

Make Your Own McKinsey

An Interview with Sara Prince, Partner Lead for Growth Accelerate, McKinsey & Company

EDITORS' NOTE Sara Prince is the partner lead for Growth Accelerate, McKinsey's approach to building client commercial capabilities. She specializes in marketing and sales capabilities in the transformation context. While serving clients across multiple industries, she spends a significant amount of her time helping consumer and travel, transport, and logistics clients. Her primary focus is on addressing multifaceted organizational, sales, marketing, pricing, and strategy capability challenges. Prior to joining McKinsey, Prince was a trader and analyst at Morgan Stanley. She earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Duke University and an M.B.A. from the University of Virginia Darden Graduate School of Business Administration.



Sara Prince

FIRM BRIEF McKinsey & Company ([mckinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com)) is a global management consulting firm committed to helping organizations create change that matters. In more than 130 cities and 65 countries, its teams help clients across the private, public and social sectors shape bold strategies and transform the way they work, embed technology where it unlocks value, and build capabilities to sustain the change. Not just any change, but Change that Matters – for their organizations, their people, and in turn society at large.

How do you describe the McKinsey culture and how critical is culture to McKinsey's success?

The culture at McKinsey is incredibly important, and it's anchored in two really critical ideas. First, it begins with the idea that you can "make your own McKinsey" – that the firm provides the opportunity and the resources to use your skills in the way that you find most meaningful, and offers you the chance to shape your contribution and your experience. Second, McKinsey is built on the concept of a caring meritocracy. It's not about the credit you get, but the impact you help create. We all show up to help each other and to help our clients, bringing the best version of our expertise and the motivation we need to take on a client's challenges.

That culture is what made me want to come to McKinsey in the first place, but it's also what has made me want to stay. It has been

central to the dynamics of the firm and to our success and it shows up in very real ways: in the help we get from our colleagues, in the teams we create within the firm, and in the sense of support that we've built for our clients and for each other. Our purpose is to make positive, enduring change – and that can only happen through the kind of agency, creativity and caring that McKinsey values and supports.

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

I lead McKinsey's Growth Accelerate program, which helps our clients capture and sustain transformational impact by combining adult-learning principles with the right content and tools to build capabilities in marketing and sales teams at every step of the process. My experience is that, at the end of the day, companies grow because individuals know what to focus on and how to do it. Growth Accelerate is focused on helping organizations make decisions that help their companies succeed, and then establishing and strengthening the long-term individual capabilities that make those decisions work. We're not just pushing a collection of ideas; we're developing a portfolio of action and, ultimately, results.

I also lead our Diversity Matters research series, which shows how diverse company leadership is critical to a company's profitability and success, and our Black Leadership Academy, which is focused on helping our clients reshape their talent pipeline by accelerating

a community of Black Leaders. That's a program that grew out of the 10 actions McKinsey announced this summer to drive towards racial justice and equity. Of course, growth and diversity and inclusion are linked, because diversity and inclusion is a vital – and often overlooked – lever for growth. It's how you get the best talent and become better at innovation, customer insights and effective decision making. All these elements fuel growth.

What's been amazing, though, is the opportunity to take action in critical areas like racial equity. We're not just talking about it – we're getting something done. We launched the idea of a Black Leadership Academy in June, and by the time we rolled out our first session three months later, we had about 4,000 Black business leaders enrolled. As we end the year, we have over 15,000 participants signed up to go through highly-rated, award-winning executive leadership development programs that are designed to help address the inequity of access for Black executives.

That's what the culture of McKinsey is about. We're not just making economies of scale; we're doing something meaningful for our clients and for ourselves. When I talk about "Make your own McKinsey," this is what I'm talking about. This is me making my own McKinsey.

Will you highlight McKinsey's approach to developing client commercial capabilities?

There are three main pieces to McKinsey's approach. First, we're using adult learning principles to understand what makes people shift

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behaviors and what makes those behaviors stick. One of the things that often gets overlooked is that people not only need to understand what you expect of them – they also have to be equipped to take the necessary actions to achieve those results. We’re helping clients build those behavioral, management and technical skills to drive sustainable change.

Second, we’re designing the best model for delivering, and right now that includes ensuring that our efforts are digitally enabled so they can scale and so they can be as relevant and effective as possible, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but long afterwards. We’re developing strategies that are tested and built by salespeople, with metrics and analytics to measure success.

Third, we’re taking growth beyond sales and marketing by focusing on the issues that help drive growth across the organization, from customer experience to pricing. Developing client commercial capabilities is really about a series of learning journeys that help our clients build and stick skills, and that’s what we’re focused on creating.

How has McKinsey adapted the way it works to address the challenges created by the pandemic?

There’s no doubt that the pandemic has changed the way we operate. McKinsey is focused on protecting our colleagues and helping our clients stay safe, whether that means having people work from home, or putting restrictions in place on travel and in-person meetings, or reducing the number of people in the room when in-person gatherings are necessary.

While the pandemic has definitely imposed some limitations, it has also pushed us to unlock innovation. We’re being thoughtful about allocating time to get to know people during virtual meetings, leaving space for the kind of catching up that would normally happen in person. We’re setting up virtual happy hours and team events to help build connections and create good working relationships. We’re finding ways to be more efficient with our clients’ time and with our own resources; for example, the fact that people don’t have to fly around means it’s easier for us to connect the expert on any topic with the people who need that information. We’re finding ways to facilitate access to expertise.

How critical is it for McKinsey to build a diverse and inclusive workforce in order to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when making business decisions?

It’s critical. Our purpose statement talks about creating lasting positive change in the world, but we can’t do that if we don’t understand what lasting positive change means for the communities that we serve. We need to meet people where they are and take them on a journey, and that means we need to understand where they’re coming from. That’s true not only for our private-sector clients, but for our public- and social-sector clients as well.

We also can’t deliver an unrivaled environment for exceptional people if we don’t have exceptional people from all areas and walks of life. Our firm is fueled by the strength of our team and the depths of our expertise. We

need to be able to show up and deliver on our purpose by having the broadest, most diverse and most capable group of humans around the table, and the data says we won’t grow if we don’t do it.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in the industry?

There are absolutely opportunities for women to grow and lead, but we also face serious structural and cultural challenges that have been made worse by COVID-19. Right now, one in four women are considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers. That could mean more than two million women leaving the workforce which would erase six years of progress in just one year.

Listen, I get it. My own lived experience is that, as hard as this pandemic has been on every human, home and work stretch me personally right now in ways I’ve never been stretched before. It’s difficult to show up as the best version of myself at work and at home when my colleagues and my family need me in dramatically different ways.

Here’s the good news: the intentions in places like McKinsey are incredible, and the industry is in a place it’s never been before both in terms of gender and race. There is a genuine commitment to progress and a potential for real transformational growth. I’m optimistic that the circumstances are right for women to lead, but the industry has to do real work in order to get there.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers during this challenging and uncertain time?

The most important thing is to trust your own voice, and to use it. Whatever environment you might find yourself in, whether it’s consulting or not, even if the environment doesn’t feel like it’s asking for your perspective, your perspective is still necessary. Having a sense of what your voice is and using it is critical, whether that means speaking up at weekly meetings or debating the mission of the organization or putting forward an idea even when you’re not sure where to take it. The power of using your voice and feeling the onus to do so is what helps you to not just sit back and think, “is this environment good for me?” but to shape an environment that is good for you and sets you up for success. Trust what you think and put it out there. ●

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