Gendered Language & Stereotype Awareness for Hiring Committees

In a hiring process, stereotypes, unconscious bias and communication styles can unknowingly influence impressions of candidates and jobs.

Women's behaviour tends to be stereotyped as communal (kind, thoughtful, sensitive to others' feelings, deferent), whereas men are stereotyped as agentic (competitive, decisive, aggressive, socially dominant). Women also are encouraged to be more self-assertive, but discouraged from advancing their interests at the cost of others.

Language can also be characterized as feminine or masculine; being more indirect, elaborate and emotional for the former, or more succinct, direct and instrumental for the latter.

These stereotypes and assumptions can impact a hiring committee's assessment of a candidate's abilities, as well as the candidate's assessment of a job description and their “fit” within an organisation.

Job ads with masculine language are less appealing to women, regardless of job type, and decreased their anticipated belonging to the organisation. Conversely, gendered language had no impact on men's anticipated belonging.

Gender Discrimination Exists

Gender segregation is the tendency for women to work in systematically different occupations and industries than men. This often occurs at critical career points, which can dissuade women from continuing in male-dominated industries.

Women grow more aware of the “glass ceiling” as they advance in their careers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Under 20 yrs</th>
<th>21-44 yrs</th>
<th>Over 45 yrs</th>
<th>All ages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of workers who believe barriers that prevent women from reaching management level exist.

Women with children experienced declines in earnings and hours worked; men with children correlated with increased earnings and virtually unchanged hours.

Stereotypes & Their Effects

Stereotype: Men

Agentic: competitive, decisive, aggressive, socially dominant

Stereotype: Women

Communal: kind, thoughtful, sensitive to others, deferent

Traditionally, companies have valued agentic behaviour over communal behaviour.

Some women counteract negative stereotypes by adopting a more masculine communication style. This can be effective for some women, but not all. Agentic behaviours have social costs.

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Gendered Job Descriptions

For an Engineer

**Feminine**
- "Proficient oral and written communication skills."
- "Collaborates well in a team environment."
- "Sensitive to the clients’ needs, can develop warm client relationships."
- "Provide general support to project teams in a manner complimentary to the company."

**Masculine**
- "Strong communication and influencing skills."
- "Ability to perform individually in a competitive environment."
- "Superior ability to satisfy customers and manage company’s association with them."
- "Direct project groups to manage project progress and ensure accurate task control."

Word Choice Matters

Gendered wording subtly signals who belongs and who doesn’t. Below are examples of language in job advertisements and qualities of candidates.

**Feminine**
- a company’s “excellence” in the market
- “understand markets to establish appropriate selling prices”
- “We are committed to providing top quality health care that is sympathetic to the needs or our patients”

**Masculine**
- a company’s “dominance” in the market
- “analyze markets to determine appropriate selling prices”
- “We are determined to deliver superior medical treatment tailored to each individual patient”

Observed Effects of Women Using Forced Agentic Behaviour

- Increase ♀’s competence scores to equally agentic men
- Seem more threatening; less persuasive & less influential
- Decrease compliance of workers for ♀ managers
- If women need to manage the impressions they give off, it can lead to stress, anxiety and reduced task performance.

Women in Leadership Positions

Use of Communal behaviour

Use of Agentic behaviour

- Respect from coworkers
- Both actions carry a risk of being disqualified from a job application.

"Qualified"

Only partially meet the advertised job requirements?

- Men are more likely to apply, regardless.
- 85% of women would only apply to a job if they met the job description “fully” or “pretty well.”
- Women are also less likely to apply for masculine-stereotyped jobs.

Deciding to Apply

3 main factors when individuals decide to apply:

- Identification with the Job
- Reward Preference
- Expectation of Application Success

- Is it consistent with the individual’s identity?
- (financial, intellectual, schedule flexibility, etc.)
- Men and women evaluate job decision factors differently because of gender role socialization.

Interview Best Practices

- Is this what I want to do?
- Job technical and skill requirements
- Go beyond the technical details and salary discussions
- Working relationships and workplace climate
- Expectations for availability and travel
- Will there be people like me?
- How do current employers handle family demands?

What Can We Do?

Gendered language is not a deliberate process - most job ads only contain 1% gendered language but impact women’s application decisions.

Increasing feminine language in job descriptions can increase women’s interest in the job.

Organisations need to rethink their hiring process, and should ensure career advancement reflects skills and capabilities instead of emphasising time served.

When attracting women to a job, flexible working hours and work-life balance are important, as well as ensuring they have a sense of anticipated belonging in the organisation.

Interview best practices help you find the best employee, and are universally helpful, regardless of gender.

Lifestyle and workplace climate discussions are particularly important to women and young workers (Millenials / Gen Y).

Women's leadership potential should be maximized through professional development, mentoring, and proactively identifying talented individuals and encouraging them to apply for upper level jobs.

The negative effects of communal communication stereotypes can also be eliminated through self-affirmation exercises.
References


Recommended Readings


About SCWIST and Make Possible

SCWIST is a non-profit association that promotes, encourages and empowers women and girls in science, engineering and technology. The MS Infinity Program introduces girls to exciting career options and positive female role models in science and technology. The IWIS (Immigrating Women in Science and Technology) Program provides support to immigrating professional women including resources, skill development workshops and networking opportunities. Program details at www.scwist.ca/

The Make Possible Mentoring Network is part of the Government of Canada’s Status of Women Initiative to help attract and retain women in technology and advance the digital economy. Make Possible provides mentoring support, networking connections, professional development and leadership opportunities to help women reach their full potential in the technology sector and all STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. The Make Possible vision is a world where aspiration, opportunity and diversity intersect. The Make Possible mission is to help women connect, collaborate and lead through a dedicated mentoring network in STEM. For more information: contact@makepossible.ca or visit http://www.makepossible.ca/

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