

Leadership roles in law 2016-2021

As we emerge from a rollercoaster year of pandemic, we examine Totum's data on leadership placements since 2016. What impact, if any, did Covid have on trends in this vital area of recruitment and what do we predict for the future development of business leadership roles in law?

As a recruitment firm that specialises in business services roles, Totum has significant expertise in placing leadership roles across business functions. These roles – at Chief, Director, Head of and, to a lesser extent, Manager level – are typically undertaken on a 'retained' basis. This means we partner exclusively with our clients to manage the entire process from candidate attraction to successful placement.

The data shows the number of leadership placements increased from April 2016 to March 2019 by 73% (yearly data sets run from 1 April to 31 March). The numbers then inevitably dropped back as Covid hit. However, we have seen a much more positive start to placements in the first quarter 2021 (we are now as busy as pre-pandemic) and fully expect a return to the upward trend of previous years, as firms continue to prioritise these essential roles.

The value placed on business leadership is particularly reflected in the roles prioritised in this latest difficult year. Hence, 64% of our retained projects in 2020/21 were for Director roles (a rise of 68% on the previous year) and Chief roles increased by 42%. While firms may have put some other roles on hold, it has and will remain critical to have these key decision makers in place.

It is also telling that of the roles we have placed since 2016, an average of 87% are still in their post. We are delighted to see such high levels of retention in roles where delivering the right cultural match is so important.



Since 2016
87%
of candidates
are still in post

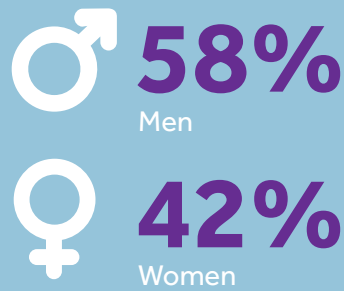
Gender split

In terms of the gender split in these leadership roles, we have been delighted to see a relatively even number of men to women overall, both at shortlist and placement. In addition, our figures show that as long as we continue to ensure women have fair representation on the shortlist, they have an impressive record in getting placed.

An interesting aside here, however, is that this past year – 2020/21 – has seen a drop in both the number of women shortlisted and placed (women comprised just 31% of shortlists and 27% of placements in 2020/21). This is quite a shift from previous years and seems to suggest Covid particularly impacted women.

We expect these figures to bounce back once more as normality resumes, however, and will do our utmost to support women who fear Covid may have set back their careers.

From 2016 to 2021, candidate shortlists included an average of:



48% of successful placements are women

Sector experience

At Totum, we strive to source talent that represents a diversity of backgrounds, including candidates that come from other professional services firms and other sectors altogether.



40% of candidates shortlisted are from outside the legal sector



Increase in candidates placed from outside legal sector has increased from 14% in 2016 to 45% in 2020

At placement, firms still tend to favour candidates from a legal background, but the fact that over a quarter (28%) of successful candidates now come from other professional services firms or other sectors is evidence of a continuing, if gradual, opening up of law firms to embrace diverse experiences.

Background of candidates placed:

(average from 2016-2021)



72%

Predominantly Legal



14%

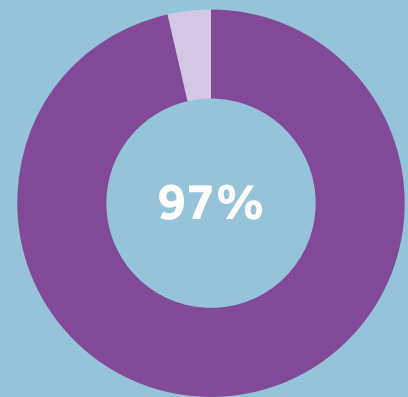
Professional Services



14%

Other

The restrictions of the Covid pandemic didn't provide the best landscape for creative recruitment. However, many firms made plans to further improve their diversity and inclusivity, with more firms looking further afield for good talent.



Totum's leadership roles filled since 2016

Looking forwards

Looking beyond the figures, we have noticed that in this past year firms have been more risk-averse in their recruitment choices, preferring to stick to candidates with legal sector experience. This is especially the case as firms continue to work in a virtual environment in which there are fewer options for in-office training and support.

It will be interesting to see how this shifts in the future as normality hopefully returns and offices reopen. What is certain is that we will continue to draw up shortlists that represent a diverse selection of candidates, as law firms increasingly demand skillsets seen in other sectors.

Despite Covid, business services leadership roles across business functions in law clearly remain a priority. In our view, this is a vibrant area of recruitment that is likely to bounce back from the pandemic with many more interesting placements (and data) to come.