Danger zone, stereotyping effects

By Juliet Andrews

Women with a hyphenated last name or their husband’s surname are judged as being more traditionally feminine, less intelligent and less ambitious, according to research by the Tilburg Institute for Behavioral Economics in The Netherlands.

In an experiment where participants judged hypothetical job applicants and awarded salary, those candidates who had changed their name when married were given a lower pay rate and were seen as more dependent.

Why? Stereotyping.

A stereotype is a belief you have about another person or group that is based on an observed or imagined characteristic or behaviour.

We all make assumptions about others based on a range of traits - gender, ethnicity, age, appearance, clothing, education or interests.

It's the way we organise the world.

Stereotypes can be positive – "she is really fit so she must be energetic and a go-getter" or negative – "she is really unfit and overweight so she must be lazy and unmotivated".

But they are almost always wrong and often serve to make us feel slightly superior in some way to the person being stereotyped.

So why do we stereotype? What impact does it have in the workplace?

We often attribute positive stereotypes to ourselves and those we think are similar to us - our "in-group" - while assigning negative notions to the "out-group".

We also rely on stereotypes to judge people we don't know.

An easy way to tell if you have a stereotype about a person is if you ask them a question and you think you already know the answer.

For example, a manager doesn't ask an older employee to learn a new computer program because she thinks he won't be able to learn it: "older people are frightened of new technology".

Negative stereotypes can impact your career. If other people have negative stereotypes about you, when you are under pressure you might be so anxious about disproving that stereotype that you perform badly.

If you or your organisation don't guard against stereotypes there is a danger that talent will be ignored, that the same people who fit a particular stereotype for success will always be given the opportunities and that good people will walk out the door.

Have you heard in your organisation: "We don't have people like that here, they just don't fit in."

If so, then it's probably time you and your colleagues thought about stereotypes and how they are operating at work.

Guard against stereotypes at work:

• Use the 10 second rule. The next time you have an interaction with someone at work, take 10 seconds to objectively judge whether you have used stereotypes to fill in the blanks or whether you really see the person in front of you.

• Ask questions. Keep an open mind and prepare to be surprised. You might find you have more stereotypes about others than you realised.

• Take time. Check when making decisions to make sure you are not relying on stereotypes for your information.

• Educate. Reduce the negative impact of stereotypes in the workplace by educating staff on what stereotypes are and how they operate.

This provides opportunities for everyone to identify the stereotypes they have about others and importantly, the stereotypes other may have about them. Try the Implicit Associations Test at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo.

Juliet Andrews is a senior associate at Aequus Partners, a management consultancy that combines psychology and law to assist organisations with flexible work practices, diversity and wellbeing. Visit: www.aequus.com.au

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