

LETTER OF REFERENCE CONSIDERATIONS

Removing Barriers From Letter of Recommendation Evaluations

The use of letters of recommendations are commonplace in the employee selection process in the United States and in academia. Researchers analyzed a great number of these letters and other research studies and outlined the three general following expectations from that analysis:

(1) the support and recommendation of the writer, (2) specific details regarding the record and focus of the applicant, and (3) an evaluation of the applicant's attributes and performance (Trix & Psenka, 2003). Women and members of underrepresented communities experience barriers at this stage in the employee selection process due to bias (Madera, Hebl, Dial, & Martin, 2018). Research shows bias creeps into letters of recommendations in the following ways: (1) length of the letters, (2) lack of references to research publications, (3) stereotypical terms, (4) doubt-raisers, and (5) elements of informal writing.

Length and Strength of Letters

Letters of recommendation written for women are 84% the length of the letters written for men (Trix & Psenka, 2003). Women also receive a higher percentage (15%) of what are called in the research as letters of minimum assurance than men (6%). Letters is minimum assurance only fulfill one or two of the three general expectations of a letter of recommendation. The following example shows a letter in which the recommender does not evaluate the applicant's focus or record nor, does it evaluate their attributes or performance:

I am writing in support of Tiffany Adam's application for the position of the Associate Professor of Physics. I am aware of Tiffany's work. She is tactful, deliberate and careful. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at your university. I would be delighted to answer any further questions.

Lack of References to Research Publications

Letters of recommendation written for men are four times more likely to mention their publications and twice as likely to refer to their research. Letters of recommendation written for women emphasize their ability to teach. These biases can be detrimental to a candidate's ability to secure a research position (Trix & Psenka, 2003; Madera, Hebl, Dial, & Martin, 2018).

Stereotypical Terms

In general, the author's bias can also find its way into letters of recommendation using stereotypical language. Women are generally categorized as hard workers with emotional and social intelligence. Whereas male candidates are described more in terms of innate talent and ability. Following are examples of stereotypical terms to avoid: caring, compassionate, hard-working, conscientious, dependable, diligent, dedicated, tactful, interpersonal, warm, careful, hardworking, meticulous, thorough and helpful (Trix & Psenka, 2003; Schmader, Whitehead, & Wysocki, 2007; Madera, Hebl, Dial, & Martin, 2018).

Doubt Raisers

There are six different types of doubt raisers: (1) negativity, (2) faint praise, (3) unexplained, (4) hedging, (5) potentially negative, and (6) irrelevant information. Although doubt raisers affected men and women in a similarly negative way, women received a statistically significant percentage more doubt raisers than men. Following are some examples of doubt raisers identified by several studies:

Negative language

While Sarah has not done a lot of bench type research.

She has a somewhat challenging personality.

Although his publications are not numerous as you know...

While not the best student I have had...

A look at [applicant's] publication record will show that she has not published a huge amount...

She is not the brightest, the most creative, the most independent, or original or productive, the most likely to be an outstanding teacher, or the most "anything" of her peers.

Faint praise

She worked hard on projects that she accepted.

I have every confidence that Billie will become better than average. She is void of mood swings and temper tantrums.

Unexplained

Now that she has chosen to leave the laboratory.

At first, despite truly spectacular GRE scores, she seemed quite unsure of herself.

Hedging

It appears that her health and personal life are stable.

She appears to be a highly motivated colleague.

I assume she will be a relatively good teacher of undergraduate and graduate students.

Potentially negative

Although she has a number of papers in preparation and one under review, I think it would be fair to say that her record on paper would not place her among the top echelon of candidates for first rate programs.

As an independent worker she requires only a minimum amount of supervision.

Bright, enthusiastic, she responds well to feedback.

She is unlikely to become a superstar, but she is very solid.

She may not be the strongest student we've ever put out in any one aspect of academic excellence, but her profile is unique.

Irrelevant Information

She is quite close to my wife.

She is very active in church (Trix & Psenka, 2003; Madera, Hebl, Dial, & Martin, 2018).

Elements of Informal Writing

The following conventions of informal writing can also introduce bias into this step of the hiring process: (1) referring to the applicant by their first name, (2) referring to the applicant without their credentials, and (3) bringing up personal details. (Trix & Psenka, 2003; Madera, Hebl, Dial, & Martin, 2018).

Best Practices for Evaluating Letters of Recommendation

Search committees can reduce the effect of this bias in several different ways.

First, Iowa State University can simply give letters of recommendation less weight than they would to other pieces of the employee selection process such as the interviews, curriculum vitae, review of work, and cover letter.

Second, Iowa State University can change the order of the stages of the employment selection process to de-emphasize the potential for bias

in letters of reference resulting in screening out otherwise eligible candidates.

Third, Iowa State University faculty can raise awareness of their use of gendered terms in letters of recommendation by copying their letters into this calculator. The calculator breaks down the letters of recommendations into female-associated words and male-associated words.

Fourth, Iowa State University can reduce the bias by being aware of the potential for bias in letters for recommendations and using the above descriptions to analyze each letter and rate them. (Morgan, Elder, & King, 2013).

References

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