Applying behavioural insights to drive public sector diversity

Insights from research in NSW

NSW GOVERNMENT

2019

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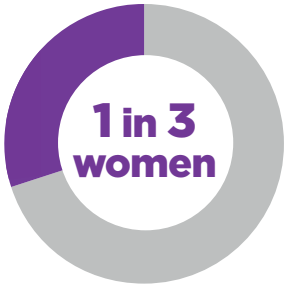
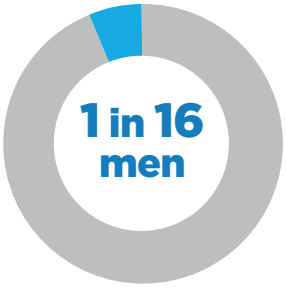
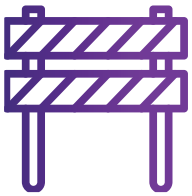
A snapshot of our findings





... SAID GENDER WAS A **BARRIER TO CAREER PROGRESSION**



WOMEN WERE **14** PERCENTAGE POINTS MORE LIKELY THAN MEN TO IDENTIFY **BARRIERS TO THEIR CAREER PROGRESSION**

WOMEN ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL WHEN THEY **APPLY FOR JOBS**

... BUT MEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO APPLY FOR ROLES IN **MIDDLE MANAGEMENT AND ABOVE**

1 in 5 women

SAID **LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN THEIR SKILLS** WAS A BARRIER TO CAREER PROGRESSION

1 in 5 men

THOUGHT WOMEN **INHERENTLY LACKED SKILLS** FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS THE FOUR KEY CHALLENGES

1 WOMEN REPORT MORE BARRIERS TO CAREER PROGRESSION

REMOVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BIAS

INCREASE EXPOSURE TO FEMALE LEADERS

2 WOMEN HAVE GREATER CARING RESPONSIBILITIES OUTSIDE OF WORK

SHIFT INFORMAL SOCIAL NORMS

SET KPIS FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING

3 WOMEN APPLY LESS FREQUENTLY FOR ROLES

SIMPLIFY THE JOB APPLICATION PROCESS

USE GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE FOR JOB DESCRIPTIONS

4 WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO DOUBT THEIR SKILLS AND CHANCE OF GETTING A ROLE

REMOVE SELF-EVALUATION FROM PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

ENCOURAGE WOMEN TO TAKE UP PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In 2015, the Premier of NSW set an ambitious target to increase the proportion of women represented in senior leadership roles in the NSW Government sector to 50% **by 2025**

Introduction

Over the last three years the representation of women in senior leadership roles has steadily increased from 33% to 38%. While this increase is an important step towards gender parity, there is still a considerable way to go.

In this report, we summarise the findings of research conducted by the Behavioural Insights Unit within the Department of Customer Service, in partnership with the Public Service Commission and the Customer Service, Stronger Communities and Transport Clusters. Using these insights, we can better identify, and ultimately remove, the obstacles facing women rising to senior roles in the NSW Government Sector.

The findings in this report are based on robust analysis, using multiple research methods and a wealth of recruitment data.

- We analysed over 1.1 million NSW Government job applications from the previous five years, covering approximately 23 million data points.
- We held in-depth interviews with 65 male and female employees in leadership pipeline and senior leader roles across the NSW Government Sector.
- We received approximately 500 responses to our survey, which we circulated to approximately 2500 people who had applied to middle management and senior leader roles over a four-month period.

By using qualitative and quantitative research insights, we have been able to identify key enablers and challenges to women in the NSW Government Sector. This research points to two very promising signs that gender parity in senior roles by 2025 is achievable.

Looking at an aggregate level across the NSW Government Sector, when women apply for roles, they are significantly more likely to be successful compared with men. In addition, our research showed that the clear majority of women (75.5%) were interested in applying for more senior roles in the next five years. In fact, when surveyed, women were more likely than their male counterparts to be interested in more senior roles. Only 7.7% of women and 11.5% of men were not considering applying for a more senior role in the next five years.

However, despite these promising signs, women submit fewer applications than men to senior roles and this appears to be the greatest challenge to achieving gender equality in NSW Government Sector leadership.

The research points to four key challenges to women in the Government Sector. Women:

- report more barriers to career progression
- have greater caring responsibilities outside of work
- apply less frequently for roles
- are more likely to doubt their skills and chance of getting a role.

We have identified 10 opportunities that use behavioural science to help break down these barriers, to reach gender parity in senior roles in the NSW Government Sector by 2025.

Challenges and opportunities

Women report more barriers to their career progression

When surveyed, both male and female applicants to senior roles were most likely to report experiencing no barriers to their career progression. However, as shown in Figure 1, male applicants were 14 percentage points more likely to identify no barriers or limitations to their future career progression in the survey compared with women. Women reported experiencing significantly more barriers to their career progression than men. This was also supported by the interviews.

QUESTION: Are there any factors you feel might limit your interest or ability to take on a more senior role in the NSW Government Sector in the future?

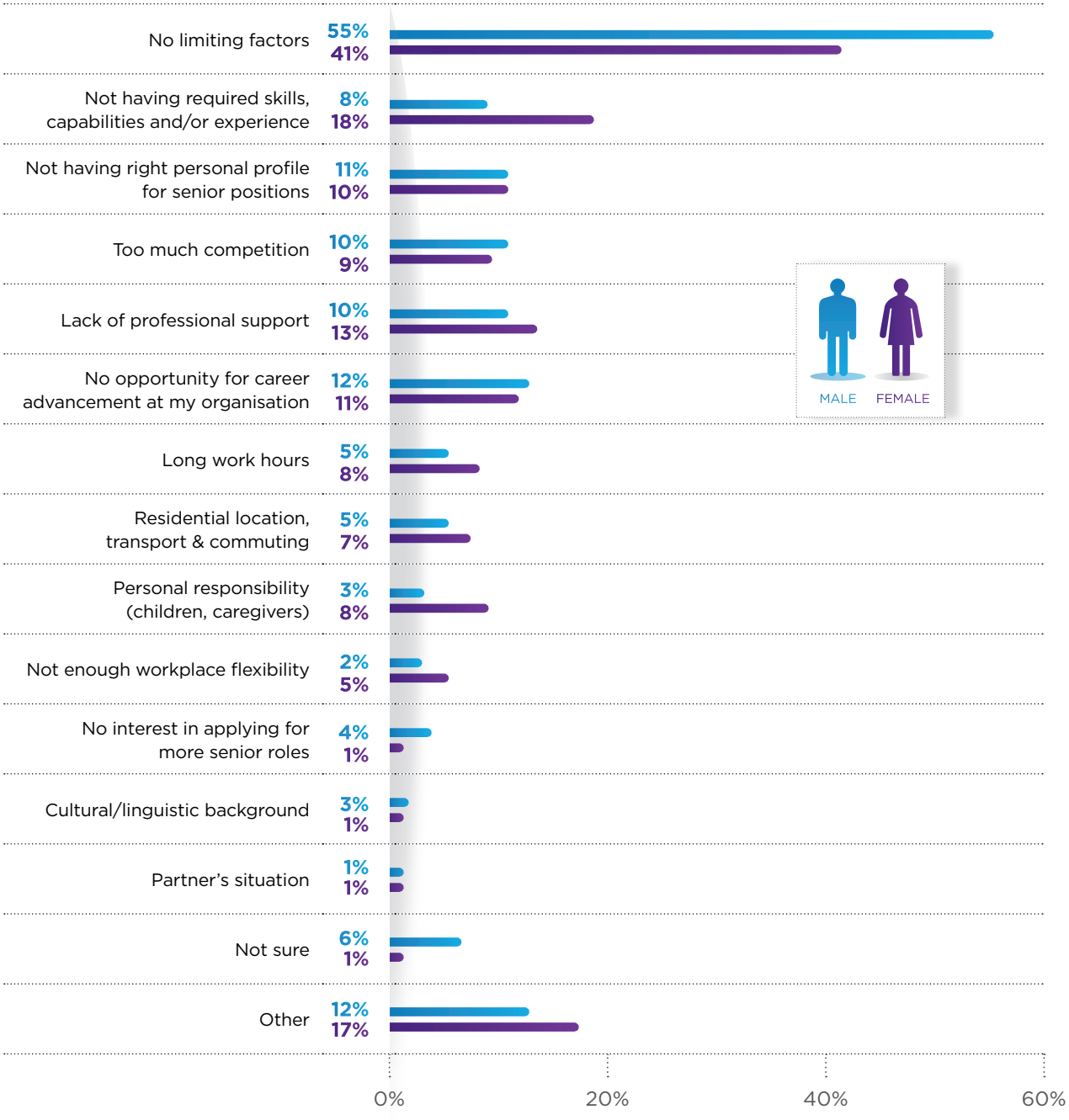


Figure 1. Barriers to progression for male and female applicants to the NSW Government Sector

One in three women interviewed identified that their gender was a barrier to their career progression both in the past and looking to the future. In comparison, only one in 16 men identified their gender as a barrier to their career progression.

Gender-based stereotypes were also a key barrier to women progressing to senior roles in the NSW Government Sector. Interviewees were asked why they thought there were more men than women represented in senior leadership in the NSW Government Sector. Approximately one in five men thought that women were not represented in senior roles at the same rate as men because women inherently lacked the skills for effective leadership. Approximately one in 50 women interviewed also thought this was a factor.

> "I will tell you, in the 13 years I have been in this organisation I have seen so many women just walk away from this organisation because they haven't been taken seriously."
>
> Female middle manager

WHAT COULD WE DO TO IMPROVE?

Removing opportunities for bias

We all have unconscious cognitive biases that affect our decisions. In the workplace, our unconscious cognitive biases, such as our tendency to over-rely on one positive aspect (halo effect) or prefer someone who is more like us (affinity bias), can lead all of us – both men and women – to make gender stereotypes and even perpetuate gender inequality. Finding innovative ways to remove our inherent biases from decision-making can be very effective at increasing gender equality. For example, recruitment platforms such as Applied are being introduced to reduce opportunities for unconscious biases to creep into the decision-making process. The platform removes all identifiable information from applications and allows recruiters to randomise the order in which they review applications, to avoid bias based on these factors.[1]

[i] Other recruitment platforms such as GapJumpers and Unitive also remove information about gender and race that can cloud decision-making.

A two-year research program in Victoria piloted removing identifiable information from CVs and training staff in strategies to reduce the effects of unconscious bias. Results showed an increase in the diversity of the candidates making it through to shortlists. It is not always easy to identify how our own biases might affect our decision-making and it can be difficult to overcome these biases via training. By removing the opportunity for our own biases to affect decision-making, we can improve our decisions and reduce gender-based discrimination as well as discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age and sexuality.

Seeing is believing

Research has demonstrated that greater exposure to female leaders can disrupt negative stereotypes of women in leadership positions.

> "[Fewer women in senior leadership] may be the case because women are more team players than men, where they will often just listen than take a leadership role."
>
> Male middle manager

But perhaps more surprisingly, even very subtle exposure to successful female or male leaders has been shown to influence the behaviour of aspiring leaders. The Harvard Kennedy School found this research compelling and is increasing the representation of female leaders in portraits around the university. Increasing our exposure to counter-stereotypical images can help to disrupt ingrained stereotypes. This can be practically applied by increasing contact points for junior staff and female senior leaders through mentoring or shadowing opportunities.

> "An idea isn't valid around here until a man says it."
>
> Female middle manager

Caring responsibilities outside of work continue to be a greater barrier for women than men

The most commonly cited barrier to career progression reported in the interviews of both men and women was family and child caring commitments. One in three women and slightly less than one in five men identified having children as a barrier to their career progression. Caring responsibilities were not as commonly reported in the survey as in the interviews. However, women were again more likely to report children as a barrier to their career progression compared with men **(refer to Figure 1)**.

In 2015, the Premier announced that all roles in the NSW Government Sector would have flexible arrangements on an 'if not, why not' basis. Since this time, sector-wide surveys have shown a steady increase in access to flexible working arrangements. This was supported in the interviews. There was a strong theme across those interviewed that the formal structures supporting flexible work arrangements (for example, laptops and access to IT infrastructure at home) had improved over the last few years in most agencies. However, informal support (such as discussions with managers and support from colleagues) had not improved at the same rate.

Although both men and women interviewed viewed access to flexible work as a career enabler, managers' support for work-life balance and flexibility was much more important to women than men. A quarter of women interviewed specifically noted their manager's support of flexible work as an enabler to their career, whereas it was not discussed by any male employees interviewed.

WHAT COULD WE DO TO IMPROVE?

Shift social norms

In 2017, we designed and implemented a trial that nudged employees to take up flexible start and finish times. From our qualitative research interviewing employees and managers, we found that the barriers to taking up flexible work were more informal (such as social norms and manager's perceptions) than formal (such as infrastructure and IT). We found that, rather than a lack of access to technology to work from home, it was subtle social cues that rewarded and sustained the 'nine to five' culture. In the trial, we were able to demonstrate that behavioural insights could successfully tackle the subtle informal behavioural barriers embedded in organisational culture. Relatively simple solutions such as changing default settings in calendars, implementing manager training and encouragement, and developing a team-based competition significantly shifted the times employees were starting and ending their office workdays. These shifts were successful without leading to a significant change in the overall number of hours worked. A more flexible workplace can help create a more inclusive culture for people with caring responsibilities and contributes to gender equality.

When considering barriers to gender equality, it is important to consider informal barriers. Research has shown that we do not like to change – we prefer the status quo (known as the status quo bias). So even when structural, formal barriers have been removed, our biases may keep us from embracing change. Behavioural insights can help identify and reduce both formal and informal barriers, and encourage individuals and organisations to embrace the changes needed to achieve gender equality.

> **"It [applying for more senior roles] does come down to what happens with me, like if I decide to have children. I'm 35 and haven't had children, that plays on my mind. What happens if I do decide to have children? I'll only be a year in the job and want to be in the job for a bit longer than that."**
>
> Female middle manager

Flexible work KPIs

In 2018, the Department of Premier and Cabinet introduced flexible working conversations into people manager's performance appraisals. As part of this initiative, managers were required to have conversations with their team members about how they could work flexibly. The requirement to have these conversations was included in each manager's performance review to keep them more accountable and ensure their staff would feel they could access flexible work options that suited them and the organisation.

> "Until my baby goes to school I can't even think about a more senior role because the flexibility is just not there. In fact, I can see less and less."
>
> Female middle manager

Along with several other changes designed to support and drive flexible working, this has led to an increase in employees at the department reporting they are satisfied with their access to flexible working. In the 2018 People Matter Employee Survey, 85% of DPC employees were satisfied with their access to flexible working options.

> "If I didn't have two young children at home and I wasn't studying, I probably would have jumped ship [to a more senior role in another department] a long time ago."
>
> Female middle manager

Women are more likely to doubt their skills and chances of getting jobs

Another key barrier to achieving gender parity is women's perceptions of their own skills and experience. When surveyed, women were significantly more likely to see their lack of skills and experience as a barrier to taking on a more senior role in the next five years. In addition, on average, women were less optimistic that they would get the job when they applied compared with men – despite being more likely to be hired when they did apply. This doubt was also supported by the interviews. Of the women interviewed, one in five reported that their personal lack of confidence in their skills was a barrier to their career progression. In comparison, only one in 16 men interviewed discussed their confidence as a barrier. This result is consistent with previously published literature suggesting that women tend to be more critical of their skills in the workplace than men.

WHAT COULD WE DO TO IMPROVE?

Line manager encouragement of promotion opportunities

Support and encouragement from direct line managers was a key driver to career progression for both the men and women interviewed. However, managers, as well as strong personal networks, were more often seen as an enabler to career progression for women than men. Middle managers play an important role in encouraging their staff, in particular their female staff, to seek out opportunities to take on more senior roles. Line managers can proactively and explicitly prompt high-performing employees to consider opportunities for promotion, including setting shared, time-limited and action-oriented goals for applying for new roles. This encouragement and support is likely to have a disproportionate impact on women because they tend to be more self-critical of their skills and readiness for promotion.

Performance reviews

Gender differences in self-confidence can be compounded during performance appraisals. It is not uncommon for organisations to ask employees to evaluate themselves and share their self-assessments with their managers. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to give themselves a lower score based on their self-confidence – not necessarily their performance. The effect of this lower confidence can compound because of bias in our decision-making known as the anchoring effect. The anchoring effect (where we tend to be anchored to the initial information provided) can lead to a manager's evaluations of their staff being biased by their employees' own self-assessments – which can lead to women ending up with lower performance appraisals simply because of their lower self-confidence. In her book ***What Works: Gender Equality by Design***, Iris Bohnet suggests the best solution to improving this issue is to remove self-evaluations entirely, or to "not share employees' self-evaluations with their managers before they make up their own minds" (p.188).

Limit job description criteria

Research has shown that there are trends in the way specific groups respond to job advertisements. For example, women tend to apply when they meet closer to 100% of the required capabilities on a job advertisement, while men are likely to apply when they meet only 60% of those qualifications.[ii] The gender differences found in our research around confidence could partially explain this. Limiting criteria on job advertisements to only include criteria genuinely essential may disproportionately increase the number of women applying for the role.

> **"I do look to see what is out there but I always look at them [job advertisements] and go 'I couldn't meet that! There is no way that I could meet that!' Then I have got peers and my husband saying 'You would nail that!' And I'm like 'I don't think I would.' And I think I need to get over that self-doubt and put myself out there but I kind of go 'Can I keep putting myself out there?'"**
>
> Female middle manager

Women apply less frequently and are less likely to reapply for roles

Analysis of over five years' worth of data from one of Australia's largest recruitment datasets showed that men submit slightly more applications than women over time to the NSW Government. Men submit approximately 1.15 times more applications than women over five years. So if a woman submits six applications over five years, a man will submit seven over the same period. Although this is a small difference over five years it may lead to larger long-term differences when applied across a career. The difference is likely larger when applications to roles outside of the public sector are considered, as men form a greater proportion of applications in the private and non-government sectors. This supports previous research demonstrating that women tend to be more risk-averse when submitting their applications.

In addition, women who are interviewed but aren't selected for a senior role are less likely to reapply to the NSW Government than men. On average, men are 7 percentage points more likely to have another application under review when they applied for a role than women. And women who make it through to the final stages of recruitment but are not selected for the role are 1.4 percentage points less likely to reapply than men.

The differences between men and women in the frequency and duration of applications, though statistically significant, are small. This research shows there is not one single barrier to women applying for senior roles; however, these small additional friction points can add up.

WHAT COULD WE DO TO IMPROVE?

Simplification

Even vanishingly small behavioural frictions have been shown to reduce the likelihood of a task being completed. Simplifying the online job application process for candidates is likely to increase the number of applications submitted. This is even more likely for candidates who are time-poor – for example women, who on average have less leisure time than their male counterparts – and it could also increase the completion of applications by top candidates who have a lot of options available to them. Simplifying paperwork, pre-populating forms and making the process of finding and applying for roles easier and simpler may increase the diversity and talent of the applicant pool.

Salience and framing

People's attention is selective and influenced by features of their environment. Some of these features can be automatically more noticeable and memorable to the person perceiving them, and are often unconscious. For example, subtle differences to the wording of job advertisements can change the applicant pool. Researchers have found that when a job advertisement includes stereotypically masculine words, women are less attracted compared with the same job advertisement constructed to include stereotypically feminine words. Online tools, such as the Gender Decoder for Job Ads, allow recruiters to check whether the language used in their job advertisement inadvertently uses stereotypically masculine or feminine words.[iii]

Comparative and actionable feedback

Providing all employees and candidates with accurate feedback on their performance is an important tool to help reduce differences between those who are confident in their skills and those who are not. Providing comparative feedback to candidates could help address the tendency for women to be more critical of their skills and their likely success when applying for jobs.

i. Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A.C. (2011). Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 101(1),109-128.

ii. Mohr, T.S. (2014). Why women don't apply for jobs unless they're 100% qualified. *Harvard Business Review.* Available at: https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified [Accessed 02 February 2016].

Where to next?

There has been considerable progress made to reach gender parity in NSW Government senior roles, although there is still work to be done. Many of the best-practice strategies outlined in this report are already underway across the NSW Government Sector, along with other novel approaches being piloted and trialled.

Better understanding the barriers to gender parity and using insights from the behavioural sciences can help us better target and design solutions to achieve equal gender representation in senior roles in the NSW Government by 2025.

More information

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