Are some job adverts discouraging women from applying?

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It is now well known that advertising a vacancy for a "barmaid" or a "handyman" would discriminate against applicants of the opposite sex. When Human Rights Watch called out a number of Chinese tech companies for advertising for "men-only" and "men preferred" roles, the discrimination was obvious to all.

Gender-biased phrasing in adverts

However, discrimination is rarely this blatant. We all use language that is subtly 'gender-coded', and reinforced by societal expectations and behavioural norms associated with what men and women are like. 'Bossy', for example, is a word rarely ever used to describe men. Adverts may also be "gender-coded", i.e. hinting towards a male or female applicant. Totaljobs has published its analysis of 75,000 job advertisements, and it shows that gender-biased phrasing is fairly common.

Male and female-oriented phrasing

In terms of male-oriented phrasing, Totaljobs found that the three most frequently-used words are: **lead** (mentioned 70,539 times); **analyse** (35,339 mentions); and **competitive** (23,079 mentions). The three most commonly used female-related words were found to hbe: **support** (used 83,095 times); **responsible** (with 64,909 mentions); and **understanding** (29,638 uses). Totaljobs also reported that male-oriented language was more frequently used in advertisements for senior positions, such as 'head' roles, directors, and partners; on the other hand, the language in advertisements for "assistant" roles leaned heavily toward female-associated language.

The recent publication of large companies' gender pay gap data revealed significant differences between male and female pay in many instances. Employers with large gender pay gaps have often explained it on the basis that their more senior positions are occupied by men, bringing up the average for male pay.

Under-representation of women in senior roles

Could the way that companies are advertising for senior roles help to explain why women are under-represented at executive level? Totaljobs believes so, concluding that women are hesitant to apply for roles which are worded in a way which

appeals to male applicants (albeit unintentionally).

Employers are under increased scrutiny in respect of equality and diversity – for example, the Investment Association recently wrote to a selection of FTSE 350 firms to inform them that shareholders are getting "restless" at the lack of female representation on company boards.

That being the case, a prudent employer may want to take a step back and think about whether the way they advertise job vacancies contains any inadvertent stereotyping or bias. In order to help employers with that process, Totaljobs has created a tool it calls the "**Gender Bias Decoder**" which will flag any gendered words in a text. Anything the tool flags up can be re-worded to sound more gender-neutral.

ACAS guidance on job advertisements

ACAS also recommends that employers or recruiters include in any job advertisements a statement that applications are welcome from all sections of the community, as well as reinforcing the employer's commitment to equal opportunities.

Small steps can lead to big changes. If employers begin to gender bias de-code their job advertisements to encourage female applicants to put themselves forward for more senior, better paid positions, they may find that their gender pay gap figures start to improve in coming years as women begin to fill the ranks of those senior, better paid jobs.

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