

How blind auditions help orchestras to eliminate gender bias

To get more women into their ranks, many orchestras use blind auditions where musicians perform behind a screen. Could we replicate this in business?

- Monday 14 October 2013 07.00 EDT



The number of female musicians in orchestras has increased since blind auditions became commonplace Photograph: Lebrecht Music And Arts Photo Li/Alamy

Bias cannot be avoided, we just can't help ourselves. Research shows that we apply different standards when we compare men and women. While explicit discrimination certainly exists, perhaps the more arduous task is to eliminate our implicit biases — the ones we don't even realise we have.

After all, if you were making a decision about hiring someone or giving an employee a pay rise, wouldn't you like to be fair? Don't you think you should carry out your evaluation using only criteria that actually matter?

A lot of us think we can make evaluations based on quality alone. But the research suggests otherwise. So how might you make sure that your implicit biases are kept at bay?

Gender blind evaluations

You could try to do your evaluation without knowing the sex of the person you're evaluating. If you didn't know whether the applicant was a man or a woman, then your biases shouldn't be triggered. Needless to say, it's quite difficult to set up a process that truly is gender blind.

An interview makes it impossible. But even written descriptions of applicants contain hints about the sex of the person. The most obvious, of course, is the name, but there are other subtle indicators there, too.

Letters of recommendation that don't use first names may nonetheless reveal the sex of the person being written about. Women get described as caring about their students or clients, while men are said to have strong relationships with those groups. It's unplanned, it's not intended, but we do it. And when we do, we give different impressions about the qualifications of applicants.

If we could avoid interviews and steer clear of using written profiles to review candidates, maybe we could stay gender neutral. Except, what would then be the basis for our decisions? Here's where the orchestras come into play.

Sexism in orchestras

Over the past several decades, orchestras have started changing the way they hire musicians. One of these changes was designed to eliminate bias against women.

It would be hard to deny that there was such a bias in the composition of orchestras. As late as 1970, the top five orchestras in the U.S. had fewer than 5% women. It wasn't until 1980 that any of these top orchestras had 10% female musicians. But by 1997 they were up to 25% and today some of them are well into the 30s. What is the source of this change? Have they added jobs? Have they focused on work that appeals to women?

The size of a major orchestra is quite stable; they all have around 100 musicians. Furthermore, the types of jobs do not change. The increase in the number of women cannot be attributed to a redistribution giving the orchestra fewer bassists — traditionally played by men — and more harpists — where more women are found.

Blind auditions

In the 1970s and 1980s, orchestras began using blind auditions. Candidates are situated on a stage behind a screen to play for a jury that cannot see them. In some orchestras, blind auditions are used just for the preliminary selection while others use it all the way to the end, until a hiring decision is made.

Even when the screen is only used for the preliminary round, it has a powerful impact; researchers have determined that this step alone makes it 50% more likely that a woman will advance to the finals. And the screen has also been demonstrated to be the source of a surge in the number of women being offered positions.

By the way, even a screen doesn't always yield a gender blind event. Screens keep juries from seeing the candidates move into position, but the telltale sounds of a woman's shoes allegedly influenced some jury members such that aspiring musicians were instructed to remove their footwear before coming onto the stage.

Assessment without bias

It seems impractical to imagine evaluating someone but remaining ignorant of their sex. But the orchestras show us: it can be done.

If we trust the research and accept that women are being judged more fairly because of the screen, perhaps we should ask if there's any way to replicate the musicians' success. What kind of screen would be needed at your workplace?

University faculty members constantly evaluate each other. It's not just about hiring and promotion. Every week, we read and evaluate research articles submitted to journals and grant applications submitted to research councils. Success at publishing and raising funds is essential for anyone hoping to make a career in higher education. Is there any reason to think we are free of gender bias when we carry out these evaluations of our peers? Not at all. In fact, there are good reasons to think that we're not.

With grant applications, we see different success rates for men and women. The prestigious grants from the European Research Council, for example, consistently show that applications from women have a lower success rate than applications from men. Would blind reviews change this?

When scholarly articles are reviewed, the reviewers may not be told the name of the author. But the editors know who it is. I wonder if there are major journals willing to open their archives to let a researcher determine if the success rates for men and women are different.

Of course, simply identifying a difference for grant success or article acceptance rates doesn't tell us why that difference is there. But without knowing the most basic facts, we don't know where our work should be focused.

It's time to find ways to tune our own evaluation instruments better.

This article originally appeared on [Curt Rice's blog](#) and was reproduced here with his permission. More info on [research behind this article here](#). Curt Rice is a professor at the University of Tromsø and a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study

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