



RESEARCH & IDEAS

Gender and Competition: What Companies Need to Know

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Do women shy away from competition and thus hurt their careers? New research by Harvard's Kathleen L. McGinn, Iris Bohnet, and Pinar Fletcher suggests the answer is not black and white, and that employers need to understand the "genderiness" of their work. Key concepts include:

- How women and men perform at work may be strongly linked to the gender of the person they are competing against.
- Gender effects around competition are contextual and that the results depend on the sorts of tasks men and women are asked to complete and the gender of those with whom they are interacting.
- Organizations need to think about the "genderiness" of their tasks and the composition of their groups.

Pressure not to compete against men, rather than an innate preference for cooperation over competition, may keep women from earning what they're worth in the workplace, according to preliminary findings by three Harvard researchers.

In their forthcoming paper, *The Untold Story of Gender and Incentives*, Harvard Professors Kathleen L. McGinn and Iris Bohnet, along with HBS doctoral student Pinar Fletcher, examine how men and women respond when they cooperate or compete in pairs on math and verbal tasks.

What they unearthed in their early research is that how women and men perform at work may be strongly linked to the gender of the person they are competing against.

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"Women are competitive, but not in particular work environments or groups," says McGinn, the Cahners-Rabb Professor and chair of the Doctoral Programs at Harvard Business School.

She and Bohnet, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School who serves as director of its Women and Public Policy Program, have

extensively studied gender gaps and inequality in the workplace. Their research addresses questions about why women are paid less, have trouble being promoted in certain work environments, and hold a tiny percentage of top corporate management positions. According to a 2010 report from research firm Catalyst, among *Fortune* 500 companies, only 2.6 percent of CEOs are women, 13.5 percent of executive officers are women, and 15.2 percent of board members are women.

They teamed with Fletcher, who is pursuing a doctoral degree in organizational behavior, to answer questions on gender, competition, and cooperation that have not been addressed in previous research: Do men and women react differently to diverse sorts of pay schemes? Do gender stereotypes about a task influence competitive and cooperative behavior among men and women? How does the gender composition of groups affect competition and cooperation among individuals?

The experiments

Fletcher and McGinn conducted experiments with 236 men and women in April and May of 2011, using cooperative and competitive scenarios in which participants performed both a verbal and a math test at Harvard Business School's Computer Lab for Experimental Research.

Each participant was given a pseudonym, with women receiving obviously female aliases (like Jennifer) and men obviously male names (like John). Then participants were paired with another participant—male against male, male against female, and female against female. Participants never knew the actual identities of their opponents, but they were given the pseudonym assigned to their opponent.

Competition between the participants was induced through a "winner-takes-all" payment scheme: only the participant with the higher score would receive a payment for each correct answer.

Cooperation was induced with a different payment scheme: the researchers would add up the number of correct answers each pair produced and split the payment equally between the two participants.

Interestingly, the researchers didn't find a significant difference in performance between the cooperative and the competitive payment schemes for either men or women. "This is in contrast to previous studies," says Fletcher. Prior research had found that men exerted extra effort and performed better than women when they were in a competitive situation, whereas women exerted similar amounts of effort whether or not they were competing.

"There's a strongly held assumption that men are competitive and women aren't, and our results show otherwise."

In addition, past studies mostly utilized tasks that would stereotypically advantage men, such as math or maze tasks. The McGinn/Bohnet/Fletcher team built on that research by asking participants to complete tasks that were stereotypically female (verbal) and stereotypically male (math).

Each participant in the group completed an anagram and a math task. For the anagram task, participants raced against the clock to create as many four-letter words as possible from a scramble of letters. For the math task, they were given a set of two-digit numbers and asked to identify as many pairs that equaled 100 as possible in a given time.

Men scored slightly better than women on the math test, and women slightly higher on the verbal exam. But both men and women performed better when paired with somebody from their own gender—with the exception of the men's performance in the verbal task, which was not affected by the gender of their counterpart.

Fletcher says that homophily—our tendency to associate and form relationships with those who are similar to us—might lead individuals to feel more comfortable and perform better on same-gender teams, whether cooperative or competitive.

Then and now

How do the researchers explain the differences between past and present results? Perhaps it came down to money. In previous studies, Fletcher says, participants were offered a higher pay rate per correct answer in the competitive scenario, so it's possible that men respond more to higher pay rates than do women. Societal pressures might also hold women back from responding to higher pay as aggressively as men do, she adds.

Furthermore, Fletcher notes that previous studies compared behavior under an interdependent, competitive scheme with an independent, piece-rate scheme. In independent payment schemes, participants cannot influence each other's pay. In their study, two interdependent payment schemes—competitive and cooperative—were compared. As Fletcher explains, perhaps in previous studies men were responding to the interdependence built into competitive situations and the stereotypically male tasks utilized in these studies, rather than to competitive pressures per se.

McGinn says their results suggest that gender effects around competition are

contextual and that the results depend on the sorts of tasks men and women are asked to complete and the gender of those with whom they are interacting.

"There's a strongly held assumption that men are competitive and women aren't, and our results show otherwise," she says. "Men and women work together differently when they're dependent [on each other] versus independent and when they work on stereotypically male or female tasks."

The team plans to draft an article based on the research, and to continue with additional tests to clarify and expand on the results. "At this point we have more questions than answers," Fletcher says.

One idea is to give test participants the option to choose a man or woman for a partner, instead of assigning one. This will enable the researchers to better understand how people choose their work partners—and how those choices impact the results in a competitive or cooperative environment.

Once their results are solidified in the lab the team will return to the field, find some

prototypical situations within a workplace, and conduct a cross-organizational study, McGinn says.

Still, she says, the preliminary research already tells the team something quite significant: "Organizations need to think about the 'genderness' of their tasks and the composition of their groups." **WK**

About the author

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