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An Examination of Gender Bias in Hiring

March 2019 / Employers Council

We often hear about the “glass ceiling,” i.e., the barrier to advancement impacting women in the workplace. Yet, “women may be most vulnerable to discrimination even before they begin the job – in the interview phase,” according to an article by Jennie Shulkin, a student at Harvard University, published on May 12, 2017 in The Huffington Post. This assertion is confirmed by many studies that explore how gender bias affects decisions made in the interviewing and hiring process across multiple industries. According to an article published in March 2015 in Psychology of Women Quarterly, “Although explicit stereotypes of women in the workplace have become increasingly positive, negative stereotypes persist at an implicit level, with women being more likely associated with incompetent—and men with competent—managerial traits.”

Further, a study published in Proceedings from the National Academy of Sciences, based on an experiment conducted under laboratory conditions, and reviewed in The New York Times in March 2014, indicated that with no information about the candidates aside from their appearance, managers (regardless of sex) were “twice as likely to hire a man over a woman.” Often, this occurred, even when the hiring managers were provided with evidence that candidates were equal in competency and the female candidate’s skill level exceeded that of the male candidate. In cases where managers knew they were hiring the lower-performing candidate, two out of three times they still chose the male candidate over the female candidate.

Additionally, HHS Public Access and PbMed Central published a compilation of results from 27 studies that examined gender bias in the hiring process. Several of the studies indicated that interviewers tended to have negative reactions toward women who displayed behaviors stereotypically associated with men. In addition, these studies found that women who are clearly capable in job roles typically associated with men, may receive lower marks primarily because their competence is in violation of expected female behavior. This is particularly common when female candidates use “self-promoting or powerful language or gestures.”

Because the evidence demonstrates that these biases tend to exist (albeit usually unconsciously) in both male and female interviewers, the following are some suggestions for organizations to implement in order to avoid that tendency:

- Review and rate the qualifications and credentials of candidates prior to in-person interviews.
- Design a structured interview process so that all candidates are compared uniformly.
- Rate performance on a numerical scale based on demonstrated job knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Strive to attain an applicant pool in which women comprise a significant portion of the candidates.
- Provide training to interviewers on how to prevent unconscious biases.
- Use gender-neutral job titles, such as “chairperson” rather than “chairman.”
- Refrain from making a hiring decision until after you have interviewed all of the candidates. This helps to prevent making decisions based on appearance and other first impressions.