Solutions for tackling workplace gender inequality

Exploring the impact of women's self-efficacy levels, career aspirations and work engagement

Introduction

Despite equal rights and increased openness in the workplace over the preceding decades, issues surrounding women in the workplace and how they perform compared to their male counterparts continue to generate much discussion. A research paper by Hartman and Barber (2020) explores the differences between men and women in the workplace in relation to their self-efficacy, career aspirations, and engagement. The paper aims to uncover how men and women differ in these occupational characteristics, and more specifically whether self-efficacy has an impact on the career goals of women. The assessment of these similarities and differences between genders was based on 153 responses to online surveys.

How self-efficacy impacts behavior at work

Many organizations are working hard to make progress toward achieving a more equal split between men and women in leadership roles. However, women continue to be under-represented in senior management teams on a global scale. Workplace gender inequality is multi-faceted; for example, the ideals on which occupational success is built are skewed toward masculinity, with power, competition, and participation standing out as metrics on which organizations are built, which can impede female success. Furthermore successful women are often perceived negatively compared to their male counterparts, even though the work of the female sex tends to focus on key elements of a successful organization like collaboration and building relationships. All these factors can lead women developing low occupational self-efficacy, which negatively impacts their career aspirations.

Self-efficacy is one's perception of their ability to successfully perform certain tasks. In an occupational context, it refers to how confident someone feels about performing their duties. This interpretation influences that person's workplace behavior and in turn impacts their career aspirations. An interesting example of how social expectations impact self-efficacy and gender roles in general is the nursing profession, where men account for only 10% of the workforce. Yet male nurses progress their career faster than female nurses and hold a higher proportion of leadership positions. Occupational stereotypes have a huge impact on whether women decide to enter an occupation, as does the existence of positive role models in traditionally male-orientated industries. Those with lower self-efficacy doubt their capabilities and tend to choose less challenging tasks, put less effort into them, experience less engagement with them, and are less likely to overcome obstacles.

The phenomenon of low self-efficacy in women is exacerbated by their experience of statistical discrimination, where employers use statistical data to infer the productivity levels of a candidate. This often leads to negative perceptions of how well women will perform in the workplace. It is therefore likely that these factors have contributed to the increase in women becoming entrepreneurs, since doing so gives women greater influence over creating the more supportive, flexible, and autonomous work culture they naturally seek. In contrast, the dynamic between career advancement and family means women tend to choose the latter instead of their career. Such a dynamic increases the likelihood of women leaving the workforce for certain periods and then returning to work in part-time roles while caring for children. These factors negatively impact women's career aspirations and exacerbate gender stereotypes.

Diving into the survey results

The study asked respondents to rate their perception of their abilities, prompted by survey questions like "I can remain calm when facing difficulties in my job because I can rely on my abilities" and "I hope to become a leader in my career field." The results generated from these responses revealed that:

1. Occupational self-efficacy did have an impact on career aspirations;

2. Men and women had similar levels of self-efficacy;

3. The level of work engagement in men was similar to that of women; and

4. Women had significantly lower career aspirations than men.

Analysis of the responses shows us that men and women had similar levels of work engagement and occupational self-efficacy. It was also found that occupational self-efficacy had a positive effect on both men and women's career aspirations, but men nevertheless reported significantly higher career aspirations compared to women.

Action steps for improvement

To address the identified gender imbalance, based on the above results the authors offer the following practical advice to senior leaders and human resources (HR) teams, that:

- The knowledge and skills women naturally use to excel in tasks, for example collaboration and relationship building, should be recognized at an organizational level.

- Organizational processes should be designed in a way to avoid impeding women, for example, by not rewarding those who work long hours with promotions.

- Women should be encouraged to develop greater self-efficacy through means such as mentoring, which can help individuals elevate their confidence in their own abilities. Having a mentor helps elevate self-efficacy, and those with mentors report higher salaries, better job satisfaction, and greater career success.

- Succession planning should help facilitate an increase in women in senior management teams, and women should be offered support to assist them with attaining and undertaking senior leadership roles.

- Networking is important in facilitating career progression opportunities, therefore encouraging women to develop these skills should be considered when designing training and development programs.

- ■ Employees who perform well should be rewarded, because women with career aspirations who are not recognized by management will seek out opportunities elsewhere.

The results punctuate that self-efficacy is an important factor in determining career aspirations. To enhance women's career aspirations, not only is it necessary for them to believe in their capabilities, they must also feel confident that there are real opportunities for success in their chosen field. A key realization is that while women may believe they can succeed, they may not necessarily act on this belief. Women place greater emphasis on role competency before seeking out a promotion and anticipate that having a family will impact on their ability to progress their career. Conversely, men tend to engage in career progression activities even though they may lack the knowledge or skills needed for their new position. This is linked to their desire to secure high-profile projects or positions, a characteristic that many women do not share.

Commentary

The review is based on 'Women in the workforce: The effect of gender on occupational self-efficacy, work engagement and career aspirations' by by Rosanne L. Hartman and Emily G. Barber (2020), published in Gender in Management. This research paper concentrates on identifying variations in the self-efficacy, career aspirations, and engagement of men and women inside workplaces, with particular focus on the impact of women's self-efficacy levels. The results demonstrate that women tend to act less on any self-belief in their ability to progress in their career, and are more conservative than men in their self-assessment of their competencies before applying for more senior roles. Overall, women's lower self-efficacy has the knock-on effect of dampening their career aspirations. Structural disadvantages for women can be addressed by HR teams actively involving them in networking and mentoring.

Reference

Hartman, R. and Barber, E. (2020), "Women in the workforce: the effect of gender on occupational self-efficacy, work engagement and career aspirations", *Gender in Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 92-118, doi: 10.1108/GM-04-2019-0062.