Men Crave Competition, In Work and Play

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Jan. 19, 2011
Email

Do you like competing with your coworkers? If the answer is yes, you're probably male.

Men are 94 percent more likely than women to apply for a job with a salary potential that is dependent on outperforming their colleagues, according to a large new study from the University of Chicago.

"Women shy away from competitive workplaces whereas men covet, and even thrive in, competitive environments," the study, involving nearly 7,000 job seekers in 16 large American cities, concluded.

Economics professor John List, the senior author of the study, undertook the ambitious project in an effort to help explain the chronic disparity between wages paid to male and female workers, even for similar work.

The latest statistics show that women still earn less than 80 percent as much as men, and there have been many attempts to explain the gap. Women are less likely to work full time, and they are more likely to take time off to care for their family, and thus they tend to have less time on the job.

And many suspect there's more than a little prejudice against female workers, especially in fields dominated -- and largely managed -- by men.

Could Men's Love of Competition Be Behind Salary Gap?

List and his coauthors, Jeffrey Flory, a graduate student in economics at the University of Maryland, and Andreas Leibbrandt, a postdoctoral fellow at Chicago, were intrigued by a number of recent laboratory studies showing that men are, by nature, more competitive than women. Most of us probably don't need scholarly studies to tell us that, because we see it all around us.

But the researchers wanted to take it to the next level. Could that love of competition, shared among most men and avoided by most women, be at least part of the reason for the salary gap? Women are raised to be understanding and conciliatory; men are raised to slay wild beasts and triumph over their male friends.
So is it likely that many women won't even apply for a specific job if they know their success depends on performing better than their co-workers? The answer is yes, according to the study, unless the job pays significantly more than other similar jobs in their community.

**Men More Likely to Apply for Performance-Based Jobs**

The researchers placed two ads on Internet job boards in 16 cities for an administrative assistant, the most common job in the United States, according to federal statistics. The ads ran from January to April, 2010.

They got a response from 6,770 persons.

Those respondents were told the wage structure for the jobs, and 2,702 applied, including 1,566 women and 1,136 men. Some were told they would be paid on an hourly basis, but the amount would depend on how they performed compared to their coworkers.

Others were told they would receive the same pay, regardless of how well they competed with others. And others were told they would be members of a team and would be rewarded on the basis of how the team performed, not how well each individual competed.

The goal was to break down the applications to see if competition influenced one sex more than the other, but there was a slight problem. It's no longer considered good form - and in some cases may even be illegal - to ask the gender of a job applicant. So the researchers resorted to a series of time-proven methods, including the first name, to determine whether each applicant was male or female.

**Men Opt for Jobs That Paid Highest Fee for Personal Performance**

Here are the key findings:

- As the compensation package became more heavily reliant on individual performance, far more men than women applied. The gender gap "more than doubled" when the reward for performance rose.

- Women were far more likely to walk away from a competitive workplace, though not if there were no other good options in their community. And women were more likely to apply if the performance relied on teamwork, not on the individual, or if the salary was a flat fee independent of their performance.

- Men are more willing to compete in the workforce. Women have "a significantly stronger aversion to competitive workplaces" than men, and if they are in a labor market where other jobs pay just as well, they will go there instead.

- The bottom line: most men went for the jobs that paid the most for personal performance. The higher the fee, the more they applied. And most women opted for jobs where they would be members of a team, or face relatively low levels of competition.
Are Men More Competitive than Women?

Of course, none of this means all men want to beat their colleagues, and all women are afraid of competition. One size does not fit all.

The research is strengthened in that it was carried out in the field instead of in a laboratory, so it's a real-life setting. But it is weakened in a couple of areas, as the researchers themselves note in their study.

The applicants were all seeking one kind of job, an office support position. The researchers chose that because in 2008 and 2009, it was the most common line of work in the United States.

"It is possible, however, that office support positions attract fewer competitive types, compared for example with a sales position," the study says. "Whether the job type interacts with the gender gap is an important issue that remains unresolved.

By the way, the study was conducted last year when unemployment was soaring -- and it still is -- so it is reasonable to assume the applicants really needed work. The researchers extended a job offer in every city, and 20 of the applicants were accepted, so the study wasn't a sham offering false hope. But as so often happens these days, 2,682 people went away empty-handed.