

Gender Neutral Language for Job Ads

Why is a gender-neutral job ad important?

1. A gender-neutral job ad strengthens your talent pool with a wide variety of applicants

Research shows that gender-diverse companies are 15 percent more likely to outperform those that are not. A job ad is often a prospective candidate's first impression of your company. It can show culture, values, and greatly impact who applies.

There has been significant research around language that tends to be more subconsciously appealing to men versus women in job ads. For example, words such as "competitive", "dominant" or "leader" are male-coded, while words such as "support", "understand" and "interpersonal" are associated with work historically performed by women. Studies have also shown that potential job candidates do not realize the presence of gendered language, and they tend to attribute their disinterest in a job to personal lack of interest in the job or just general lack of appeal.

2. Good job information can be important for a fair and equitable pay equity process

While a job ad may not be what is used for a job evaluation related to the pay equity process, it can be a foundational piece that documents the work of an employee. Gender bias can occur if jobs are described differently. Unconsciously, people may use different or value-laden terms for work that has been traditionally viewed as men's and women's.

For example, if both men and women in a workplace perform similar supervisory roles, the men's job may be described as "managing" while the women's job may be labelled "coordinating", assigning different values based on the term used. Similarly, if men's jobs are described in greater detail than women's jobs, it might suggest that men's jobs are more significant.

Tips on writing a gender-neutral job ad

Use specific, gender-neutral titles

- Words like "rockstar," "superhero," and "ninja," can all carry unconscious bias. Neutral, descriptive titles could be "engineer," "project manager," or "developer".

Double and triple check pronouns

- Use "you" when describing job tasks – it takes gender out of the equation.

Carefully consider your 'must haves' (requirements) vs. the 'nice to haves' (preferences).

- Eliminate "nice-to-haves" and focus solely on requirements to expand your pool of applicants. Research has found that:

- Women are unlikely to apply for a position unless they meet 100 percent of the requirements, while men will apply if they meet 60 percent of the requirements.
- The choice of university degree can vary by gender, so you may be limiting your candidate pool by unnecessarily requiring completion of a specific degree.

Express your commitment to equality and diversity

- Include information on your company values and the ways you promote diversity to appeal to a wider pool of candidates.

State your family-friendly benefits

- Make the position attractive by giving a fuller view of compensation and include how your employees and their families benefit from parental leave, flextime, and pension plans.

Ask for an extra set of eyes

- People with different backgrounds and experiences may help uncover different unconscious biases in a job ad. Sometimes, a committee approach can be helpful.

Check adjectives and verbs

- Research indicates that certain adjectives are associated with men and others with women. For example, “competitive,” “outspoken” and “competent” are associated with men. Words like “sensitive,” “collaborative” and “compassionate” are typically used to refer to women.

Leverage technology to identify potential issues with word choices.

- Some analysis shows that the gender language bias in your job posting may predict the gender of the person you're going to hire. Using an online tool can help to identify problem spots in your word choices and catch anything you may have missed – pronouns, adjectives, verbs etc.

Sample Job Ads

Below are two examples of job ads. Can you spot any gender-coded words? Is there anything the writer may want to consider adding? Subtracting? What kinds of applicants do you think would apply?

Job Title: Customer Service Representative (Call Centre)
Purpose of Position:
 To provide inbound and outbound sales and support to customers both internal and external.

Person Specifications:

- Excellent listening skills
- A willingness to problem-solve
- Strong verbal & written communication skills
- Resilience - being able to handle complaints from customers
- The ability to work as part of a team
- Be self-driven & proactive

- Good interpersonal skills

Competencies:

- Fast & accurate data entry skills
- Excellent phone manner
- A high level of accuracy & attention to detail
- Customer focus
- Be a self-starter who shows initiative
- Respond to customer enquires and understand customer needs

Qualifications & experience:

- Minimum 2 years' customer service / call centre experience
- Strong IT skills (W4W, Excel, Outlook)
- SAP experience

The Customer Service Representative job ad uses more female-coded words than male-coded words, with words like “support”, “interpersonal”, “understand” and “respond” (female-coded) being more prominent than words like “active” (male-coded). The writer may want to swap “strong” for a more gender-neutral option like “proven”, “sound”, or “solid”.

The job ad uses “you” but does not mention company policies around diversity and inclusion or state any family-friendly benefits.

Job Title: Programmer

Purpose of Position: Code and test programming for software and mobile apps.

Qualifications/Skills:

- Understanding of object-oriented software engineering
- Track record of successful application development
- Ability to write clean, well-documented code
- Excellent complex problem solving and critical thinking skills
- Working knowledge of SQL and Microsoft SQL Server
- Solid troubleshooting and communication skills
- Experience using Microsoft Office tools (Excel, Visio)
- Demonstrated analytical and critical thinking abilities

Education and Experience Requirements:

- Bachelor’s degree in computer science, engineering, or a related field
- One to three years of experience in software development
- Proven experience with OOP languages (Java, C++, VB.NET)
- Familiarity with HTML, JavaScript, CSS, and AJAX
- Direct experience with Agile software development methodologies a plus

Benefits:

- Paid parental leave
- Paid sick time
- Paid vacation time
- Medical, vision, and dental insurance

We are an equal opportunity employer who recruits, employs, trains, compensates and promotes regardless of age, color, disability, ethnicity, family or marital status, gender identity or expression, language, national origin, physical and mental ability, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, veteran status, and other characteristics that make our employees unique. We are committed to fostering, cultivating and preserving a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Programmer job ad has balanced female-coded (understanding) and male-coded words (analytical). It also states a diversity and inclusion policy and outlines job benefits.

The company may wish to consider their list of education and experience requirements and verify that there are no 'nice to haves' listed.

Links

Resources/Tools/Sources

- Pay Equity Office [glossary of active verbs](#)
- Total Jobs [Gender Bias Decoder](#) (free)

Sources

- Glassdoor: [The Pipeline Problem: How College Majors Contribute to the Gender Pay Gap](#)
- Diversity Best Practices: [Research Report: How to Write Gender Neutral Job Descriptions to Mitigate UB](#)
- McKinsey and Company: [Why Diversity Matters](#) and [Delivering Through Diversity](#)
- Gaucher, Friesen, Kay: [Evidence that Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality](#)
- Harvard Business Review: [Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified](#)