Gender coded language: SAT meeting 15th March 2023

Summary

Research shows Gender coded language can have a significant impact on female responses to job advertisements, interview questions and university and college applications. In respect to recruitment processes, job advertisements are no longer allowed to advertise specifically for men or women or use pronouns. However, subtle cues such as traits and stereotypes associated with genders can be conveyed through the words that are used when descripting a job (Gaucher, 2011).

Research conducted by LinkedIn surveyed over 630 million of its members to establish numerical data which demonstrates how gender coded language can deter certain people from applying for jobs. The research found that one quarter of women were discouraged from working somewhere that was described as 'demanding' and forty four percent were deterred when the word 'aggressive' was used as a sought-after attribute for the role. Their research also concluded that 'soft skills' means different things to men and women. 60% of the surveyed female participants believe that soft skills are more associated with the female gender and the majority of men, see soft skills as being more male gendered.

Gender coded language is described by the employer's council (2020) as;

'Words or phrases associated with a particular gender, specifically male or female, often based on stereotypes'

Words such as 'aggressive', 'competitive', 'decisive', 'dominate' and 'fearless' are deemed to be male coded and word such as 'collaborative', 'honest', 'enthusiastic', 'committed' and 'patient' are examples of female coded language. There are several theories as to why these word have been assigned to certain genders but the Social Role Theory suggests that gender coded language began as men and women adopted roles that were stereotypical to their gender, 'breadwinner' and 'homemaker' retrospectively. It described that gender stereotypes derived from the gender division of labour that characterises a society, which results in men and women acquiring different skills. The theory also describes how language developed from this and roles which are typically filled by men such as firefighters, began to adopt male coded language, whereas positions usually filled by women, such as nurses, developed female-coded language in job adverts.

Whatever the reason for embedded stereotypes, women have had a growing place in the workforce, particularly from the early 19th century onwards. However, many roles such as STEM related occupations are still predominantly male dominated. STEM fields are often viewed as masculine, and caregivers and educators often underestimate girls' abilities starting as early as preschool (aauw, 2020). Research conducted by AAUW (2020) described various reasons why STEM fields still suffer from gender imbalances including, anxiety from female teachers on math subjects which projects onto their female students and the lack of female role models in STEM related subjects. Women are underrepresented in STEM workforces, with only 19% studying Engineering and 24% currently in the STEM workforce (stemwomen, 2020).

The National Institute of Health describes that gender prejudice and discrimination begins as early as preschool. Their research indicates pre-schoolers respond negatively to the infringement of gender norms and prefer to play with children of the same sex. However, gender bias and prejudice vary across age and context. They found that younger children's prejudice reflected through their social preferences whereas in older children, prejudice involved evaluation of capabilities and history. There are many research papers which lay claim to the establishment of the exact age gender bias

plants its deep roots into a child mind but in reality, the existing research tends to contradict across studies. Many sources are calling for more research with more robust theoretical frameworks and mythologies to be undertaken in this subject area. However, it can be agreed that whatever the cause, setting or the exact age, gender prejudice does take form at an incredibly young age.

Universities and colleges therefore have, what appear to be an uphill struggle to attract more female undergraduate applicants. In our modern society, almost every sector is suffering from skills shortages, particularly in STEM related subjects, which can only be mitigated by upskilling and attracting new talent from the next generation. However, by the time students are ready to enter a college or university setting, gender bias has, according to research, already been embedded and has ultimately limited their potential. However, such establishments can pave the way to reversing these deep-seated issues by changing mindsets within the learning environment. Prejudice is learned and by definition, can be unlearned (Esquivel, 2021) and universities and colleges have a pivotal part as they are the steppingstone for students leaving school to enter the workplace.

From the research carried out highlighted in this document, the words used in university and college course descriptions must be coded to be gender neutral to ensure potential students are not deterred before getting to the application stages. Specifically, a gender bias calculator was used on GCU's Environmental Civil Engineering and electrical and Electronic Engineering undergraduate course description, and it found little female coded language was used in the course summary, overview, or additional information sections but several male coded words were detected such as 'study', 'result', 'most', 'intelligent' and questions. However, when scanning other courses such as Electrical Power Engineering, the scan found a majority of female coded language was used.