**Episode 61: Insights from Women on Fishbowl about their Consulting Firms—with Mara Lecocq and Sarit Henig**

Deb Zahn: Hi, I want to welcome you to this episode of the Craft of Consulting podcast. So today I am talking to two guests, Mara Lecocq, and Sarit Henig. We are going to talk about Fishbowl, which is a company that they work for which has online communities, and through an app, for consultants and other types of professionals. And it is a fascinating place to be on in terms of being able to connect with other consultants. They're going to talk about what it is. Then we're going to dig into a survey that they did about women at work in 2020. And they're going to talk about what they heard from their community of women consultants who are using Fishbowl, including what it means for being in the consulting industry, and what, ultimately, their business prospects are. So a lot of great information. Let's get started.

 Hi, want to welcome Mara Lecocq and Sarit Henig to the show today. Thank you so much for joining me.

Mara Lecocq: Thank you for having us. We're excited to be here.

Deb Zahn: So let's start off. Tell my listeners what you folks do.

Mara Lecocq: So I lead the branded community at Fishbowl, which means that I help raise awareness of the brand through initiatives. So that covers marketing, social media, PR events. I mean, not right now, but internal events on Zoom now, and other initiatives inside the app.

Sarit Henig: And I work in community activation and growth. So covering launching new communities within Fishbowl and leading external marketing to recruit users in that space.

Deb Zahn: Wonderful. Now I know what Fishbowl is because I'm on it, and I love it. But tell my listeners what it is, and what it means to do.

Mara Lecocq: Sure. So Fishbowl is a social network for professionals of the same industry to have honest conversations about work, semi-anonymously. We're open to different industries like consulting, advertising, finance, accounting, law, teachers, healthcare now. And we're active. We're very active in the consulting world where we have 45% of consulting professionals on the platform, with about 60% of big four professionals who are active on fishbowl. Even firms like Boston Consulting Group is active for about 80% of their employees.

Deb Zahn: Wow, that's great.

Mara Lecocq: We have different professional communities on Fishbowl too, that are identity based, like women in consulting, black consultants, skill-based, like IT consultants, and intra space, like personal investment chat, or veterans, or there's a single consultant school, that's pretty lit.

Deb Zahn: I imagine now.

Mara Lecocq: And what's unique about Fishbowl is that you can post as your job title or as your company but never both at the same time. So you feel safe asking questions that you might be otherwise embarrassed about, while giving enough context of where that question is coming from. So for example, you can ask as an associate, "This is how much I'm making. Is this normal? How do I manage up?" or "How do I deal with a difficult employee?" So yeah, that's fishbowl in a nutshell.

Deb Zahn: That's wonderful, and I've been on it, and one of the reasons I love it and I've been engaged with other people and have answered questions about "I want to live the dream and move into the country in a rural setting. Can I?" I'm like, "Oh, I can answer that." But also just watching people really support each other, particularly now, has been just a beautiful thing to be part of. So we're going to mention throughout this, bowls. Can you describe what a bowl is?

Mara Lecocq: Bowls are professional communities. They work like groups on Facebook or I guess Reddit threads. They bring together professionals who are passionate about a certain topic. And what's great about Fishbowl is that you can nerd out on different aspects of yourself because we are multifaceted creatures. You can talk for five minutes in the woman consulting bowl and then go to the IT consultants bowl and then nerd out on IT. And so these are ways to funnel conversations and make them relevant within that community.

Deb Zahn: Wonderful. And you also did something recently, which is one of the reasons I reached out because I was very impressed with it. You did a survey of Women at Work for 2020, and you released the results in March. And this is where you surveyed your community of women consultants. So let's start with, why did you do the survey?

Mara Lecocq: It was around international women's month and we wanted to publish something meaningful. We talk a lot about issues that women face in the workplace. And since we're plugged in different industries, there are industries that talk about it more than others. We saw this as an opportunity to bring women from different industries together and give a status and how they actually feel. Because we talk about a lot, in the news, all the sensational stuff happening. There's #MeToo, there's compensation, but there's also things beyond that that affect us and affect our willingness to remain in an industry. And what we noticed is overall a lack of role models at the top that affect how women feel. And so we wanted to analyze a little bit how, different aspects of how they feel in consulting.

 So the five topics that we surveyed them on were women in compensation. I'm happy with my current compensation based on my experience and qualifications. To women and motherhood, I believe motherhood negatively impacted my career progression at my current company. Three, women and their personalities, and this is something that we really cared about because these are conversations, everything we do is based on what people really feel because they talk about it on the platform. And we've been noticing in a lot of conversations of women feeling disempowered through different occasions, when they're being given feedback on their performance. And we've noticed that a lot of women are being given feedback on their personalities rather than their performance. They're either too aggressive or too agreeable. You can never nail it.

Deb Zahn: Right. Or both.

Mara Lecocq: Yeah, or both at the same time. We've read that too.

And finally, we asked women after #MeToo: I trust my company to do the right thing in instances of reported harassment. And with that, we also did an overall company satisfaction. We wanted also to paint a positive picture of women who actually would vouch for having other women join their companies.

Deb Zahn: And that was an interesting finding because we're going to go through these one by one. But I was surprised at the satisfaction ratings relative to some of the other answers, which I would have thought satisfaction would have been lower.

Mara Lecocq: Yeah. Maybe this shows that our standards are low.

Deb Zahn: Could be.

Mara Lecocq: Or they're good enough.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Sarit Henig: I think a lot of that could also be just a reflection of an understanding of the companies that these women work at, and their understanding of the industry overall. Like a company overall could still be a good place to work in terms of career opportunities and salaries relative to other industries, but still have issues. And a lot of these companies are actively working on addressing these problems. So there is also, I think, a recognition of that.

Deb Zahn: That's great. And you know this world well, Sarit because you also have been a consultant. So was there anything that you saw that really stuck out for you just given your experience?

Sarit Henig: I think the responses generally made sense to me based on my experiences. Nothing really surprised me. I think a lot of it is definitely conversations that women are actively having within the different consulting firms. Also within the Women in Consulting bowl on Fishbowl, definitely using that as a channel to ask each other about experience in their different firms, about compensation, about maternity leave and parental policies, flexible work arrangements. Definitely #MeToo instances. So yeah, a lot of this resonates with my experience and the discussions I've seen women have in the industry.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, #MeToo. That's how I felt when I looked at it. So let's go through them one by one. So one of the first ones was company satisfaction. What really stood out for you in that one?

Mara Lecocq: So 77% of women in consulting would recommend their company to a friend. And comparative to the other industries that we surveyed, that is the highest number. So that's a really positive signal that women are overall satisfied with their careers and the firms they work at.

Deb Zahn: Oh, that's good news. And then of course you dig into the next one, which is compensation. So what did you see when you surveyed about that?

Mara Lecocq: Compensation? So 37% of women are happy with their compensation based on their qualifications at their current company. So that's pretty average across the board with the other industries.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. And I know one thing, that's something I've definitely seen talked about in the Women in Consulting bowl, is particularly compensation relative to their male counterparts who have the same qualifications, are in the same firm, and in the same job.

Mara Lecocq: I would love to ask this back at you, since you're both familiar with the consulting world. Why do you think this is happening?

Deb Zahn: I don't think I'm going to say anything that's too mysterious, which is, I think that women in general, because of sexism, are undervalued and essentially viewed differently than men are. And not just by men. I think it's woven into the fabric within organizations. It's certainly in our society. And so we just get viewed and we get valued differently. I've had that happen since I made nine bucks an hour, back in the day, and a guy made 10 for reasons I couldn't figure out. And so I think it's unfortunately very ingrained and certainly a systemic and institutional problem and not just male bosses that don't get it. I think there are male bosses that don't get it, I think there are female bosses that don't get it, but I think it's much more systemic than that.

Mara Lecocq: Totally. Love hearing that.

Deb Zahn: So motherhood was the other one, which I thought was a great thing to actually ask about and also I've seen talked a lot about in the bowl. What did you find out there?

Mara Lecocq: So 72% believe motherhood will impact their career progression. So that's a really sad stat, and to illustrate that we have different conversations. So for example, this is from an analyst, "I'm late to the consulting world, and early in my career, mid 20s, my husband and I really want to start a family, but I'm terrified this will halt my career. Please help with your family career balanced stories." Women in consulting really need that affirmation and those role models.

 I believe, Sarit, you had a story on how that also affected your perception of your career growth as a future mother eventually in this career?

Sarit Henig: Yeah, at the firm I was with there was definitely a lot of talk in the women's bowl about the question of balancing parenthood and the job, especially with the realities of travel. And a lot of the managing directors and senior managers who had children were very open about the fact that it could work and really encourage women to raise their hands and ask for any accommodations that they would need instead of just automatically assuming that they had to leave. However, they also made it very clear that the fact that they were relatively senior when they had children made it easier for them to make those requests.

 So there was still a kind of question in the back of my head of, do I need to wait until I get to that position? And then what does that mean in terms of just my own personal planning? And I see a lot of those questions as well come up in Fishbowl and women definitely using kind of the anonymity and that platform to ask, "I'm at this level, I want to have children in the next one to three years. How have other women dealt with that? How specifically did you plan it in terms of your career or you're waiting for a certain promotion, trying to time it in some way." Yeah. So definitely something I experienced, and also see a lot of women actively discussing.

Deb Zahn: And it's interesting because I was at not one of the big firms, but a smaller national firm, which was very accepting. Motherhood was never anything that would negatively impact your career, but you still had the same expectations in terms of billable hours and things like that as anyone else did. Do you think it's because there's a premium in some of the firms on your unfettered availability, including to travel and hours?

Sarit Henig: Yeah. I think that's definitely part of the job is being able to travel, be onsite for clients, and deliver that top-level client service. And it's something that firms for mothers or fathers who want to be present and involved with their families are figuring out how to deal with. I think we'll see after this period now where companies are learning that more work can be done remotely than I think anyone ever anticipated. I'm interested in seeing if that changes or if that results in any kind of adjustments. But, yeah, I would say the pressure to continue delivering for clients and the travel and like physical presence that is involved with that has definitely has an impact for sure.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. And so this is on the to do list for the consulting firms to hopefully reassess during this period. Now the next one is my personal favorite, which is women and their personalities, which we touched upon a little bit. So again, what did you find there?

Mara Lecocq: 66% of women in consulting have received feedback on their personality rather than their performance, at their current company.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Mara Lecocq: So that is something that happens across all industries as well and it's an average number. It's been fascinating to hear the stories of these women that just are all similar. One of them shared, from a lady from Deloitte, "I got told I should be less agreeable, i.e., not make less such gestures when someone is speaking." And another one shared that she's being told that she's being "too cold and too agreeable at the same time." And she's wondering how that can actually work.

 So how about you, Deb? Have you received such feedback?

Deb Zahn: Yeah, there was a lot of women at the firm that I just left, so I didn't get it at the consulting firm. But definitely in other jobs. Oh yeah, definitely. So, whereas my male counterpart who is quite confident would be called confident and all these wonderful adjectives, and, yeah, I got called cocky. I got called too self-assured, too much of a presence in the room. At one point there was a group of us women who just thought it was ridiculous, and we did actually kind of time who spoke the most in the room. And invariably it wasn't us. And yet sometimes when we were getting supposedly performance reviews, we would hear you take up too much space. Quantitatively, that was not correct, but I think it was their felt experience.

 And some of our male counterparts, and I know because I married one of my coworkers, he never heard that. And he was always horrified—and would say something—if some of us would be called out on our personality and not on our performance.

Mara Lecocq: Exactly.

Deb Zahn: It's good to have those allies.

Mara Lecocq: Yeah. Yeah. And the more men are aware of it. We're hopeful that it plants a seed and makes them think. And that's also the goal of these surveys is to arm women with statistics that they can then share with their coworkers.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Mara Lecocq: Once they receive that feedback, "Well, actually, did you know that 66% of women feel this way?" And then, so it's like, "Oh, OK."

Deb Zahn: You can't say it's just one.

Mara Lecocq: Yeah.

Deb Zahn: It's actually over half. I'd be interested too, and I know this was out of the scope of the survey, but I would imagine if you added race and ethnicity or LGBTQ status or something like that, you might even see, and I expect you would hear, differences once you start getting into the intersectionality of who people are.

Mara Lecocq: Absolutely.

Deb Zahn: And then the last one was women after #MeToo. And so what did you find there? This is another one where I know the results, and I was sad about it, but what did you find there?

Mara Lecocq: So 38% of women in consulting believe their companies will do the right thing when it comes to reporting harassment. So that means that 62% don't trust their companies to do the right thing.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Mara Lecocq: So that's really sad.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. That was disheartening. And do you think, and again, this might come from watching what some of the women are saying in the bowl, or Sarit, even your experience, do you think things have gotten better? Would that be even worse if we had asked that question two or three years ago?

Sarit Henig: I think people are more aware of the importance of this issue in the workplace. It is something that companies know they need to improve. That they need to do better at this. I think it will definitely still take time. And there's a lot of change that still needs to happen, but I think it is at least more of a topic of conversation than it was even a few years ago.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. Yeah. I certainly have seen that as well. So there's reason to hope, but we ain't there yet.

Sarit Henig: Yeah.

Deb Zahn: We’ve got a ways to go. So we mentioned a few times the Women in Consulting bowl, and I want to dive into that a little bit more. So you have different bowls that are about consulting, as you mentioned. So that's not the only one. When you released the survey, were folks talking about it within the bowl and adding sort of their feedback and comments about their own experiences?

Sarit Henig: So we did see definitely some conversations come up in those communities, in the women's bowl, and in general about experiences around these points. These are questions also that come up regularly where women will surface a specific experience they had, and then want to get feedback either to resolve it, or to just confirm their feelings or their sentiments about what they went through. For example, around the #MeToo subject, I recently saw a post from a consultant who said that, this was specifically in the women's bowl, saying that one of the managing directors she worked with was insisting that they stay at the same hotel on a project and was trying to hold her hand in a cab.

Deb Zahn: Ew.

Sarit Henig: And she wasn't sure if it was appropriate. But she was also very junior and didn't, in general, didn't know really what to do. So in this case, she was able to first get confirmation from other women that this was not OK. She had every right to feel negative about this and also got concrete advice about how to react to kind of extricate herself from the negative points of that situation, while being able to continue working. And if she did want to raise it with HR or speak up further about it, how she could go about that. So it was helpful in an emotional sense of getting support and affirmation but also in a very practical sense of getting advice from more senior women who have been there, of how she could tactically handle the situation.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, that's wonderful. And one of the ones that really jumped out at me when I first joined, the stay-at-home orders for the COVID-19 pandemic had been in place I think for about a week or two. And there was one woman who is, I can't remember if she was an associate or what level, but she was all by herself and was feeling lonely and just really having a hard time. And I think she mentioned because she works so much, she didn't have a lot of friends. So she reached out for help and got tremendous support, including from me and others of not just saying you're not alone and whatnot but also giving really practical advice. And then one person said, "Hey, let's have a party. Let's have a Zoom party." And so there was also something actionable that could happen that was more than just saying, "Yeah, we get how you feel." But it was something that was really going to address a lot of the isolation and loneliness that all folks feel but certainly that some of the women in the bowl were talking about.

Sarit Henig: Yeah, for sure.

Deb Zahn: That warmed my heart quite a bit. So let's talk about that because one of the other things I love about Fishbowl is you're also very attuned to what's currently happening in the world. So you have bowls that are very specific to the pandemic, and people talk about it on a lot of the forums, but you have a specific one. So what are you seeing people talk about relative to the pandemic and how they're handling it or their response?

Mara Lecocq: Yeah, what's been interesting is to see the evolution to when it all started at the beginning. There was a sort of a moment of shock where people were asking questions and venting and sort of surprised by the situation. A few days later, people started sharing positive resources, just like what types of workouts are you doing, what types of dishes are you cooking? So it's become a more helpful resource space community. And also right now, people are supporting each other in terms of layoffs, and sharing job opportunities, sharing support in terms of mental health. Because that's important to hear these stories that validate your own experiences, but also provide solutions, like you just mentioned. We've been organizing happy hours actually on Zoom for the community leaders that we have on Fishbowl. So each bowl has leaders and it's a great way for them to connect with each other. So right now because everyone feels isolated, it's a great way to have some sort of like "in-person experience." They're also sharing uplifting content with each other, share your dog photos, share some memes.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Mara Lecocq: And also how can we support the economy, small businesses. So people are sharing the small businesses that they'd love others to support. And finally, there's also a lot of conversations for parents because they're going through a really rough time right now.

Deb Zahn: Right.

Mara Lecocq: They have to be teachers and babysitters and C suite executives all at the same time.

Deb Zahn: That's right. That's right. Or they didn't know that their spouse chewed as loud as they do.

Mara Lecocq: Exactly.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. I loved the lightheartedness support. I posted a picture of a kitty that was so cute I was worried it was going to break Fishbowl, but it didn't. It got a lot of likes, but yeah, I saw somebody put out a spreadsheet on current job opportunities, who's actually hiring. And I really loved the heart that so many people are bringing to these communities within Fishbowl.

Mara Lecocq: Yes. It's fascinating to see the online community come together. We're all basically strangers, but we're all supporting each other without getting credit for it. There's something quite beautiful and new age about this.

Deb Zahn: In a good way. Yeah, absolutely. Now one of the other communities you recently started also, I'm just so excited about, not just because it's my field, but also because it's so needed right now, is healthcare. So talk a little bit about what that new community is about.

Sarit Henig: Sure. So the objective of that community, as with all of our communities, is to give professionals in that space a place for them to connect with each other, share what they're experiencing, support each other emotionally through this, as well as practically share information, share resources, share, especially in the context of COVID-19, whatever treatments they've seen work, or what hasn't worked, and just kind of respond to the real life challenges that we see physicians, nurses, and all others on the front lines of this pandemic go through. To really give them a place where they can share that, and also be not afraid of the consequences. We've also heard of physicians, nurses, and others who have gotten push back out, gotten fired from their places of employments because they criticized, for example, lack of PPE or other things.

 So the anonymity of Fishbowl also gives them that additional layer of security, where they know that they are speaking to a community of their peers, but they are not as vulnerable to censure or consequences of things that they say.

Deb Zahn: And given all of the stress that they're under right now, just to have a place where other people actually understand, and they know what you're going through.

Sarit Henig: Yes.

Deb Zahn: It's a beautiful, beautiful thing. So obviously one of the other things that we're all going through in the midst of the pandemic is trying to figure out our new normal for how our daily lives work. And so I'm curious how both of you are bringing balance to your life in this sort of wacky world that we're currently living in. Sarit, let's start with you.

Sarit Henig: Yeah. So for me, it was definitely, I would say an evolution. It took me a few weeks and I'm still perfecting it, which is also something that I think is OK and important to acknowledge, that our lives are still a work in progress, especially in this case, in this situation. What I've done is really just set set hours. This is when I start working, this is when I sign off. I physically close my computer and put it out of sight in the evening. I'll have dinner or some evening activity that I'm doing at a set time so that I also have something to look forward to and something that kind of sets a barrier in my day.

Deb Zahn: That's smart.

Sarit Henig: And that's helped me just kind of maintain like on and off hours, and then still have time to do things that I enjoy in the evenings and on weekends.

Deb Zahn: Now, one of which is extremely cool, which is the baking. Say a little bit about what you're baking these days?

Sarit Henig: Yes. A lot of cookies, and a lot of pies. I will say definitely, a lot of chefs I've seen have started sharing recipes on Instagram, doing a lot of live demos. So that's been great because usually over the course of the week, I'll just screenshot things that I want to try, and then Saturday or Sunday, I'm busy in the kitchen. So yeah, that's definitely been a silver lining of this phase.

Deb Zahn: Oh, that's great. Yeah, since we last spoke, I think I'm on my third focaccia bread recipe. I think I'm doing research. I'm not convinced that's what it actually is, but that's all right. And Marla, how about you?

Mara Lecocq: Yeah, it's so interesting because I feel like my life is way more balanced than it has ever been with the situation we're in right now. Just the absence of commute has just given us more time to focus on other things, and the absence of a social life, especially based in New York where it's kind of a reverse FOMO, there's just things every day, all the time.

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Mara Lecocq: And I've been incredibly healthier. I work out every day. I set like 30 minutes either when I wake up or to finish my day, to kind of create that transition between work, and sort of the personal life time. And that's been really fulfilling, and I hope that I can take that back on when things go back to normal. And as like yourself, I've been also cooking more, actually we're starting, we're preparing our first sourdough with my husband.

Deb Zahn: Nice.

Mara Lecocq: I know that's a big trend right now. So that's exciting. And so what we've been doing at Fishbowl is we choose ingredients every week and we have, it's called Fish Foods Challenge, and we do a little competition of recipes every week. There's no winner or loser, but it's fun to see, like an ingredient can be tofu one week or salmon the next week.

Deb Zahn: Nice.

Mara Lecocq: And then we all share our recipes and the results. And so that's really motivating. So there's small things like that, that companies can do to keep the morale up.

Deb Zahn: Absolutely. And to build community wherever they can, which I just love. So I want to thank you both so much, and I can't say enough good things about Fishbowl. So I definitely, I will put a link to how folks can get the app in the show notes. And I encourage everybody to get on there. You'll find such a wonderful community of good folks who are going through some of the same things you're going through and are curious and fun and interested and supportive. So I encourage everybody to get on there.

Mara Lecocq: Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Deb, for having us. This was so much fun.

Deb Zahn: Wonderful.

Sarit Henig: Yeah, thank you.

Deborah Zahn: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the Craft of Consulting Podcast. I want to ask you to do three things. If you enjoyed this episode or any of my other podcasts, hit subscribe. I've got a lot of other great guests and content coming up, and I don't want you to miss anything.

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