

Gendered Language in Recruitment

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This advisory provides an update on recent research concerning the impact of gendered language in recruitment. It revisits the key findings from commercial and academic research in the 2010s, which identified that masculine-coded language in job descriptions leads to fewer applications from qualified women candidates. This insight has influenced how inclusive companies formulate job descriptions and spurred the development of gender-debiasing tools in HR platforms such as JDexpert and Textio.

This article seeks to answer two key questions -

1. Is the original finding still valid?
2. What additional measures can increase the proportion of female applicants?

Executive Summary

For countries where English is the native language, more recent studies have found that altering job descriptions to neutralise masculine language only marginally increases female applicants. For countries with gendered languages, it is an effective strategy to use the pure female form and feminine language. Our recommendations are to focus on interventions that provide the benefits that women are looking for, such as flex-work and job sharing; to actively communicate these in the job listings; provide a supportive work culture for women; have clear job requirements in job listings; keep requirements to a minimum for entry positions and to first enable internal success for women in male dominated roles.

Definitions: What is gendered language?

Gendered language refers to words or phrases that carry gender-based attributes or reinforce distinctions between binary genders. For example, in English, the term “businessman” is used as the generic default to represent all business owners, with the intention to include businesswomen, but it may implicitly exclude them. This can perpetuate the association of business ownership predominantly with men.

The study of gendered language is a crucial field within academic areas of social psychology, business, linguistics and gender studies. Researchers investigate how gendered language influences perception, identity formation, gender roles and social interaction. For example, sociolinguistics studies investigate variations in language use among genders and how these variations reflect broader societal norms and expectations.

Factors considered in our evaluation

When reviewing research in this area, we considered several factors:

1. **Language of the research** - Some languages, such as Italian, Spanish, and French, use gender-specific forms for nouns, pronouns, and verbs. For example, in Spanish, all nouns are classified as either masculine or feminine.
2. **Country of research** - some countries exhibit deeper gender inequalities, potentially making them more sensitive to gendered language.
3. **Scope of industries** - the research should ideally span both male and female dominated industries for application.
4. **Sample size** - The number of roles involved should be of sufficient size.
5. **Type of gendered language** - we focused on gendered context and words found in a job description. We excluded research on stated gender preference.

Impact of Gendered Language in Increasing Female Applicants

Despite the broad interest in gender-coded language in recruitment, few studies directly investigate its impact. There is a trend for job descriptions to use gendered language corresponding to the gender dominating the role (Tokarz, 2021; Gaucher et al. 2011). However the key question remains: does this language bias lead to a self-selecting representation of genders?

Gaucher's study involved two content analysis studies across 4133 jobs and multiple industries and levels, and three experimental studies involving students. The researchers replaced masculine words with feminine words, to examine how this change affected perceptions of gender diversity, sense of belonging and job appeal. They found that masculinely worded ads were less appealing to women, due to a decreased sense of belonging. However, the findings were not conducted in field conditions and do not directly demonstrate an impact on the applicant pool.

Synder, a scientist at Textio, analysed 78,000 job listings in the engineering sector. Her findings indicated that jobs typically hiring male used twice as many masculine-coded words, concluding that language bias in job descriptions impacts who you will hire.

However, correlation does not imply causation, and the lack of published methodology and detailed results limits the conclusions that can be drawn.

More recently, in 2023, Castilla and Rho conducted a significant study in the U.S., including data from 296,000 job listings, 485,000 unique job seekers and 590,000 inquiries. They used natural language processing to count the frequency of stereotypically masculine and feminine words, assigning each job listing a femininity score. They found that a one standard deviation increase in the femininity score corresponded to only a 0.3% higher probability of a woman inquiring about the job compared to a man - an almost negligible effect. In the second part of the study that was conducted only with Amazon Turk, their study showed that while women displayed higher interest in feminine postings, this did not significantly affect their application behaviour. The gender of the recruiter also did not significantly impact the gender outcome of the recruitment..

It appears that neutralising gendered words will not significantly increase female applicants. However, the studies have limitations, such as applicability to countries with deeper gender inequalities and the impact of switching to entirely feminine language (vs. words), particularly in male-dominated sectors.

The situation differs for languages with gender-specific forms. Research by Hetjens and Hartmann (2024) and Damelang et al. (2024) in Germany, and Del Carpio in Latin America (2023), shows different results. Hetjens and Hartmann's analysis of 256,934 job listings, viewed almost 48 million times, found that the use of female forms had an impact on gender viewership, and the biggest increase when explicitly including a feminine suffix (e.g., "-in" in German). Addressing women with masculine job titles or pronouns, and even using neutral nouns has much fewer women viewing the job ads. This had an impact even in female dominated fields, such as nursing. Gender-neutral job titles have been a legal requirement in Germany since 2019.

Their study also found that simple gender-neutral or male-biased formulations, such as using a single asterisk to signal neutrality in masculine terms (e.g., Lehrer*), did not significantly attract female views compared to formulations explicitly including female forms or a combination of both gender forms. Traditional gender stereotypes in certain fields influenced viewing patterns, where explicit gender-inclusive language tended to attract more female views in fields not traditionally dominated by females.

Damelang et al.'s 2024 study, published by the IAB (German Research Institute of the Federal Employment Agency), undertook a descriptive analysis of almost one million job listings across 710 job roles. They set out to review gendered language, beyond gendered titles. The study applied the German occupation classification that allowed them to compare within and between occupations, and compare hierarchy through leadership and technical skills classification.

The findings echoed those of Gaucher and Synder, showing strong gender stereotypes in job roles and levels. Although the methodology did not prove that this leads to biased applications and hiring, there is a fairly robust body of research indicating that masculine grammar invokes male-biased representation; and other research shows that when females do apply, they are perceived as less capable (González, 2019; Napp and Breda 2022).

For Del Carpio's research in Latin America, the use of gender-neutral language in job titles did not significantly affect the number of women applying for positions in male-dominated roles, such as tech, but increased significantly by 12.6% for areas with a higher share of female applicants, such as marketing and design. Participants also perceived companies using gender-neutral language as more inclusive, promoting work-life balance, and employing a higher proportion of women. This observation that representation of females follows a self-enforcing cycle is also observed in Damelang's research (2020).

The findings advocating the use of gender-neutral language and feminine-inclusive language are relevant for application in gendered Asian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Dari and Tajik Persian. A global research by Jakiela and Ozier (2020), covering 99% of the world's spoken languages also found a strong correlation between countries whose native languages are gendered and them having lower female labour force participation and educational attainment.

Other ways of increasing female applicants

In terms of language, the explicit inclusion of females through feminine language, and also excluding masculine-coded language, will only marginally increase female candidates, and yield better results with gendered languages, such as Hindi and French. What other strategies can the English-speaking world adopt to attract more female applicants?

Initiatives that directly target and enable an inclusive environment for female employees may be the most obvious and effective answer. Here are some strategies:

1. **Build a reputable workplace for women:** Ensure that your company is recognised as an excellent workplace for women, supported by Glassdoor reviews that attest to the environment.
2. **Tailor job offerings to women's needs:** Women with more responsibilities outside of work are more likely to apply for roles with flexibility, less critical decision-making, and a less competitive environment. In general, women prefer roles with more interpersonal interactions. (Basbug et al., 2024).

3. **Highlight flexible working options:** In 2019, insurance company Zurich's UK office reported a 16% increase in women applying for roles after adding flexible working options to their job ads, words such as "part-time", "job-share" or "flexible working". Furthermore, their management roles saw a 33% increase in women hires.
4. **Address risk aversion:** In general, women are more risk adverse. Displaying the number of applicants can increase the number of female applicants by 3.5% overall, as knowing the actions of others can influence their decision to apply (Gee, 2016).
5. **Clarify job requirements:** Ambiguity around job requirements discourage female applicants. Clearly stating what the role involves and how candidates will be evaluated can help (Coffman et al., 2021).
6. **Only list critical requirements:** A shorter list of requirements will increase both male and female applicants. However, the overall skill level of female applicants will drop, and this will also cause an outflow of some highly skilled women who are more conscious of job fit. This strategy may suit entry-level roles where requirements are lower and in-house training is an option. (Abraham et al., 2024).
7. **Challenge job gender typing:** Gendertyping of jobs is a reality - sales roles are dominated by men and human resources, by women. In order to overcome gender stereotypes and diversify gender mix, case studies and success stories have to be visibly celebrated.

Conclusion

While gender-neutral language in job descriptions has limited impact on recruiting more women, there are other tools to leverage on. Companies must actively cultivate environments that not only attract but also support and retain women talent. This includes implementing and communicating flexible work policies, transparent hiring practices, and ongoing support for work-life balance - things that matter to women. Finally, don't wait for research to validate what you think may work. Conduct experiments in your organisations and measure them.

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