

Employers prefer to promote men... but not always

New research shows that when women try to take a first step up the corporate ladder, they can have trouble pulling their feet up from “sticky floors”. Women job applicants are significantly less likely than men to be called in for an interview for jobs implying a promotion at the functional level (in terms of tasks of tasks and duties); however, women and men seem to be on equal footing when it comes to jobs offering an increase in authority (for example in terms of management/supervision responsibilities).

The study by Ann-Sophie De Pauw from IÉSEG School of Management, Stijn Baert (Ghent University, Belgium), and Nick Deschacht (KU Leuven, Belgium), is published as a paper in the May 2016 edition of Industrial and Labor Relations Review, entitled “Do Employer Preferences Contribute to Sticky Floors?”

Most people are familiar with the notion of the glass ceiling, which expresses the difficulty for women to reach the very top of business organizations. ‘Sticky floors’ refers to the difficulty for women to receive promotions early on in their careers as well, or, in other words, the fact that it is also harder for women than for men to start to climb up the corporate ladder.

Ann-Sophie De Pauw and her co-researchers hypothesized that early in careers, employers often prefer to hire men. To find out if such preferences can explain sticky floors, they designed a study in the Belgian labour market and measured differences in call-back rates for men vs. women applying for the same job.

When De Pauw and her co-researchers decided to investigate gender discrimination, they were faced with a fundamental obstacle. “You cannot just ask employers whether they prefer to hire men over women,” De Pauw explains. “And traditional research methods like questionnaires and lab experiments present methodological limitations.” The researchers designed a correspondence test to find out whether employer preferences lead to unequal treatment of male and female job candidates.

They created fictitious yet reality-based CVs that they sent to real employers in Belgium seeking to fill job vacancies. The employers were unaware of their participation in the test. When a positive response from employers was received, the researchers promptly declined the interview request to limit further disruption for the employer.

In general, the research showed that employers have no significant preference when it comes to hiring men or women. There was no difference in treatment of men vs. women overall. One out of four job candidates received a call-back. However, when the researchers looked specifically at jobs implying a step up from the current level, they found a different story.

“We found that women received 33% fewer interview invitations when they apply for jobs that imply a first promotion at the functional level,” explains Ann-Sophie De Pauw.

Still, the issue is more nuanced than it first appears. De Pauw explains that there are two types of promotion, one implying more complex job content, and the other involving increased authority (in terms of supervision and management). The correspondence study shows preferences for male candidates only when the vacant job involves an increase in complexity (at the functional level), not

greater authority. “This is an intriguing finding that gave our research team food for thought,” says De Pauw. “It was interesting to isolate two different dimensions in promotion, and we need to follow up with further research to further disentangle the issue.”

She speculates that for more complex jobs, women may be subject to traditional factors of discrimination and assumptions of lesser productivity. This is not so when jobs imply more authority. “Women are considered to be good team leaders. They are not subject to any specific expectations in relation to men,” she adds.

Since completing the study, De Pauw and her co-researchers are focusing on a second hypothesis about sticky floors. Indeed, in addition to employer preferences, they might potentially stem from women’s reluctance to start climbing the corporate ladder. The team is exploring the issue in a study where men and women are presented with various job scenarios and asked whether or not they would accept a promotion in different circumstances.

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