Language Matters

How words impact men and women in the workplace

What's in the report?

Introduction

Language Matters

The words people and companies use to describe who they are and what they do have a direct impact on their experience at work, and which companies they are attracted to. Many times, it's not just what you say, but how you say it. Paying attention to and being deliberate about word choice during interviews, in talent branding materials and on social media can help employers attract, build and retain more gender-diverse teams, while creating a more inclusive environment for all employees.

To better understand how professionals respond to different word choices, we took an in-depth look at the words men and women use in the world of work: from their LinkedIn profiles to interactions on LinkedIn, to the language used throughout the recruitment process and in the workplace itself. We also analyzed language used in the press and on social media to describe public figures, and engaged expert Professor Rosie Campbell, Director of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London.

In this report, we aim to provide a high-level understanding of how men and women respond to and use language, as it relates to their experiences during the job search as well as in the workplace, to encourage actionable strategies toward a more inclusive workplace.

LinkedIn worked closely with Professor Rosie Campbell, Professor of Politics and Director of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London, to provide additional context to the report findings. Professor Campbell has written on barriers to participation in politics and gendered patterns of support for what voters want from their elected representatives and has co-authored reports for the Fawcett Society, The Expert Panel on Electoral Reform for the Welsh Assembly, the EHRC, BBC Radio Four's Woman's Hour, The Electoral Commission, The Fabian Women's Network and The Hansard Society.

*Gender identity isn't binary and we recognize that some LinkedIn members identify beyond the traditional gender constructs of 'male' and 'female'. However, LinkedIn gender data – which has been used to inform substantial portions of this report – is inferred on the basis of first name and currently does not account for other gender identities. As members begin to self-report gender, we are looking forward to sharing more inclusive gender data.

Words impact men and women differently at work

The language men and women use to represent their experience varies

Findings show that men and women favor different words to describe their work experience and express themselves at work – even if they are at similar seniority levels.

- Both men and women seem to relate most positively to strong, performance-based descriptors: In fact, the top 3 words for men and women when describing themselves in a job interview were: "hard-working" (58% of women & 49% of men), "good at my job" (48% of women & 42% of men) and "confident" (42% of women & 40% of men).

- Women, however, also prioritize terms that relate to their character to describe themselves in an interview: like 'likeable' (38% of the surveyed women but just 29% of the men) and 'supportive' (39% of women & 32% of men).**

When it comes to LinkedIn profiles, our data also shows that while both genders are keen to represent themselves as 'team players,' men tend to focus more on their technical skills, whereas women are more likely to make greater reference to their education and personal attributes.***

How men and women want to be perceived in an interview

When leaving a job interview, women are...

40% more likely

...to want to be perceived as:

Qualified   Smart   Competent

Men were more likely than women to say they want to be seen as "honest" and "trustworthy" and ~10x more likely to say "sincere".††

Open language is more likely to attract gender-diverse candidates

When trying to appeal to both genders, it's important to remember that it's not only about skills – individual characteristics matter, too.

- Both men and women reacted equally positively to language such as 'powerful'; 'strong-willed'; and 'confident'.**

- Similar to the descriptors above, when applying for roles, women were more likely to prioritize terms that relate to their character, such as 'likeable' and 'supportive'.**

- More definitive terms are off-putting: for example, 44% of women would be discouraged from even applying for a role if the word 'aggressive' was included in a job description – but only a third of men felt the same.**

If the word **'aggressive'** was included in a job description…

44%
of women

33%
of men
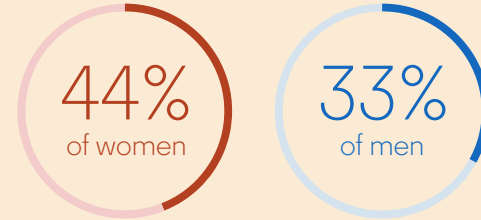
…would be **discouraged** from applying for the role**

1 in 4 women

would be discouraged from working somewhere that is **described** as 'demanding'.**

Talent tip

When attracting a balanced cohort of talent, be thoughtful about how you describe your company, and the work environment. Consider using words like 'supportive', 'diligent', and 'confident' to describe your ideal candidate – and pay attention to how the workplace atmosphere is depicted. Words like 'fast-paced' should be used instead of 'pressured', to avoid suggesting a negative working environment. Most job descriptions today highlight skills or qualifications, as well as educational background. However, to truly match with how people describe themselves, consider being more descriptive about the kind of candidate you're looking for, either in your job descriptions or your employer branding materials, company site or LinkedIn Career Page.

Expert insight

Getting the wording of a job posting right can be key for attracting the right candidate. Previous experiments have demonstrated that the use of certain types of 'masculine' language reduces the likelihood that women will apply.[i] Not only is prioritizing candidates who use 'masculine' language such as 'aggressive' likely to exclude a large portion of the talent pool, it may also lead to some pretty bad hiring decisions.

Language in the media shifts by gender

Interestingly, our media analysis also found that the language used to describe influential men and women mirrors the findings above.[†]

- When considering how men and women are portrayed in the media, there is a tendency to use 'emotional' language for women and more 'decisive' language when discussing men. For example, while the media typically highlights Michael Bloomberg's strength (the top two adjectives used in connection with Bloomberg were 'aggressive' and 'bold'), Oprah Winfrey – also a leader in media and entertainment – tends to be described in more ambiguous terms that relate to her character ('amazing' and 'happy').[†]

- It could be argued that women are more likely to focus on their character in a work context (wanting to be seen as 'likeable', for instance) because of the way in which professional women (particularly aspirational women, like Oprah Winfrey) are portrayed by the press.

Atlassian wanted to make sure that when it came to inclusive language, they were getting it right. They turned to technology to do some of the heavy lifting: *"At Atlassian, we're focused on bringing in more balanced teams as it relates to gender, race, and other underrepresented backgrounds. Understanding that one of the first entry points to our company is through our job descriptions, we use the augmented writing platform Textio to make sure that the job descriptions we put out are not only balanced, but are reflective of the kinds of people who will succeed at our company. We discovered that we had used language that subtly biased on job ads in favor of white and male candidates, and Textio helped us more closely align our language to our culture and message more inclusively to a broader set of candidates."*

Aubrey Blanche,
Global Head of Diversity & Belonging, Atlassian

Atlassian is a leading provider of collaboration, development, and issue tracking software for teams.

Disparity in the perception of soft skills

Finding the right talent is about finding the person who has the technical skills required for the role, as well as certain personality traits that seemingly determine how they'll fit in with the team and if they'll stay – these are known as soft skills. Interestingly, there appears to be a disparity between how men and women perceive soft skills. While women tend to believe that soft skills are female gendered, men see soft skills as male-gendered; however men do not feel the same need to highlight soft skills to potential employers and tend to lean into hard tech skills.

Do men or women have more soft skills?

61% of women associate the female gender with the term **'soft skills'****

52% of men associate soft skills with the **male gender****

Showcasing your skills varies by gender

- In general, LinkedIn found that men report more skills than women - but this gap varies across countries. For example, in Canada and Singapore the gap is so small that it's almost imperceivable between how many skills are reported according to gender; however, in India, men, on average, list three more skills on their LinkedIn profiles than women do (members with five skills or more on their LinkedIn profile are messaged up to 31 times more by hirers).***

- When looking at the skills for professionals in some of the most common roles on LinkedIn (i.e. Recruiter, Salesperson, Account Executive, Product Manager, Program Manager, Customer Success Manager), women are more likely than men to report specialized industry skills and soft skills.***

- And in two of the fastest-growing tech roles – Data Scientist and Software Engineer – men are more likely than women to report in-demand or emerging tech skills like artificial intelligence, robotics and aerospace engineering, that we know recruiters are pressed to find.***

- Despite these findings, in practice, women are more likely to actively showcase their soft skills on their LinkedIn profile, and men showcase their hard skills.***

How senior leaders view soft skills

Executives see soft skills as being most associated with men.

- More than 55% of C-Level executives consider soft skills to be male gendered.**

- Interestingly, LinkedIn data shows that the global gender breakdown of professionals holding the title of Chief Executive Officers consists of 77% males (just 23% females): this data could imply that most high-ranking professionals – who are men – believe that soft skills are male gendered.
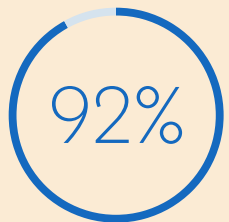
92% of hiring managers say soft skills are **more important** than hard skills.[ii]

Talent tip

The importance of soft skills is not in question. In fact 92% of hiring managers say soft skills are more important than hard skills.[ii] The question becomes, how do you highlight the importance of soft skills to a balanced audience, and how do you screen for them? Consider including those soft skills by describing the ideal candidate early on in your job descriptions and marketing materials. Also, having a standard set of interview questions, through tools such as LinkedIn's Interview Question Generator, so companies can easily compare evaluations and determine a fit.

Expert insight

Changing the wording in job descriptions to attract applications from a diverse range of people is just the beginning. We also need to remove biases in our selection and promotion processes to produce systems that reward competence over confidence. The first step is to reduce the influence of intuition on the process.

Gender bias exists when it comes to professional ambition

When comparing how men and women are described in the workplace – and also how individuals of both genders see themselves – a few trends emerged. While both women and men respond very positively to descriptors such as 'confident'**, men are more likely to be described in such terms by the media.†

Positive affirmations can have a profound effect on individuals of either gender. Both men and women reported feeling similarly uplifted if colleagues described them as 'powerful' (around 30%), and over a third of females would feel delighted if they were thought of as 'talented'.**

30%
of both men and women feel similarly uplifted if colleagues described them as **'powerful'****

A third
of females would feel delighted if thought of as **'talented'.****

During an interview...

35% of women

32% of men

would use the word **'ambitious'** to describe themselves

Once in the role, however...

26% of women

28% of men

would use the word in a performance review.**

Media perceptions of professional ambition

• That said, in the media, assumptions about professional traits are often tied strongly to gender. For example, the media uses different language when talking about leaders in the same field (Donald Trump and Theresa May, for example), depending on the individual's gender. For instance, the top adjective used in the media to describe Theresa May was 'reserved' (which was used in 25.7% of cases referring to her) whereas Donald Trump was mostly described as being 'strong' (which was used in 13% of cases).†

- Men are far more likely to be talked about in terms of their ambition or strength than women. For instance, the word 'powerful' was used nearly six times more in connection with Mark Zuckerberg compared to his female counterpart Sheryl Sandberg.†

- Looking at Sheryl Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg again as leaders in their industry, language related to trailblazing and ambitious qualities is commonly used in connection with men, whereas even the most high-achieving women are depicted as more 'reserved' (this word was used over 3,000 times in connection with Sheryl Sandberg).†

Talent tip

Word choice can have a big impact on how empowered employees feel in the workplace – but data shows there's still a disparity between how genders are depicted and how they think of themselves. The idea that ambition 'looks' a certain way (often being associated with being a male trait) is perpetuated by a tendency to position trailblazing qualities as male gendered. To account for this, consider how you describe company leaders, the workplace environment and community, and what you're looking for in prospective candidates. Make it clear that there are equal opportunities for ambitious individuals – regardless of gender – and take care to describe both men and women (at all levels) in similarly positive, 'open' terms will indicate a commitment to diversity and inclusivity.

Expert insight

There is plenty of evidence that managers simply assume that women don't want to progress because they make assumptions about what an ambitious person looks like and mistake confidence for competence.[iii] [...] A host of studies have demonstrated that we tend to assess men as being more competent and authoritative than women, even if they're conveying the same information.

When The Estée Lauder Companies decided to take a new approach to ensuring inclusivity throughout their brands and functions, they made unconscious bias a topic of discussion for all employees, no matter their seniority: *"It's important to us that our employees are aware of the programs and resources that are in place to encourage and foster a more inclusive workplace. One way is through a company-wide learning program for all of our employees on how to identify unconscious bias, and most importantly, overcome it. But we don't stop there. We create deeper awareness, through Employee Resource Groups, referral programs, social media campaigns, etc. Because at the core, inclusivity is knowing that there are other people like me at this company and this could be a home."*

Jolie Chehadeh,
Vice President, Global Talent Management,
The Estée Lauder Companies

The Estée Lauder Companies is a leading manufacturer of quality skin care, makeup, fragrance and hair care products.
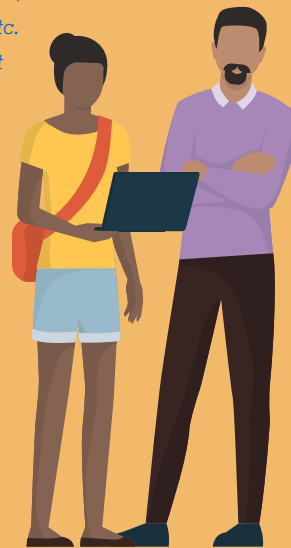
Different benefits appeal to different genders

Our data suggests that while there aren't huge differences between what men and women look for in a job (with women placing slightly more value on salary),** women tend to look beyond the role itself: considering both the concrete benefits and the workplace community and culture.

- Women often prefer to talk about the role in the context of workplace culture: atmosphere, structure, benefits.**

- Women also tend to actively seek out positions that describe an adaptable workplace culture: positions that promoted flexible working (60%), working from home (30%) and additional medical benefits (45%) were most popular amongst women.**

- Interestingly, flexibility is often associated with women, but our research shows that this is increasingly important for male workers, too.**
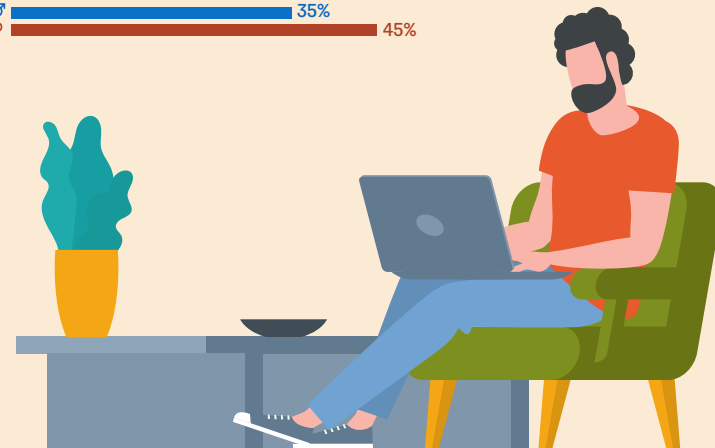
The top 4 work benefits men & women look for

Salary
♂ 75%
♀ 79%

Flexible working hours
♂ 49%
♀ 59%

Annual leave
♂ 50%
♀ 53%

Medical/dental coverage
♂ 35%
♀ 45%

50% of men 60% of women

consider the availability of **flexible working hours** when looking for a new job**

Talent tip

When crafting your LinkedIn Career Pages or company websites, emphasize the benefits that you can offer as an employer, such as learning, culture or additional benefits. Employee-generated social engagement, such as hashtags, are also a good way to showcase what it's like to work at the company and encourage current employees to share what they love most. Be specific about what makes your organization flexible and progressive. Above all, be sure to highlight that work-life balance is part of your company ethos, and that your organization has much to offer beyond financial compensation and job title.

Expert insight

According to one survey, 66% of women would not ask about parental leave policies during an interview for fear it would give a negative impression, 57% would not ask once they were offered the job and 40% would not even inquire once they were employed.[iv] One way that employers can get around this (and to remove any stigma that goes along with flexible working) is to see it as the rule, rather than the exception: by advertising all jobs as being available on a flexible and part-time basis, and by communicating the message that work-life policies are for everyone, not just for parents.

What now?

Take advantage of LinkedIn tools

This report is the first step in a much bigger journey towards helping to highlight what can be done to address gender imbalance in the workplace. We don't only want to report on how genders respond to – and use – language in a professional context: we want to be an active part of the conversation so that, together, the LinkedIn community can challenge stereotypes and drive change.

- [LinkedIn Recruiter](#) can show you how your InMail messages perform by gender so you can monitor who you reach out to and who responds. Make sure that the percentages of men and women line up with the percentages you had in mind for your pipeline and make adjustments to your voice and tone for the type of candidates you engage.

- Use [LinkedIn Talent Insights](#) to understand your current talent pools for your top roles and identify cities or industries that have a better gender balance, to focus your sourcing efforts.

- [Sponsored Content](#) expands your reach and helps you engage with LinkedIn members who may not be aware of your brand. Make sure your content is inclusive and inviting for all genders to reach more people.

Take a LinkedIn learning course:

To help you get started on tackling inadvertent language bias, you can access a variety of LinkedIn Learning courses to help HR professionals: providing guidance on how to embrace diversity at every level and increase the productivity of an existing workforce by harnessing different voices and talents.

- Overcoming bias in the hiring process: Unconscious Bias and Human Diversity Recruiting with Stacy Gordon (Diversity, Inclusion and Career Strategist).

- Establishing an inclusive team dynamic: Understanding Unconscious Bias in Hiring and Using Inclusive Language with Daisy Lovelace (Senior Lecturing Fellow at Duke Law).

- Embracing differences and countering bias in thought and action: Confronting bias: Thriving Across our Differences with Verna Myers (VP of Inclusion Strategy at Netflix) and Arianna Huffington (founder of HuffPost and Thrive Global).

Join the conversation

At LinkedIn we believe that change often begins with open, honest dialogue. That's why we're encouraging businesses to share thoughts on gender diversity using the hashtag **#LanguageMatters.**

Find out more information and see how LinkedIn can help you to create this change here:

Linkedin Gender Insights >

LinkedIn is more than just a platform through which to make professional connections: it's a community where everyone can feel at home. **On LinkedIn, we're in it together.**

- Together we can enjoy a supportive, safe space in which to enter into discussion and share experiences.

- Together we can tackle the gender gap, incite change, and empower our business communities to take action.

- Together we can make a difference.

Methodology and sources

** Consumer Research by Censuswide

We worked with Censuswide, survey consultants who specialize in both consumer and B2B research, to study over 15,000 employees and employers worldwide. Respondents were asked to consider a number of questions, including queries around how language is used during the recruitment process, how they describe themselves in job applications, and whether job adverts are gender neutral.

Censuswide surveyed two groups: 12,122 full-time employees (not involved in the hiring/recruitment process) in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States between 10.05.2019 - 31.05.2019; and 3,106 individuals involved in the hiring/recruitment process in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States between 16.05.2019 and 21.05.2019.

Censuswide's researchers and processes are governed by the ESOMAR principles of ethical practice.

***LinkedIn Insights

LinkedIn analysis was created by looking at the publicly available LinkedIn profile information of millions of LinkedIn members across the United States, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Singapore, India and Australia between March 2017 and March 2018. We infer gender based on a member's first name, if we cannot infer explicit gender, that individual is remove from the analysis. Only countries where we are able to infer gender for 65% or more of our member base were included in this report.

†Media analysis by TrendKite

TrendKite's portfolio of analytical tools provide a comprehensive view of coverage across global media, delivering audience insights, impact analysis and more through advanced AI technology. We partnered with TrendKite to analyze online articles from 25 of the most highly-viewed publications across the globe from 1st January – 31st December 2018, comparing and examining the language that was used in connection with sixteen influential individuals. These individuals were grouped into male/female pairings according to industry, as follows:

- Theresa May and Donald Trump (Politics)
- Sheryl Sandberg and Mark Zuckerberg (Tech Entrepreneurship)
- Mary Barra and Jeff Bezos (Business)
- Meghan Markle and Prince Harry (Royalty)
- Melinda Gates and Bill Gates (Philanthropy)
- Beyoncé and Jay Z (Music)
- Oprah Winfrey and Michael Bloomberg (Media and Entertainment)

† † LinkedIn Data and Insights Resources

[i] D. Gaucher, J. Friesen, and A. C. Kay, "Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. - PubMed - NCBI." [Online]. Available: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21381851. [Accessed: 19-Jun-2019].

[ii] 'LinkedIn Report: These 4 Ideas Are Shaping the Future of HR and Hiring' [Online]. Available: https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2019/global-recruiting-trends-2019. [Accessed: 8th-Jul-2019].

[iii] Marketers on why parental leave is not a 'women's only' issue." [Online]. Available: https://www.marketingweek.com/2019/03/08/parental-leave-not-womens-only-issue/#. [Accessed: 19-Jun-2019].

[iv] G. Kirton and M. Robertson, "Sustaining and advancing IT careers: Women's experiences in a UK-based IT company," J. Strateg. Inf. Syst., vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 157–169, Jun. 2018.