

Biased Language Tool

Introduction

This series of guidelines assists in creating job descriptions that are free from biased language, positioning you to recruit and ultimately hire from a more diverse pool of candidates. Upon review of this document, you will be able to better identify how certain wording can impact the candidates that you attract (or discourage) with your next job posting and what tools you can use to avoid using biased language.

Research has shown that one of the biggest areas of failure in job description bias is gender-based. In a research paper titled “Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality” written by Danielle Gaucher, Justin Friesen, and Aaron Kay, they conducted a series of studies on gendered language in job descriptions. These studies demonstrated that gender-biased language in job descriptions still exists.

The study found that job descriptions for positions traditionally associated with men use language that may unconsciously deter women from applying for these positions. The use of male-associated pronouns like “his” – rather than female-associated “her” or more gender-neutral “they” or “the person” – significantly impacts who applies for each position. Even worse, those gender-specific pronouns have a profound effect on who gets hired. Even using words like “dominant” or “competitive” can be viewed as biased.

What is Bias?

There are two types of bias in job descriptions: explicit bias and implicit bias. Explicit biases are ones we can control and are aware of. Racism is an example of explicit bias. On the other hand, implicit biases are our unconscious perceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs we have developed from our past experiences and influences. Implicit bias is often more subtle and therefore more difficult to identify. It has been referred to as unconscious bias.

Explicit bias for men and women in job descriptions is no longer commonplace or legal due to regulations by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But that doesn’t mean that biased job postings don’t still exist. The gender of a preferred candidate may still be conveyed, but in a more subtle fashion, through implicit biases that influence wording in job descriptions. These reflect broader cultural stereotypes about men and women. This biased wording can cause diverse pools of candidates to avoid applying for the position.

Gender bias is not the only thing to be cognizant of. Sometimes the wording used can discourage BIPOC or LGBTQ+ candidates from pursuing an opening. This happens most often when a hiring manager is actively looking to subtly discourage certain classes of applicants even while adhering to corporate diversity policies and EEOC regulations. For example:

“For this role we’re looking for a strong, ‘All-American boy’ type. Must be well-mannered, well-groomed, well-spoken and respectful to the customers.”

Do you hear the bias? This hiring manager is most likely looking for a young, able-bodied, white, heterosexual, well-educated male that most likely comes from an affluent family. And yet the hiring manager deftly avoided including any of those demographics in the job description.

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Special attention should also be paid to the list of job requirements. According to the Harvard Business Review, there is research that suggests men will apply for jobs they see themselves as mostly qualified for (meeting 60% of requirements), while women won't apply without being 100% sure they meet every qualification. Job descriptions that are written to demand extensive requirements from candidates are less likely to see a fair gender split among applicants and will most likely skew towards men. Your top candidate might wind up being someone who doesn't quite meet all of your organization's preferred qualifications.

The Solution

Writing a good job ad isn't so much about avoiding all masculine words as it is about being mindful of how language is perceived and using words that appeal to a broad range of candidates. Balance biased language throughout, to make sure that if you are using some masculine-coded language, you are also using other feminine-coded language to result in an overall neutral tone.

Here are a few steps to consider when creating a job posting:

- 1. Check for gendered wording.**

Learn how to discover, decipher, and translate biased job postings.

- 2. Diversify who Reviews Job Postings.**

Consider asking a diverse committee (made up of more than just one single hiring manager) to review job postings before they are publicized.

- 3. Use plain speech instead of corporate jargon.**

If a candidate cannot easily interpret the job posting, they may not feel welcome to apply.

- 4. Watch for coded words.**

Avoid phrases that imply a preference for younger candidates, such as "fast-moving" or "digital native." Also pay attention to phrases that may discourage candidates with physical disabilities or challenges from applying, such as "able-bodied" or requiring that the applicant be able to "speak/talk" (when "communicate" would be more inclusive).

- 5. Avoid excessive requirements.**

Separate job requirements into lists of "must haves" and "nice-to-haves" to attract a wider pool and avoid discouraging promising applicants.

- 6. Incorporate a Statement of Commitment to DEI.**

Including a DEI statement can show candidates that your organization is committed to diversity and inclusion and can go a long way to attracting diverse talent.



Tools to Support Your Work

Gender Decoder: <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>

This free online tool allows you to copy and paste your job posting into their system and analyzes it in seconds. The tool indicates whether the job posting is masculine, feminine, or neutral and identifies words that are creating any imbalance.

Language Bias Quick Sheet

Top 10 Feminine Words

1. Support
2. Share
3. Responsible
4. Understand
5. Together
6. Committed
7. Interpersonal
8. Feel
9. Collaborate
10. Connect

Alternative Words

Aid, Reinforce, Bolster
Contribute, Allocate, Distribute
Accountable, Spearhead, Ownership
Comprehend, Appreciate
Jointly, Unite, Mutually
Dedicate, Pledged, Loyal
Interact, Relational
Tone, Atmosphere, Culture
Partner, Contribute
Join, Unite

Top 10 Masculine Words

1. Strong
2. Lead
3. Analysis
4. Individual(s)
5. Decisions
6. Driven
7. Competitive
8. Expert
9. Objectives
10. Principles

Alternative Words

Proven, Exceptional, Sound
Manage, Guide, Steer
Study, Research, Test
People/Person, Team Member(s)
Choices, Actions, Outcomes
Passionate, Inspired, Motivated
Enthusiastic, Comparative
Professional, Skilled
Targets, Goals, Purpose
Values, Beliefs, Standard