

Building Future Leaders

An Interview with Marie Christine Padberg, Partner and Global Talent Attraction Co-leader, McKinsey & Company

EDITORS' NOTE Marie Christine Padberg is a partner and the global co-leader of talent attraction at McKinsey, overseeing the firm's full-cycle recruitment strategy and leading efforts to strengthen its talent brand. She also founded McKinsey's Next Generation Women Leaders program which brings together and empowers hundreds of women each year as they shape their leadership journeys.



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FIRM BRIEF McKinsey & Company ([mckinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com)) is a global management consulting firm committed to helping organizations accelerate sustainable and inclusive growth. It works with clients across the private, public, and social sectors to solve complex problems and create positive change for all its stakeholders. The firm combines bold strategies and transformative technologies to help organizations innovate more sustainably, achieve lasting gains in performance, and build workforces that will thrive for this generation and the next.

How do you describe McKinsey's culture?

A career at McKinsey is challenging, and that is by design. From the day someone joins, we immerse them in situations that stretch their capabilities and push them to grow. Whether someone stays for two years or 20, we want them to look back and say their time here gave them skills and experiences they couldn't have gotten anywhere else. Our learning never stops and there is an expectation that everybody needs to continue to grow.

Our people develop extremely quickly because they're constantly tackling new, high-stakes problems – often helping clients solve challenges that, in some cases, have never been addressed before. They're pushed to think creatively, experiment, and build truly new solutions. That kind of environment can be intense, but it works because no one is doing it alone. Every stretch experience is paired with hands-on apprenticeship and regular feedback, along with a very deliberate team environment that makes the process fun. These elements create a support structure that turns challenge into accelerated growth.

Elite athletes often talk about the importance of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable – operating at the edge of “this is hard.” It's similar at McKinsey: you learn how to thrive when you're pushing your limits.

Another important part of our culture is the early exposure colleagues get to senior clients. Our senior leaders are, of course, trusted advisors to the C-suite – but colleagues at all levels are included in those settings, apprenticed by more tenured teammates and contributing from day one. In many organizations, it can take years to earn that kind of access; here, it's part of how we grow talent from the start.

Ultimately, it's our ambition to create an environment where people grow faster than they could anywhere else in the world.

Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

I co-lead McKinsey's global talent attraction function, which means I focus on how we show up to the world as an employer – how we define our talent brand, connect with candidates, and shape their experience throughout the recruitment process. This role is deeply entwined with the firm's long-term future. The people we hire today aren't just our next class of business analysts or associates – they'll shape what McKinsey and the broader business community look like in 5, 10, 20 years.

What have been the keys to McKinsey's success with its talent attraction strategy?

We're fortunate to receive around one million applications each year, but we never take that for granted. We're constantly reassessing how we find, evaluate, and connect with distinctive and diverse people to ensure we're building the leadership McKinsey, and our clients, need for the future.

Over the past several years, we've deliberately broadened where we look for candidates as we believe distinctive talent can come from anywhere. This expanded reach has allowed us to bring in individuals from a wider range of backgrounds, and our firm is certainly better for it. At the same time, we're evolving how we assess candidates' potential throughout the recruiting process. As technology continues to reshape the way we work, we are acutely aware that the skills our people need will evolve rapidly so we're placing even more emphasis

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on discovering intrinsic qualities – like adaptability, problem-solving, and curiosity. We’ve found these traits are strong indicators of long-term success even as day-to-day tasks evolve. To support this, we’ve introduced new tools, like game-based assessments, which help us identify these qualities in ways that a CV or academic background alone never could.

At the end of the day, we’re focused on finding people with the drive, curiosity, and leadership potential to succeed here – whatever their background may be.

Will you highlight McKinsey’s commitment to the full cycle of an individual’s development and the firm’s focus on maintaining a strong alumni network?

Development is something we approach very intentionally. It’s not just about formal training – though we do offer robust learning programs for colleagues at all tenures. But, we’ve found that the most significant development gains come through real client work, a structured and rigorous approach to feedback, and apprenticeship alongside colleagues. From the start, we’re strategic about how we staff people to projects. We match colleagues to opportunities where they can both apply their strengths and stretch into new areas. As I mentioned, in many cases they’re tackling challenges that have no obvious answer, which accelerates their growth and helps them become comfortable working outside their comfort zones.

Apprenticeship is also central to how we operate. It’s not just about giving advice – it’s

about teaching in the flow of work and helping colleagues build the skills and judgment to lead independently. We invest a lot of energy into building apprenticeship skills across the firm and hold ourselves accountable for how well we develop others.

As for our alumni, we strive to maintain a strong connection long after colleagues leave the firm. Our alumni network now spans over 60,000 people, many of whom are leading organizations worldwide. We continue to learn from and collaborate with them.

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You founded McKinsey’s Next Generation Women Leaders initiative. Will you highlight this program and how you define its mission?

Yes, this is a program I care deeply about. We launched the Next Generation Women Leaders initiative in 2012 to support women early in their leadership journeys. The goal was to create a space where they could develop practical leadership skills, build confidence, and connect with others who were also thinking about how to shape their careers. It started in Europe as an in-person event, and has since expanded globally, combining in-person and virtual formats. It includes leadership development sessions, small-group workshops, and real conversations with McKinsey colleagues and peers. Thousands of women have taken part over the years. Some have gone on to join McKinsey, others have taken different paths. What matters most is that they leave feeling more confident about the

choices they want to make, and clearer about how they want to lead.

The mission has always been simple: to help turn ambition into action, and to show that leadership isn’t a fixed path. It’s something each person can define for themselves.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

First, stay curious. It’s not about having all the answers right away; what really matters is your ability to ask good questions and keep learning along the way. Another piece of advice is to seek out mentors. There are so many people willing to offer guidance if you make the effort to ask. These relationships can make a real difference in how you grow and navigate your career. It’s also important to say yes to opportunities that challenge you. Some of the most pivotal moments in my own career came from stepping into roles or projects where I wasn’t entirely sure I was ready – but those challenges pushed me to grow. At McKinsey, we look for people who are eager to take on hard things and stretch themselves. Lastly, enjoy the journey. The early years of a career can be intense, but they’re also full of learning and growth. It’s a time to figure out not just what you’re good at, but how you navigate challenges, make decisions, and how you want to show up. Embrace the process – even when it’s tough – because every experience builds the foundation for the person and professional you’ll become. You’ll learn faster during this time than at almost any point in your career, so soak it all in. ●

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