Gender equitable recruitment and promotion

A guide for organisations

Gender bias is pervasive at work and in organisations, creating inequalities at every stage of the employment cycle, from recruitment to selection to promotion. This leading practice guide provides evidence-based suggestions for creating more equitable hiring and promotion systems.

Recruitment and selection

Organisations can take various steps to reduce gender bias in recruitment and selection.

Gender neutral job advertisements

Organisations should strive to ensure that job advertisements contain gender-neutral wording. Various online tools enable organisations to check their job advertisements for language that evoke masculine and feminine gender stereotypes.

Interview invitations

Organisations should carefully monitor who is applying for jobs and who is receiving interview invitations to ensure that subtle gender biases (and other intersectional biases, such as age, race, parental status, and socioeconomic status) are not producing inequalities at the initial recruitment stages.

Use specific recruitment and selection criteria

Specific criteria directly tied to the job should be used to assess job applications. Criteria must be directly related to the job requirements, and the relative importance of each criterion must be weighted in advance to avoid the phenomenon of evaluators subtly shifting criteria to favour applicants who fit a stereotypical profile.

Use structured interviews

Organisations should develop structured interview questions around specific job-related criteria. Rather than developing 'holistic' assessments of candidates based on managers' gut feelings or intuition, organisations should rate each candidate against pre-established criteria. When making negative judgments about a female candidate's personality or perceived weaknesses, interviewers should be trained to use 'counter-stereotypical' scenarios to question (either individually or collectively) whether they would have the same reaction to a male candidate who answered the same question in the same way.

Anonymise performance-related criteria

Organisations need to be aware of the unintended consequences that can arise from anonymous recruitment procedures and conduct rigorous testing and evaluation to ensure that the process does not exacerbate existing inequalities. Organisations may wish to consider using anonymisation for procedures that test work performance (such as work sample tests or job-specific questionnaires), rather than anonymising resumes.

Feedback and promotion

Organisations should also take steps to ensure that gender biases are not holding women back in feedback and promotion.

Train managers to provide specific feedback

Women are more likely to receive feedback that is vague and unspecific, such as being told they are 'too abrasive' or 'too demanding'. Managers must be trained to provide feedback that is specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, timely and thoughtful.

Career development

Organisations should seek to ensure that women and men have equal opportunities for career development. Managers should be made aware that well-intentioned attempts to protect women from overwork might limit women's advancement within organisations and lead to discrimination. Managers should also be given specific guidance on how to avoid letting gender-based assumptions interfere with the allocation of career development opportunities.

Valuing alternative leadership styles

Organisations seeking to encourage women's progression into senior leadership need to be aware of and sensitive to the dilemma facing women who display traditionally masculine leadership styles and develop new evaluation frameworks to ensure that alternative leadership styles are equally valued and respected. Addressing procedural fairness at all stages of recruitment, selection and evaluation may also improve women's sense of belonging and persistence in competing for senior leadership roles.

Merit

Organisations should also take steps to make their processes more accountable and transparent, and to challenge uninterrogated notions of 'merit' which can be used to justify discrimination.

Create a dialogue around 'merit'

Many organisations committed to gender equality have initiated bias awareness training for managers alongside the setting of organisational gender targets. However, research suggests that educating managers about the existence of biases is not sufficient to garner support for affirmative action policies. Organisations must also begin a systematic process of challenging and redefining uninterrogated concepts of 'merit.'

Research

Further research is required to design and test interventions that effectively reduce or eliminate gender bias in recruitment, selection and promotion. Such research requires that organisations partner with universities and research laboratories to allow such design and testing to occur.