



Sponsorship advances top talent, so why aren't we using it? How to fix what isn't broken

Diversahack 2016: Report on Sponsorship
in partnership with Deloitte, Dentons, HSBC
and the Ontario Public Service

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Diversahack 2016:

Executive summary

What: A hackathon-inspired event designed to co-create a sponsorship strategy capable of propelling women to senior executive positions at Canada's leading organizations.

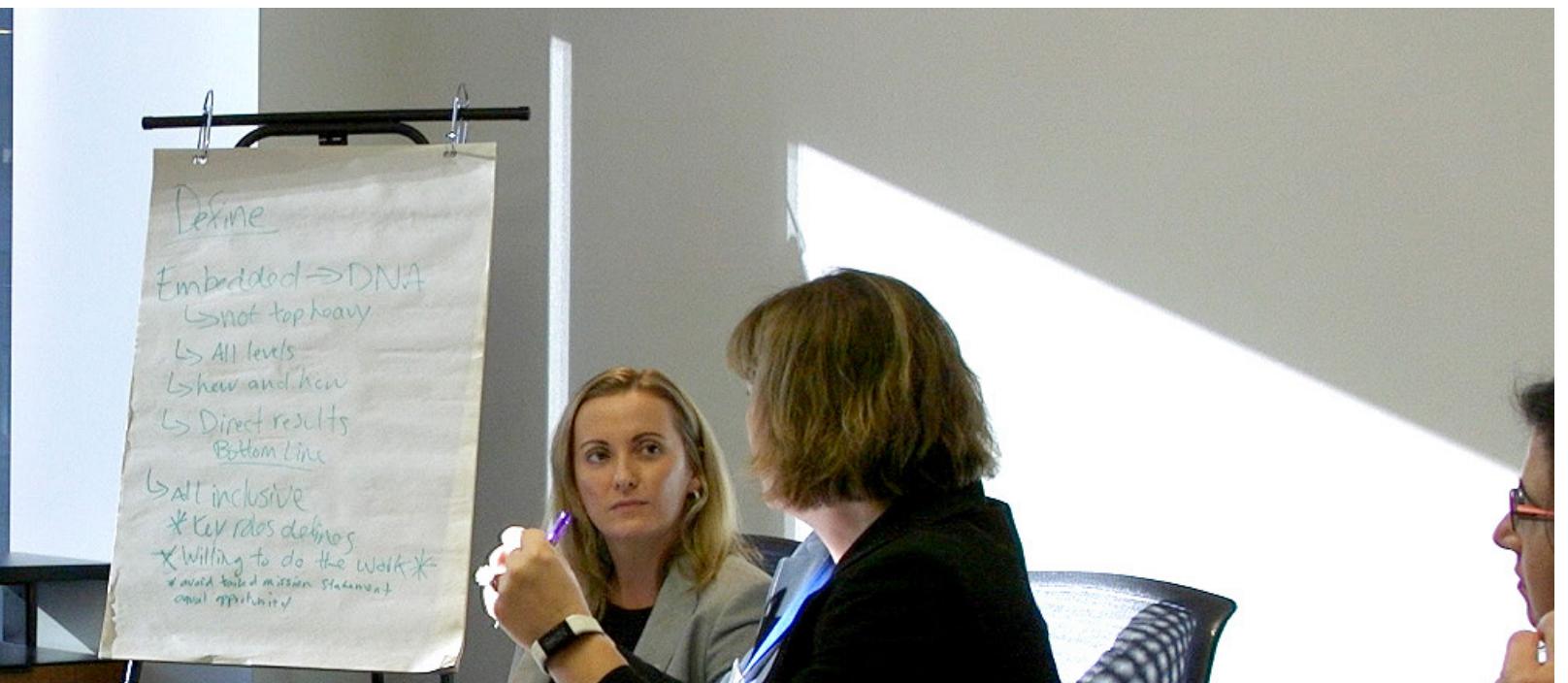
Who: Participants from Deloitte Canada, Dentons Canada LLP, HSBC Bank Canada and the Ontario Public Service were placed into six mixed-firm teams.

Why: Research shows that sponsorship—not just as a program, but as a corporate philosophy—is a highly effective way to accelerate women's careers in everything from gaining access to senior leaders to landing top jobs, but most companies aren't leveraging it. We joined forces to find out why.

Result: Judges, who included leaders from the participating organizations, selected one winning submission, which proposed a team-based approach to sponsorship.

Takeaway: Although each team's submission was unique, no radical solutions rose to the fore. This suggests sponsorship, as a program or strategy, isn't broken. It simply isn't gaining consistent buy-in.

Next steps: Leaders should determine how to gain greater traction for sponsorship by turning it into a strategic priority.



Setting the stage:

why do we need to solve for diversity?

The leadership imbalance

Despite the progress made over the years, the processes and policies, the shifts in attitude, women are still under-represented in leadership roles. According to Catalyst, women occupy less than 5% of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies,¹ even though the participation rate of men and women in the workforce is roughly equal.²

This imbalance becomes even more mystifying when you consider the bottom line benefits of diversity. To wit: companies that have gender-balanced leadership outperform those that don't.³

"Diverse teams are more engaged, innovative and high performing."

Chris Pinnington
CEO, Dentons Canada

From mentorship to sponsorship

To resolve this challenge, some organizations are looking beyond mentorship and towards sponsorship. The difference is subtle but substantial. While mentors give protégés advice on how to meet specific career goals and provide feedback on work assignments, sponsors actively use their influence to help protégés advance in their careers by advocating for their promotion and inclusion on

high-visibility assignments. Notably, the benefits of having a sponsor are measurable: 68% of women with a sponsor feel their rate of career advancement is satisfactory, compared to 57% of unsponsored women.⁴ The effect is even more pronounced for sponsored women with children, 85% of whom continue to work full time and seek out leadership positions compared to 58% of those without sponsors.⁵



Hacking sponsorship: firms gather to find a solution to define what an awesome sponsorship program could look and feel like

Inside Diversahack 2016

It was with this understanding in mind that four leading organizations—Deloitte Canada, Dentons, HSBC Bank Canada and the Ontario Public Service (OPS)—recently hosted Diversahack, a hackathon-inspired event that brought together mixed teams from each firm to brainstorm how an awesome sponsorship strategy could look and feel. The participants—who included people of different genders, ethnicities, physical abilities, experiences and functional backgrounds—were broken into six teams. Each team—assigned a team colour—was then asked to consider ways to transform sponsorship into a corporate strategy, one embedded in the way leaders lead.

To help teams reimagine how sponsorship could work, facilitators challenged them to think through how to motivate sponsors and protégés, what cultural levers would need to be pulled to implement a new strategy, what success would look like and how it would be measured.

About the participating organizations

It was no accident that these four firms got together to seek out new ways to advance women in the workplace. For years, each participating organization has been strongly committed to diversity and inclusion. Deloitte LLP, Dentons Canada LLP and OPS were all recognized as among Canada's Best Diversity Employers in 2016.⁶ HSBC was recognized as a Top Global Employer in Stonewall's Global Workplace Equality Index for two years running.⁷ And Catalyst Canada, which recognizes exceptional role models for accelerating progress for women through workplace inclusion, honoured leaders at both Dentons (2013) and Deloitte (2016) with Champion Awards.⁸

"To foster inclusive leadership, we need to bring our unconscious biases into the light."

Jackie Scales
National Practice Leader,
Inclusion & Diversity
Deloitte Canada

The winning solution: a three-legged stool approach to sponsorship

After three hours of deliberation, each team was given five minutes to present its best sponsorship hack. Judges, who included such notable guests as the CEO of Dentons, two Ministers, Deloitte's Managing Partner, Talent and other leaders of each participating organization, then selected one winning submission—which proposed a team-based approach to sponsorship.

Flipping orthodoxies

Team Yellow, the winning team, likened existing programs to the movie The Hunger Games, a dangerously competitive environment. In this case, they explained that protégés are often randomly selected, while sponsors are assigned, lack enthusiasm and have no incentive to assist. To combat these issues, the team proposed fostering an environment more like the television show The Voice, where contestants are each encouraged to succeed. To do so, they outlined a three-legged strategy where protégés would be identified based on their talent and sponsors would be incented to act as active champions. To reach these goals, the team proposed flipping two core orthodoxies: that sponsors must pick protégés and that sponsorship must be a one-to-one relationship.

The stage

Under leg 1—the stage—the aim is to ensure that top talent, of both genders, has the opportunity to get on stage. To this end, the organization would use talent processes to identify top talent and provide them with a platform to showcase their skills (for instance, by placing them on a cross-functional team working on a business-critical project). Under this structure, rather than having sponsors pick protégés, the pool of identified protégés would be given the opportunity to pick sponsors by asking them to join the team. This would allow the protégés to develop important relationships with numerous sponsors who could assist them throughout their careers. The corollary? Rather than building a one-to-one relationship, sponsors would manage a team of protégés.

"By allowing protégés to pick their own sponsors, the matching process becomes more equitable and less influenced by gender. Similarly, by rewarding sponsors, providing them with professional training and enabling them to work in a team, we de-risk the sponsorship engagement and ensure sponsors are receptive to going the extra mile."

Team Yellow



The prize

Under leg 2—the prize—senior leaders who set the example by acting as sponsors would be rewarded by earning the opportunity to work on interesting projects, participate on committees or boards, and grow their own profile. Similarly, to encourage inclusive and diverse sponsorship relationships, successes would be celebrated through story-telling.

The coaching

Finally, under leg 3—the coaching—sponsors would be educated on the importance of diversity, the impact of sponsorship, how to be a good coach, how to sponsor a woman and specific barriers faced by women. Protégés would be educated on the importance of having a sponsor, how to be a good protégé, how to build relationships with male sponsors and how to leverage the relationship.

And people across the organization would be educated on the importance of diversity, the power of sponsorship relationships and how they can incorporate those relationships into their own roles.

The payoff

With this type of sponsorship approach, diverse top talent across the organization would have equal opportunities for advancement, sponsors would be excited to work with protégés, protégés would hone their skills and team-working abilities, and staff across the organization would be inspired by the strategy's success. As the judges noted, this team-based approach can help break down some of the traditional resistance organizations face when implementing these programs, while laying a foundation to effect the cultural change required to promote an effective sponsorship strategy.



Diversified brainwaves

Collaborative sponsorship

The diversity of the input shared by all six of the teams was reflected in the creativity of their proposed solutions. Team Red, which took the runner-up spot, noted that sponsorship programs often fail to reach their potential because they are approached in isolation and not embedded in the DNA of corporate cultures. According to the team, part of the problem lies in the fact that sponsor relationships are confined to individual organizations.

Its notable solution was to establish a sponsorship program that allows professionals to interact organically across organizations. It encouraged the participating organizations to act as catalysts by collaboratively sponsoring projects, non-profit or volunteer opportunities, special events and/or speaking engagements that would bring together potential sponsors and protégés to create broad-based career opportunities. While the judges felt this solution was a bit ahead of its time, they agreed that organizations may be interested in adopting this approach in the future, as their sponsorship strategies mature.

In their own words

"All employees should have access to sponsorship opportunities, regardless of their gender. By turning sponsoring into the heart of our business strategy, we can identify all high-potential employees suited to be leaders. This, in turn, would improve retention of top talent and organizational productivity."

Team Blue

"Because individual employees may want to follow non-traditional career paths, sponsorship strategies should support the protégés' career ambitions while taking their personal journey into account—whether that journey includes taking time off for paternity leave, caring for an aging parent or carving out time to volunteer."

Team Orange

"A cross-organization solution would foster engagement, collaboration and networking by taking a holistic, long-term, all-inclusive approach."

Team Red

"An effective sponsorship strategy must be desirable, viable and feasible for each of the organization, protégé and sponsor. To work, it should establish guiding principles for sponsorship, ask for performance commitments from all parties and align protégés with sponsors who would support both their careers and their causes."

Team Green

"Hopefully, 40 or 50 years from now, we'll no longer be having this conversation about promoting women and minorities because it has become the norm. To get there, organizations must articulate a clear business case, define how diversity and inclusion contribute to innovation and train people on how to combat unconscious bias."

Team Purple



Defining next steps:

what we can all do to advance high potential leaders

How can sponsorship take flight?

While the solutions proposed by each team were unique, no radical ideas rose to the fore. This suggests that sponsorship isn't broken. In fact, organizations seem to understand how to craft effective sponsorship programs and strategies. What they seem to be struggling with is building an effective business case for sponsorship, winning executive buy-in to the program and implementation. Notably, the winning ideas shared during Diversahack can help organizations begin making the necessary strides to encourage sponsorship to take flight.

To spur the process, leaders can ask:

- How can we turn sponsorship into a strategic priority?
- How can we incent sponsors to act as active champions?
- How do we ensure that all high potential talent has equal access to sponsorship opportunities?
- What evidence do we need to further strengthen the business case for sponsorship?
- Can we drive success by linking sponsorship to performance measures?

While each organization must determine for itself how to answer these questions, one thing is clear: the more strongly executives understand the business case for diversity and inclusion, the more likely they will be to champion the sponsorship cause.

Contacts

Deloitte Canada**Carolyn Lawrence**

Leader Gender Diversity
& Inclusion
416-775-8850
clawrence@deloitte.ca

Beyond championing a diverse and inclusive workplace itself, Deloitte has a dedicated practice to help its clients implement inclusion and diversity strategies and reap the rewards of diverse people and ideas in the workforce.

Dentons Canada LLP**Chris Pinnington**

Canada Chief Executive Officer
416-863-4409
chris.pinnington@dentons.com

Diversity and inclusion is a key dimension of our strategy and a business driver at Dentons. It enriches our firm and the communities we serve, and enhances the quality of our counsel and our ability to collaborate and innovate in delivering better value to our clients.

HSBC Bank Canada**Gisela Pong**

Senior Marketing Manager
416-868-8413
gisela_pong@hsbc.ca

Here and around the world, HSBC is stronger because of the differences that make us unique. Our diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives all contribute to the creativity, productivity and performance that make HSBC successful. No two employees or customers are the same and, at HSBC, we value everyone's perspective.

Ontario Public Service**Heather Taylor**

Assistant Deputy Minister Corporate
Management Division and Chief
Administrative Officer
416-314-6424
heather.taylor@ontario.ca

As part of its Inclusion Now! initiative, OPS goes beyond mandatory requirements to build a workplace enriched by personal differences and enhanced by the innovation and creativity of an engaged workforce.

End notes

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