

Training & Employment

n° 107 September-October 2013

'Men tend to be go-getting but women are better organised': what recruiters say about job applicants and gender

Discrimination when hiring new staff is punishable by law. And yet gender is seldom a neutral criterion during the recruitment process. The assumption that women are less flexible in respect of their working hours is not the only issue at stake. A whole set of personality traits that are still regarded as 'innate' to men and women can bias the selection process. The statements made by recruiters, both men and women, show that the stereotypes die hard...

gender
stéréotypes
recruitment
social mix
discriminations
work

Lydie **Chaintreuil***,
Dominique **Epiphane**
(Céreq)

To use interviews with recruiters to investigate discrimination during the recruitment process is to run the risk of collecting a series of extremely sanitised statements. Indeed, when they are questioned about policies for promoting diversity, equality, anonymous CVs and so on, their statements on the various types of discrimination to which job applicants might fall prey tend to be considerably watered down. Whether it be their family background (foreign), their place of residence ('problem' or 'disadvantaged' areas), their gender, their age or even a possible handicap, nothing seems to be an obstacle to their recruitment. On the contrary, it seems that all applicants, whatever their individual characteristics may be, have the same chance during the various phases of the recruitment process. And yet, as soon as they start describing their actual recruitment practices, the reality is suddenly quite different. Stereotypes, and in particular gendered stereotypes, die hard. This is what emerges from the qualitative section of a study of discrimination during the recruitment process carried out on behalf of the Fonds d'expérimentation pour la jeunesse (Experimental Fund for Youth or FEJ) (cf. box on methodology on page 3).

Recruiters who discriminate despite themselves?

This illusion of equality in access to jobs – which is very much shared by all the recruiters interviewed – is expressed with great sincerity most of the time. Diversity and gender mix are even frequently praised to the skies, described as sources of wealth for business and sometimes explicitly sought after. Furthermore, it would appear that most of them are aware of the legal risks that might be incurred if applicants were selected on the basis of an unlawful criterion (such as family background, gender, age, etc.) and make it a point of honour to comply with the law and ensure it is enforced throughout their organisations.

Despite the availability of more or less detailed job profiles, recruitment decisions are not the result of a mechanical process. As François Eymard-Duvernay and Emmanuelle Marchal note, the problem is not necessarily to be fair to each individual; the primary objective, rather, is to make a selection. ●●●

* Lydie Chaintreuil, research analyst in Céreq at the time of the survey, works now in the ORM-PACA.

●●● During periods when there is a plethora of applicants, recruiters may, for example, simply eliminate a large number of applicants using very simple criteria in order to focus their decision-making on the remaining few. Thus when they explain the criteria they adopt to select applicants, it turns out that the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate criteria can be porous. For example, occupational experience is a criterion often mentioned by recruiters, on the grounds that it enables them to assess an applicant's level of competence and expertise. However, this criterion may lead them to sort candidates by age and, depending on the circumstances, to reject either young applicants because they are 'not sufficiently mature' or older ones because they are too experienced and potentially too expensive. Similarly, a university degree, which is supposed to measure an applicant's level of knowledge, is sometimes used to indicate membership of a particular social group (which, in turn, is associated with possession of a certain level of social and interpersonal skills).

To find out more about the whole of the study, particularly its quantitative section, see

EVADE - Entrées dans la vie active et discriminations à l'embauche,

L. Chaintreuil, T. Couppié, D. Epiphane, E. Sulzer, Net.doc n°114, octobre 2013.

Recruiters tend to justify their choices with arguments that seem to them wholly legitimate, although they are in fact based on stereotypes. Whether negative or positive, these stereotypes may stigmatise 'young people' in general ('little interest in the world of work'), young people from disadvantaged areas ('who want to get out at any price'), people with handicaps (who are always 'in wheel-chairs') and older workers (experienced but 'reluctant to change their way of working'). Above all, however, what one observes is the pervasiveness of gendered stereotypes.

This finding is consistent with the results of the 'Job advertisements and recruitment' (*Offres d'emplois et recrutements*) survey carried out by DARES in 2005. In this survey, recruiters in more than 3,000 establishments were questioned about their preferences for one or other gender during their last recruitment exercise. It turns out that more than a quarter of them stated that the applicants' gender was not a neutral factor in the selection of the successful candidates; among those who finally hired a man, this applied to more than a third. The qualitative study conducted as part of the *Evade* project shows that, when the subject of gender is broached, very few recruiters say they take no account at all of an applicant's sex. Of the 30 recruiters interviewed, only two declared that gender had no influence on the choice of individual actually offered the job. For these employers, professional competence totally eclipsed all other characteristics. However, these two cases seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule.

HR • Human resources

Small company • less than 10 employees.

SME • Small and medium size enterprises • between 10 and 249 employees.

Medium-sized company • between 250 and 5 000 employees.

Large company • more than 5 000 employees.

Gender as an amalgamation of intrinsic 'qualities'

For the vast majority of the recruiters interviewed, gender is frequently described in the early stages of a job interview as a secondary criterion that ranks far behind the required skills, occupational experience, etc. However, it fairly quickly emerges as an integral component of applicants' personalities. Even though not all recruiters are as peremptory as this (female) HR director, who explained to us that, '*Whatever people say, there are occupations for men and others for women... that's just how it is, end of story!*', the qualities the person they are seeking to recruit is expected to have are often assigned 'naturally' to a man or a woman. Thus whether it is to justify the assumed rejection or selection of one or other gender for the vacancy to be filled, the applicants' gender is regarded as a reliable indicator of the qualities, characteristics and even the competences the recruiter is looking for:

'I find that women are excellent managers, and above all excellent teachers! When I'm looking for team leaders, I need people who can organise and provide guidance... What's important is the teaching aspect, I almost said the 'mothering' side...' (Male operations manager in a small company).

'We don't have many female sales reps because it's a very difficult job ... nothing can be taken for granted, and then there are targets to be met! (...) Women perhaps need a little more security. And then it's a job in which [correcting himself] ... no, reps don't carry machines now, so that's no longer a problem... But still it's a difficult job ... it's a hard job... because you have to argue your case, you have to fight the competition ... Yes, it's a much more difficult job.' (Male MD of an SME).

Paradoxically, efforts to promote a more balanced gender mix within teams and parity within companies are very far from reflecting a gender-neutral attitude towards occupations and functions. On the contrary, most of the time they go hand in hand with declarations fraught with sexist presuppositions, accompanied by a justification for recruiting women for their particular aptitudes:

'I think being a manager is a job for women: women are able to use gentle persuasion to push a lot more things through... they manage to put certain messages across, whereas men are much more brusque, much more 'pushy'. It's true that women can sometimes be less flexible about their working hours, but on the other hand they are much more organised than men... they waste a lot less time than them and ultimately they're more efficient!' (Female HR manager, large company).

Thus the attribution of the qualities required for certain positions is not randomly distributed by

gender. While this is not a new phenomenon, it has actually acquired a new lease on life in recent years. For example, the process of feminisation that can be observed in managerial and supervisory jobs in companies has been mediated, particularly in the specialist press, by a rhetoric that seeks to capitalise on the supposed differences between men and women. A study by Irène Jonas and Djaouida Séhili on the discourse of management handbooks shows that it tends to be assumed in this literature, sometimes implicitly and sometimes unquestioningly, that the differences between men and women can be explained by a natural biological order. They note that 'feminine skills' are even currently being advocated as a fruitful way of improving company performance. Indeed, their 'natural' capacities for organisation, negotiation, management etc. are being presented as so many assets that women can now invest in the productive sphere by taking on managerial positions, for example.

Choice of gender as a corporate strategy

Women's supposed qualities are sometime also put forward as means of improving a company's ability to respond to client expectations:

'What's more, in this job, clients are more trusting of women, so being a woman in these positions is definitely an advantage!' (Female HR manager, large company)

'For sales reps jobs, it's better to be a woman (...) because our clients are men, so it's a little easier ... when it comes to client relations, a woman will find it easier to get a client to accept things than a lad, they'll be more likely to listen to her, it's not the same power relationship at work' (Male sales director in an SME)

...or, on the other hand, they may be regarded as incompatible with the company's image or with that of the product being sold:

'I think our clients would be surprised to see a woman turn up in their machine shop, and what's more the job's a tough one, but well, why not' (Male director of a small company)

'We don't have many women in our sales teams because alcohol is mainly a man's product.' (Male HR director, medium-sized company)

Similarly, the qualities or failings that are regarded as typically female will in some cases become one of the essential parameters in establishing 'the necessary balance' when putting teams together and therefore a factor that recruiters will have to take into account for the sake of the group:

'Obviously I did give preference to a man when recruiting for an account's job because they were all girls in the team, you'd have thought you were in a

hen house! They were going for each other from morning till night, and he already had this ability to calm things down... that was regardless of gender, that's how he was, he had that ability and, in addition, he was a man' (Female HR director, freelance)

'Well, the branch managers are all men, so we have male/female pairs. Anyway, they only want women as PAs... And what's more, the PA is often the only female in the branch! The managers, the engineer and the technicians are virtually all men, so we're not going to hire a man as a PA!' (Female HR director, large company)

Thus everything in the imagery and policies adopted by employers seems to provide a pretext for a mixed gender workforce, in some instances even to the point of extolling the virtues of and promoting, paradoxically, the 'differences' between men and women. The arguments put forward by the vast majority of recruiters ●●●

The EVADE project: gaining a better understanding of how young people obtain their first job

The Evade study, carried out by Céreq on behalf of the *Fonds d'expérimentation pour la Jeunesse* (Experimental Fund for Youth, or FEJ), focused on recruitment and job search processes. Its main objective was to contextualise a measure of discrimination during the recruitment process, that is to understand to what extent problems in obtaining a job can be attributed to discrimination or to other factors. To this end, a *testing** procedure was carried out on CVs submitted in support of job applications.

One of the sections of the project was based on some thirty semi-structured interviews conducted among employers in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, who were potential recruiters of young graduates in the sample, that is young people leaving education having obtained the *brevet de technicien supérieur* (BTS, a vocational training certificate awarded after two years' higher education). The companies, of varying sizes, were selected from a wide range of industries (agro-food, industrial cleaning, energy supply, retailing, banking and insurance, aeronautics, etc.).

By virtue of their function, the recruiters interviewed intervened directly in their companies' recruitment processes and with varying degrees of autonomy. In some cases, the HR department managed the process of selecting CVs, while the operational departments made the final selection. In some companies, we interviewed several individuals involved in the recruitment process (e.g. the HR director and the unit manager). Interviewees were asked to give a detailed description of their recruitment practices, from assessment of manpower requirements to the procedures for selecting applicants. In the majority of cases, we focused on the company's most recent recruitment exercise in order to gather information on the upstream phases of the process, the channels utilised, the applications received for the job, the selection of applicants and the individuals actually hired. In order not to influence the statements made, it was not until the end of the interviews that the subject of discrimination was explicitly raised with the recruiters.

* *Testing* is a method that involves matching two profiles that are comparable in all aspects, except for the characteristic under investigation. Here, the procedure involved submitting a pair of CVs, accompanied by a covering letter, that differed only in the variable to be tested. Thus there was a CV for a 'reference' applicant and one for a 'disadvantaged' applicant, likely to be an object of discrimination.

●●● interviewed were based essentially on the exploitation of specifically female characteristics that stand in contrast to those of men. Thus women are regarded as embodying values and qualities that can be used to humanise the workplace and work groups, by virtue in particular of their relational skills. For all that, the fact of being a woman may sometimes not be sufficient and in some cases it is also necessary to be young:

'I tend to look for young PAs. The average age in the offices is 30 ... and at 50 they're more mothers than PAs! After all, you have to make sure you maintain team cohesion ...' (Female HR director, large company)

... although they shouldn't be too pretty!

'I also tend to take the photos off the young ladies' CVs when I pass them on to the managers ... most of them are men and some treat HR interviews as opportunities for romance ... so I anonymise CVs when the girl is a bit too pretty ... just to be quite clear ... (..) At our place, there are a lot of men, they're very macho and they have the power ... they control everything and there's a lot of dirty stories ... So I tend to reject girls who are too pretty and whom I find a bit limited in terms of general knowledge.' (Female HR manager, large company)

What is being constructed here is a model of what is expected and desirable in female job applicants, i.e. a model of the ideal female recruit.

Gender as an indicator of family constraints

There is another, more familiar factor that clearly impedes (young) women's chances if being recruited by certain companies, namely family responsibilities, whether actual or potential. In such companies, flexibility with regard to working hours, which is often regarded as a very important criterion, is put forward as a justification for concerns about hiring a woman for the job. The combination of applicants' (mainly female applicants)' gender, 'age' and marital status' is interpreted by recruiters as an indication of potential future problems:

'It's true that if I have to choose between a man and a woman on a short list, I would tend to

choose the man.. The fact that women are on maternity or parental leave disrupts the company's organisation. (...) I find that young people today, particularly young women, are not very motivated by work. They're more interesting in starting a family than having a career. When I ask them to work extra hours, even if they're paid, I often get refusals.' (Male director, SME)

'Flexibility with regard to working hours is an essential criterion for these [sales] jobs! (...) Marital status is essential information as well. We ask about the arrangements an individual has made for collecting their children after school or nursery ... about the age of the children ... about what the husband does.' (Female HR manager, large company)

Other studies, including those by Emanuelle Lada, have already demonstrated the importance of non-professional criteria in recruitment procedures; over and above education and experience, many factors related to the private sphere are taken into consideration by employers, who view them through the prism of gender difference.

Whatever their preference may be for one or other gender, recruiters justify their choices by adopting a discourse that is invariably based on a form of rhetoric in which the differences in behaviour and skills between men and women are evident. The studies by Réjane Sénac-Slawinski show that, by adopting different, frequently implicit criteria for the recruitment and then the career development of men and women, companies are actively helping to blur the relationship between education/training and employment. It might also reasonably be supposed that the attitudes and stereotypes used in selecting employees may be in part responsible for the gender imbalances that can be observed in many occupations.

As Erika Flahaut has pointed out, all the criteria relating to experience outside work or individuals' social identities are constructed on the basis of gender stereotypes that are still at work, not always explicitly but certainly recurrently. Gender stereotypes, which are reflected in the plans and behaviour of young men and women on the threshold of the labour market and are used by recruiters to define the criteria discussed above, are mutually reinforcing. ■

Further reading

« Dire ou ne pas dire les discriminations... Les jeunes femmes face au sexisme et au racisme », D. Epiphane, V. Mora, I. Jonas, *Revue Agora*, n°57, 2011.

« De l'inégalité à la différence : l'argumentation naturaliste dans la féminisation des entreprises », I. Jonas, D. Séhili, *Sociologies Pratiques*, n°14, 2007.

« Relation formation/emploi et genre », E. Flahaut, *Formation Emploi*, n° 91, 2005.

« Sélection à l'embauche et rapports sociaux de sexe », E. Lada, *Formation Emploi*, n° 91, 2005.

« Discriminations sexistes au travail : de la responsabilité des entreprises », R. Sénac-Slawinski, *Formation Emploi*, n° 91, 2005.

Façons de recruter. Le jugement des compétences sur le marché du travail, F. Eymard-Duvernay, E. Marchal, Paris, Métailié, 1997.

T&E n° 107 ● September-October 2013

Newsletter on employment and training research from Céreq

Publications manager

Alberto Lopez

Translation

Andrew Wilson

**Centre d'études
et de recherches
sur les qualifications**

10, place de la Joliette,
BP 21321,
13567 Marseille cedex 02
Ph. +33 4 91 13 28 28

www.cereq.fr

Reproduction permitted
provided that the source is cited.

ISSN 2119-0496

Registration of copyright
4th trimester 2013

Published free of charge

Céreq



Ministry of Work, Employment,
Vocational training
and Social dialogue