” scores of partners is that for associates to be elected to partnership, they need to convince existing partners of their ability to work at a partner level (i.e., influence them). Partners also score slightly higher on “learning approach” yet lower on “sociability.” Perhaps the reason for the lower “sociability” scores of partners is because success as a lawyer is based less on networking and interpersonal skills, and more on one’s ability to deliver a competent work product. There were no statistically significant differences in the other traits.

But do these traits apply equally across gender? Does personality

ABOUT THE TRAITS

Here are brief descriptions of the seven personality traits measured in the HPI assessment.

Adjustment The degree to which a person is steady in the face of pressure or, conversely, moody and self-critical.

Ambition The degree to which a person seems leaderlike, status-seeking, and achievement-oriented.

Sociability The degree to which a person needs and/or enjoys social interactions.

Interpersonal Sensitivity The degree to which a person is socially sensitive, tactful, and perceptive.

Prudence The degree to which a person demonstrates self-control and conscientiousness.

Inquisitive The degree to which a person seems imaginative, adventurous, and analytical.

Learning Approach The degree to which a person enjoys academic activities and values education as an end in itself.

TABLE 1 • Lawyers, Compared to the General Population

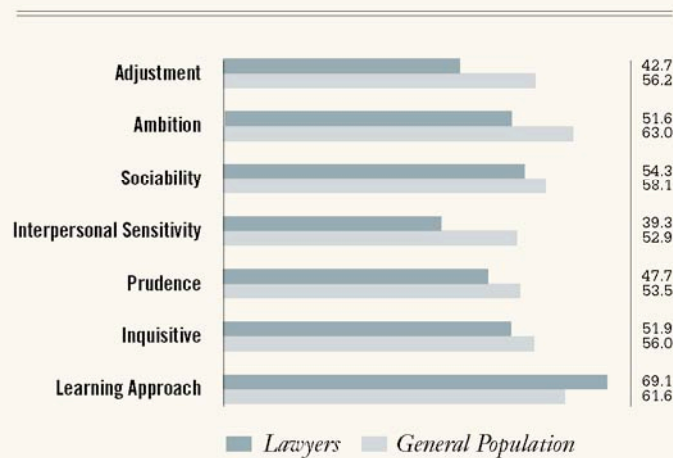
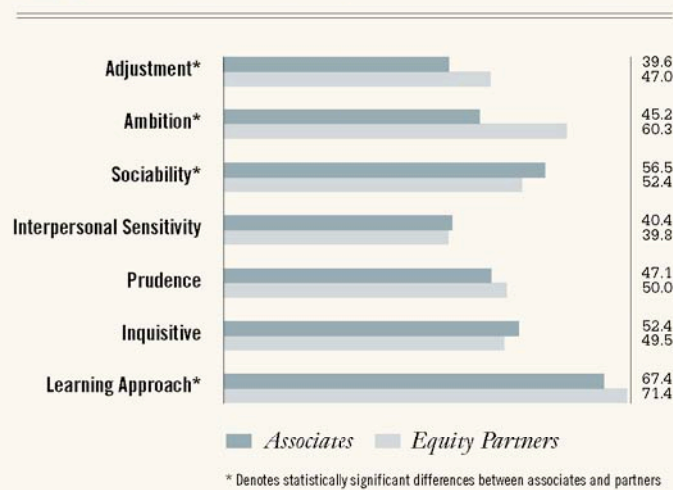


TABLE 2 • Differences Between Equity Partners and Associates



play a role in the journey toward partnership, and if so, what personality traits are associated with women who are equity partners? Do they differ from men? Our data can provide some guidance here.

But first let’s examine gender differences without regard to partnership status. Table 3 [page 46] shows that men and women lawyers are statistically different in every personality trait we measured. Women score lower on “ambition.” They score higher on “interpersonal sensitivity,” but lower on “sociability.” They also score higher on “prudence” and “learning approach.” Recall that in the Hogan test, “ambition” is the degree to which one enjoys leading others and exerting social influence. Many researchers have observed that women tend to be more collaborative in their leadership style, so this result is consistent with these observations.

We were initially surprised, however, by women’s significantly lower scores on “inquisitive,” which measures the extent to which a person is imaginative, curious, and adventuresome. Those who score high on “inquisitive” are prone to get sidetracked on minor issues because they represent an interesting twist or turn in an intellectual argument. Perhaps in large law firms, women cannot afford to get sidetracked; they have to maintain concentration on the task at hand. Taken together with high “prudence” and low “sociability,” this finding suggests that women in large law firms tend to focus on getting the work done and done right.

How do these differences play out as lawyers progress up the ranks? Table 4 [page 46] shows gender differences at the associate and equity partner levels. Many gender differences that exist among associates disappear at the partner level. Take “prudence,” for example. The difference in “prudence” scores was quite marked at the associate level, with women scoring quite a bit higher than men. However, at the partner

level, men and women are fairly equal, with the male score rising closer to the female score instead of the female score coming down to the male score. It is possible that being especially prudent is important for male associates who want to be elevated to partner. "Ambition" scores for men and women at the partner level are also statistically similar, while men had higher "ambition" scores at the associate level. This suggests that women with high "ambition" scores may be more likely to make partner. Male partners have lower "sociability" scores than male associates so that among partners, the two genders are statistically equal on this trait as well. Since partners tend to have lower "sociability" scores than associates in general, more "sociable" males may be discouraged from the partnership track. On "interpersonal sensitivity," male partners score slightly higher than male associates, while female partners score slightly lower than female associates. Females are higher in this trait among both associates and partners, but the gap is narrower among partners.

Not all scores narrowed, however. The gap in "adjustment" scores was wider between male and female partners than it was between male and female associates. While men score higher on "adjustment" across the board, the wider gap between men and women at the partner level suggests it is particularly important for men to be high on the "adjustment" trait in order to make partner. While "adjustment" scores for women went up at the partner level, they did not do so appreciably, suggesting that this trait does not particularly influence women's partnership prospects the way that it does for men.

Finally, let's look at the last trait, "learning approach": Among associates, there was no significant gender difference in scores on this trait. However, among partners, women's scores are nearly ten percentile points higher than men's. What does this difference mean?

TABLE 3 • Gender Differences

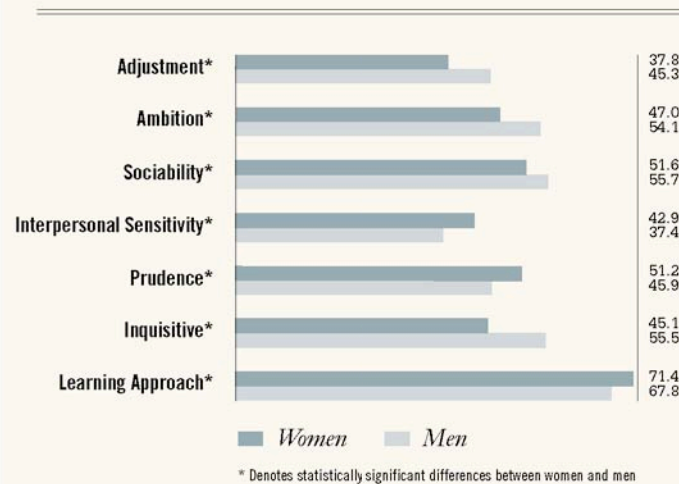
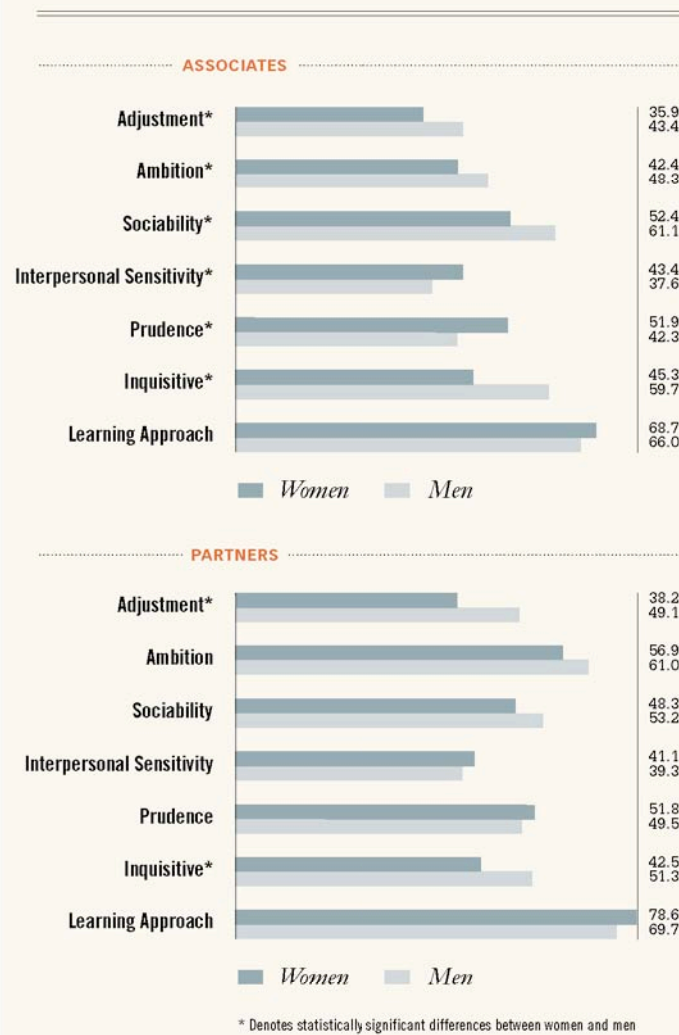


TABLE 4 • Gender Differences by Position



People who score high on learning approach value education and keeping up-to-date on the latest trends and information. The difference in score could indicate that for women, a key differentiator from men is being on point with information and data. This finding is consistent with the gender differences we see at both the associate and partner levels on a related trait, "inquisitive," and further supports the need for women to focus on their work. It may also imply that for a woman to succeed in the law, she has to be even more focused and devoted to academics than men are.

What are the implications for gender differences in partnership? Men who make partner tend to be more prudent, steady in the face of pressure, and independent. Women partners, on the other hand, are less socially sensitive but especially ambitious, focused, and passionate about staying on top of the latest developments in the profession.

Studying personality at different levels in firms provides insight into who decides to stay in law and who succeeds in large law firms. Our data show that personality plays a role in career progression, although it is surely one of many indicators of success. Accordingly, we are not able to rule out many other factors that also affect advancement. Fit with corporate culture, early career experiences, choice of mentors, and outside influences can also play a role in success in any firm. When we see traits "disappear" from associate to partner, we also do not know whether certain people are self-selecting out of the partnership track or if they simply do not have the ability to make partner. These questions continue to drive us to understand the role of personality and the dynamics of success in large law firms.

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