

Case Study IBM: Gendered Job Descriptions- Interrupting Bias in Talent Attraction

Mitchell Services applies extensive project management rigor and global diversity & inclusion strategy experience to intentionally disrupt the subtle and not so subtle business processes that perpetuate gender inequity- targeting structural, cultural, interpersonal and personal barriers in the workplace.

The gender composition of the Australian workforce reveals men comprise more than 75% of the full-time workforce in mining; construction; electricity, gas, water and waste services; transport, postal and warehousing industries, and 60% of professional, scientific and technical services roles (1). Social dominance theory suggests that structural barriers reinforce and perpetuate gender inequality in the workplace (2). Organisations are gendered; reflecting our gendered societies (3). Recruitment practices are inherently bias (3); promoted by descriptive gender stereotypes in job descriptions. Women can place different values than men on job description cues when making decisions on potential fit. Gendered language is contained not just in job titles, but throughout the job description such as ‘dominate the marketplace, aggressively meet targets, or drive teams to lead results’. Research shows that female applicants make decisions on whether they would belong in an organisation based on gendered wording in job descriptions-irrespective of qualifications and skills match (4).

At IBM, a review of applications by gender revealed for every 10 experienced professional males applying, only 1-2 experienced professional women applied. A pilot project was developed to interrupt bias in job applications. A job description review was undertaken to ensure gender neutral language was used to describe job requirements.

Client Testimonial

By changing the way job descriptions were written, IBM raised the proportion of women in their experienced hires from 23 per cent to 30 per cent. “That is the highest rate in 50 years. It was a small thing to do, you could almost disregard it, but it had a big effect.”

IBM Australia New Zealand General Manager.

Mitchell Services offers:

- Review to define structural barriers; specifically bias in job descriptions
- Agree on bias interrupters strategy
- Execute & measure ROI

1. ABS (2014) Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly, Feb 2014.
2. Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression. Cambridge University Press: New York.
3. Acker, J. (1992). Gendering Organizational Theory. In A. J. Mills & P. Tancred (Eds.), Gendering Organizational Analysis (pp. 248-259). London: Sage.
4. Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

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