While compulsory gender quotas for the number of women holding board positions did not pass the EU vote on 14 November, tough new measures forcing companies to achieve a 40% female board head count by 2020, or face sanctions, did.

The government didn't support the idea of gender quotas. Currently, the percentage of UK board positions held by women is around 16, slightly better than the EU average of 14, but far less than the 40% target. Complicating the issue is the result of a survey published in The Daily Telegraph recently which revealed that only 4% of women actually aspire to sit on the board.

The upshot of the vote last week is that companies will need to demonstrate that they are putting in place mechanisms to drive up the number of female board members and report on their progress. But how can companies, and more to the point, partnership firms increase the percentage of women in senior positions without a quota to pull-up the numbers and without a strong push of demand from women themselves?

There is a strong business case for more women in business and professional partnerships, in particular. There is no difference technically between them and men and they have strong attributes to offer such as, empathy, strong verbal and communication skills and a more collaborative, team-orientated leadership style. Women's rapport and relationship building skills are a significant advantage in managing relationships and more and more clients want female partners on their advisory teams.

But while clients want to work with women in senior roles, they also expect them to be there for them 24/7. While some women manage brilliantly a family life with the demands of partnership, others opt for a different work-life balance taking themselves out of the promotion selection pool. Businesses and professional firms have several options to raise the number of female managers aiming for the board room, or associates presenting for partnership.

The first is to accommodate women who want to be both mothers and board directors/partners by encouraging part-time and remote working.

Next is positive discrimination but this is dangerous territory for all sorts of well-aired reasons. Nevertheless, men dominate decision-making in the board room and professional services firms and some will argue that until women are better represented at a top level, they will continue to get the thin end of the wedge.

This leads on to the third issue of unconscious bias - the elephant in the room. Men are the dominant brand in business. People like working with people like them, that is, other men. From the start of their careers therefore, men may be offered more interesting or challenging work, get better deal experience and be associated with more influential people. As a result, women can end up comparing unfavourably, both in terms of experience and profile.

Real transparency needs to be built into the training, selection and assessment process at all levels. The criteria against which trainees and associates are judged needs to be spelt out clearly, discussed honestly and enforced rigorously to ensure equality. Studies show that if people are aware - and are constantly made aware of the tendency towards unconscious bias - it is much less likely to happen.

Women tend not to be as aggressive as men at self-promotion. It is not just that women fail to achieve visibility by acting this way but their behaviour is often interpreted negatively by men, consciously or not, as lacking in commitment, ambition or confidence. Women that do act as men can be perceived as aggressive and domineering.

While a strong profile - internal as well as external - and an identifiable brand are of fundamental importance for promotion, deliberate programmes to achieve them will only ever meet with partial success. If women are not comfortable with their new more “self-salesy” approach, they will fail the authenticity test and this impacts massively on their ability to build personal trust.

Women should definitely use their excellent communication skills to expand their networks, though they also need to understand the power in business of the male-style network (one of many acquaintances), over the female-style (one with fewer but deeper relationships).

Women should also understand the importance of developing their own brand - a unique selling proposition that differentiates them as individuals. This should draw on all their innate abilities, for example communication skills, relationship building, intuition, instinct and collaborative teamwork where they frequently have the edge on men, and not forgetting the opportunity for visual distinction they have which is pretty much denied to men in the business context.

Ultimately, much of this boils down to strategies designed by men to reward male characteristics and strengths. While most people accept that men and women are different in many respects, a male-orientated set of selection criteria disadvantages women candidates. Businesses and firms should select female directors or partners on their own strengths, accepting how important they are to the success of the business. Not a two-speed system or an artificially levelled playing field but an acknowledgement that over and above technical merit, men and women have different abilities, characteristics and skills-sets, all of which need to be represented on the board.