

“The aura of capability”: Gender bias in selection for a project manager job



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KEYWORDS

- Gender bias
- Project manager
- Recruitment
- Gender studies

Article Highlight:

This paper reports on the results of a study that assessed attitudes toward male versus female candidates applying for a project manager position. The authors sampled project professionals in several organisations using a scenario-based assessment to determine their reactions to a male and female candidate applying for a project manager position.

The authors wished to determine the degree to which perceptions of gender roles in technical positions have changed during a time of increasing female entry into traditionally male-dominated disciplines such as project management.

What does the paper cover?

Gender bias, stereotyping, and unfair or skewed hiring practices have long been experienced by female managers. However, industries that were traditionally viewed as 'male-dominated', such as information technology, engineering, operations and construction, have recently seen a rise in the number of women moving into managerial positions.

One discipline that has witnessed significant changes in perspectives on equal gender accessibility and competence is project management, so the authors sought to study the job selection challenge within the context of this industry, focusing on perceived differences in male and female job candidates based on a set of critical personal/managerial characteristics.

Methodology:

The authors developed a scenario-based survey questionnaire and a between-subjects research design, sampling 312 project management personnel and testing the subjects' reactions to two candidates for a project management position, employing identical descriptions and language while only changing the candidate's name: Susan Johnson or Stan Johnson.

The study used the following scales: likeability, trust, perceived competence and self-interest. The authors also included a dependent variable relating to how willing the respondent would be to hire the candidate.

Research findings:

The study offers some intriguing findings as they relate to perceptions of the characteristics that are considered important in the hiring decision for project manager positions. Firstly, female project manager candidates were viewed as less competent (and therefore less likely to be hired) compared to their male counterparts, but only when perceived technical skills were low. Therefore, in a hiring pool where knowledge of a candidate's technical skills is either unknown or viewed as modest, the findings suggest that women will experience a negative bias.

The good news for female project manager candidates is the lack of demonstrated gender bias across the other predictor variables of trust, likeability, administrative competence and self-interest. There was a lack of broader, systematic gender bias results in this study.

Other noteworthy findings included the more positive perception of the female job candidate at higher levels of perceived technical competence, and when women are able to demonstrate task-specific or task-related expertise, many gender biases tend to dissolve.

Conclusions:

The results suggested that all independent variables are significant predictors of the likelihood of a project manager candidate being hired. The authors only found evidence of gender bias in relation to perceived technical competence. In situations where the perceived technical competence of the job candidate was low, the female candidate was less likely to be hired over a male counterpart. However, as a candidate's perceived technical competence increased, the resulting attributions were significantly more beneficial for the female job seeker, who was more likely to be hired over a male candidate.

Significance of the research:

The rapidly growing female managerial class gives rise to some important questions. First, what are some of the important traits looked for in attractive project manager job candidates? Second, how does the candidate's gender moderate the relationship between these various personality variables and the likelihood that the candidate will be hired?

The encouraging evidence regarding a relative lack of gender bias in project manager selection in this study offers hope, coupled with the finding that professional capability (particularly technical competence) remains the great job equaliser.

Comments from authors:

Our research presents something of a good news/bad news conclusion. The good news is that demographics show that more and more women are graduating from university with technical qualifications right at the time when project-based work is accelerating across organisations and industries. As a result, this is an excellent time for job prospects for women in project management roles.

The bad news, as we found in this study, is that although prejudices against women are improving, there are some ways in which female job candidates still experience gender bias. These biases are most notably evident in perceptions of technical skills and qualifications. When the perception is that the overall hiring pool is of low technical competence, women are not given the benefit of the doubt when compared to male candidates. Overall, these hiring prejudices are dying hard but we believe that they are dying.

Professor Jeffrey Pinto

Project management has been perceived as a male-dominant practice. However, in recent years, project management has been practiced in various industries and the mix of male and female project managers has increased. In addition to the technical competence of project managers, other characteristics such as administrative competence, likeability, and trustworthiness are important for success. It is encouraging to see from the results of this study that there is no gender bias towards a selection of candidate project managers on the basis of many characteristics. However, to lessen any gender bias – if there is any – it is very important for female candidates to be able to demonstrate a proven track record of their technical competency during the selection process – don't be shy! In fact, this should apply to any candidate, both male and female – level the playing field!

Dr Peerasit Patanakul

Leaders at all levels in organisations, whether in human resources or not, are continually confronted with the challenge of navigating sensitive issues, such as issues that arise during the selection and hiring process to an employee's feelings of being under-utilised by his/her manager, a conflict with a co-worker or even stress from personal issues.

We learned that scenarios can be an effective projective technique for testing sensitive topics. Although complex, the process of developing an accurate scenario can be a valuable learning experience for the researcher as it sheds light on topics that are difficult and hard to study. Scenarios require insight and a willingness to clearly understand alternative perspectives. They should not be created without verifying their believability and accuracy with practitioners or members of your targeted population. Done well, they offer a superb means to deal with sensitive issues such as gender bias in hiring. We are confident that our results show a broader perspective of the overall difficulties involved in evaluating selection and hiring bias.

Professor Mary Beth Pinto

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Glossary:

Likeability

The likeability scale used in the research consisted of nine statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with anchors 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Trust

Integrity, or relational trust, is the respondent's belief in the personal integrity of the subject of interest. Sample items on this scale include: "I believe s/he will keep her/his word throughout the life of the project" and "I feel confident that s/he has high levels of integrity."

Perceived competence

For this study, the authors developed a six-item scale based on the measures of two accepted perceived competence trust scales. Sample items from this scale include: "I would expect her to handle herself well on the job" and "It will be difficult for him/her to find effective solutions to the problems that come his/her way."

Self-interest

The authors used a modified, six-item form of the [Gerbasi and Prentice \(2013\)](#) self-interest inventory, which measures several components of self-interest, including self-maximising and self-prioritising attitudes. Sample items include: "I would expect Susan (Stan) to keep an eye out for her (his) interests."



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