Interview Tanja Hentschel: Professional employee selection

A Success Factor in Academia?

Excellent research needs excellent scientists. Therefore, one of the Clusters' gender equality policy aims is to increase the participation of women in cutting edge research by strengthening gender equality in its research community. One instrument to attract female scientists independent of their career level is a professionalized employee selection that takes different aspects of diversity, including gender, into account. For this reason the equal opportunity office organized a workshop on making fair employment decisions through professionalized employee selection during the annual cluster retreat in 2014. In the following interview Tanja Hentschel explains how common pitfalls can be avoided.

In 2011 Tanja Hentschel started working in the project "Selection and Evaluation of Leaders in Business and Academia", led by Prof. Claudia Peus, Chair of Research and Science Management at TU München. During the 2014 Cluster Retreat Tanja Hentschel presented the latest project findings and showed how gender balance and diversity in academic research teams can be increased and why this is beneficial for scientific work.
In Summer 2015 a volume regarding professional employee selection in academica co-edited by Tanja Hentschel will be avaliable.

Can working groups in science benefit from more diversity?

Recent studies show that the percentage of women in top management teams is related to objective performance measures. In some studies researchers find that diverse teams have a higher potential for innovation – which is crucial for scientific work.

However, the benefits of diversity need to be earned: For diversity to lead to positive team outcomes, it is important to highlight the similarities in order to increase the identification within the team. It is also helpful, if team members see a value in diversity.

What are the reasons for the continuing imbalance of men and women in high ranking positions in academia?

The reasons are complex. We can broadly specify factors on three levels that influence the amount of women in top positions in academia: Society, organization, and individual.

To give an example for factors on the individual level, our research shows that women have less self-confidence than men and some women may therefore doubt that they can make it to the top. On the organizational level we find that women have fewer role models and less access to powerful networks in male-dominated fields; and because search committees for professorship positions often rely on networks, it can be harder for women to get hired.

Do you also have examples for factors on the societal level?

For example, women are still the main caretakers of the family and childcare opportunities are often scarce, which is a problem. In addition, a recent study shows that in the natural sciences both male and female professors prefer male over female PhD candidates when qualifications are equal, which can be even more of a problem. The reason for this preference may be gender stereotypical expectations that men perform better in science than women.

What are gender stereotypes?

Gender stereotypes are generalized expectations about what men and women are like. Men are perceived as more agentic than women, e.g. assertive, dominant, and outgoing. Women are perceived as more communal than men, e.g. caring, supportive, and concerned about others.

Which role do these stereotypes play in the context of employee selection in science?

Even though attributes describing women are very positive, they can be the reason why women face problems in the hiring process – especially for high rank positions. People think that a good leader has agentic attributes. Because women are seen as less agentic, people perceive a so-called lack of fit between women and leadership. This may bias people's evaluations of women for leadership positions.

Unfortunately, if women show too much agentic behavior (for example, if they negotiate forcefully) evaluators may penalize them because they have violated the expectation of women to act in a communal way.

What can be done to counter typical pitfalls in the process of employee selection?

It is important to inform decision makers about gender stereotypes and how they affect their evaluations and behaviors. Stereotypes often work subconsciously and can influence our attention, interpretation of behaviors and our memory. We may not be able to fully stop the influence of stereotypes, but if we are aware of their existence and consider that they may be at work in the hiring process, we can weaken their effects.

Most important is a standardized selection process that is transparent for everyone involved.

In your project, you propose seven steps to reach a fair selection process: Requirement profile – Recruitment – Application documents – Work samples – Interview – Decision – Onboarding. What is a requirement profile?

To develop a requirement profile you should answer the following questions before you start recruiting possible candidates: Who am I looking for? What characteristics should the person have? Name no more than eight or ten characteristics that are most important for the position in question. This helps you to look for a candidate who is perfectly fitting to the specific position.

Carry on with a recruitment strategy. Your job advertisement should include the characteristics you are looking for. It should be job specific and written in gender fair language. External recruitment is crucial for diversity.

When you look through the application documents beware of pictures because they impact your assessment of the applicant. Also keep in mind that not everyone in academia is skilled in writing letters of recommendation.

Looking at step four, what might be good work samples in science?

In general, work samples are a good strategy to find out more about the skills of the applicants. You can, for example, have applicants design an experiment, give feedback on a research proposal or give a presentation.

In the following interview ask questions about the characteristics that you are looking for. You can ask about earlier or hypothetical behavior. For example, when you are looking for a candidate who is persistent, you can ask about a situation in which he or she failed at something and how he or she dealt with this failure. But you could also ask your candidate what he or she would do in case a lab experiment fails.

When deciding for a candidate compare what you are looking for with the applicant's characteristics. Also take into account the potential of the applicant to acquire other knowledge and skills.

Finally, when you have hired an applicant make him or her feel welcome in the team (e.g. through a team lunch), and help him or her to get used to the new job.

Do you have a final tip for us?

Be aware of biases in all parts of the selection process.

Interview conducted by Ruth Kamm.
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