

The Myth of Merit



THE PROBLEM

There are two key problems with the concept of meritocracy in the world of work. The first is that bias exists at each stage of the employment process. The second is that women and men do not start from an even playing field.

PROBLEM 1: SUBJECTIVE JUDGMENT

The way merit is used in the recruitment and retention of candidates is not definitive, neutral or objective.

In fact our cognitive biases, conscious or unconscious, make the process more subjective than we would like to believe.



Unconscious bias means that we gravitate to people who look and sound like us and hire with a 'more of me' mentality.

MERIT = PAST PERFORMANCE + POTENTIAL



Past performance is fairly straightforward, and is usually based on length and type of experience, qualifications, and measured outputs.



Bias creeps in when we look at **potential**, where we use entirely subjective measures, such as our perception of the candidate's fit or suitability.

Perpetuating Power

The people who are already in power define what merit means, thereby perpetuating an idea of merit that reflects their own values and biases. Narrow definitions of merit typically disadvantage women and other under-represented groups.

This could include, for example, expecting someone to work the traditional 9-5, when flexible hours could work just as well. In an instance like this, those with caring responsibilities – disproportionately still women in modern-day New Zealand – will be judged to have less merit.



PROBLEM 2: THE UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD

Women and men do not start from an equal playing field with regards to the access to opportunities to build networks and enhance their careers.



Our job descriptions often use wording that is biased toward one gender, and research has shown that this puts women off applying for jobs that are advertised with masculine-coded language.

This isn't because they lack the skills to do the job but because of cues telling them they are not welcome.



Informal networking opportunities often lead to career advancement. Yet women, particularly mothers and other carers, are often

excluded by events being held out of business hours or in male-dominated environments, like the golf course.



As a man gets more successful, he is better liked by men and women, and as a woman gets more successful, she is less liked by men and women. In a

society that views the same behaviour traits that are penalised in women as positive in men, it is a mistake to think our judgments of merit are based on the same criteria for everyone.



In New Zealand unpaid carers are twice as likely to be female than male, again penalising women in a culture where those with 'gaps' in their CV or who

can't be available round the clock are seen as having less merit. With evidence showing that women working part-time are in fact the most productive group of workers, we are missing out on significant talent by allowing this to continue.

Women are just as ambitious as men when they begin their careers, but become so wearied by fighting against multiple structural and experiential barriers to their success that this ambition often wanes.

**PROFESSOR MICHELLE RYAN,
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER**

"Women get less of the mentorship and sponsorship that often results from informal networking. [...] The result is that women miss out."

LEANIN.ORG

FACTSHEET The Myth of Merit

RE-THINKING MERIT

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REDEFINE WHAT MERIT MEANS TO YOU

- Reframe the employment conversation from seeking and developing the ‘best candidates’ to seeking and developing the best teams.
- Open your mind to non-traditional career trajectories and broaden the success profiles you use to consider candidates.

MAKE LEADERS RESPONSIBLE FOR DIVERSITY

- Leaders need to be equipped to bring attention to unconscious bias and explain both the myth of merit and the business case for diversity. Buy-in will be driven by the tone at the top and needs to be supported by effective training and support.
- Set targets for women at all levels of your organisation, share them publicly and develop strategies to meet them. This includes tying executive remuneration to the organisation’s success in achieving its targets.

INTENTIONALLY INTERRUPT BIAS

- Conduct organisational pay audits and use this data to eliminate any gender pay gap within your organisation.
- Commit to building internal awareness of unconscious bias through training and self-awareness testing.
- Processes as simple as having minorities represented on the selection panel can make an organisation more attractive to other minorities.
- Conduct bias-conscious performance reviews.
- Ensure that you have a diverse shortlist for every role. All male shortlist? Try again.
- Use gender neutral words in job descriptions and KPIs and remove irrelevant selection criteria that describe non-merit performance factors.
- Monitor employee take-up of flexible work options and development of networking opportunities to ensure access is genuinely equitable, rather than equitable in policy only.

References

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“To assume career advancement is based purely on individual merit is to be blind to the realities of a playing field that continues to present barriers to women.”

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