



# CREATING A GENDER-NEUTRAL VOCABULARY.

Language is powerful, it has the power to change the way in which we think, believe, live and even dream. It can bring us together, or it can push us apart.

Whilst we spend so much time in organisations thinking about the language we use to appeal to customers, service users or members, we spend so little time focussing on the language that we use with our candidates (or colleagues internally). We use jargon and language which is overly complex and unnecessary, out of habit rather than intent. And sometimes **we unintentionally exclude at the most fundamental level - through gender bias.**

So how can we prevent this - and make sure we attract the right candidates from all genders?

## What the Research shows

A recruitment advertisement using the phrase **“We’re looking for someone to manage a team”** may seem innocuous enough. But US research of over 11 million job descriptions by Textio showed that this led women to have a lower sense that they would belong in the position or company than the same ads using more feminine wording. So the word **“manage”** encourages more men than women to apply for the role.

Equally, terms such as **“coding ninja”** send out a message of a potentially hostile work environment for female employees - and words such as **“competitive”** or **“leader”** are usually associated with male stereotypes, while words such as **“support”** and **“interpersonal”** are associated with female stereotypes. And choosing the idiom **“stakeholder”** serves as a signal to ethnic minorities that their contributions may not be valued.

*Simple words and phrases are contributing to unconscious gender bias and impacting on inclusion in all organisations.*

Building on the Textio findings, authoritative US research from The University of Waterloo and Duke University outlined a series of male and female gender-coded words (words that socially, culturally and historically carry a stereotypical weight towards a particular gender) – and the impact of these were analysed in 76,929 job ads over a six-week period to assess the frequency of gender-coded words. Quite astonishingly, there were 478,175 words carrying gender bias. This is an average of 6 male-coded or female-coded words per job advertisement.

Out of the advertisements reviewed, the top male-gendered words found in UK job ads were revealed to be as follows: **lead** (70,539 mentions), **analyse** (35,339), **competitive** (23,079), **active** (20,041) and **confident** (13,841). For females the results were: **support** (83,095), **responsible** (64,909), **understanding** (29,638), **dependable** (16,979) and **committed** (13,129).

The research also shows that there is an unconscious gender-bias of words by industry. Female bias is prevalent in industries such as social care (87%), secretarial / admin (67%), cleaning (62%) and housekeeping (77%). Whilst male-biased industries are disclosed as science (62%), sales (51% male bias vs. 35% female bias) and marketing (52% male bias vs. 33% female bias).

What’s more, it reveals a male-bias in adverts for senior positions: director (55% male bias vs. 32% female bias), head (50% male bias vs. 36% female bias), partner (52% male bias vs. 34% female bias). And compare this with job titles that include the phrase ‘assistant’ which carry a female-bias language (28% male bias vs. 58% female bias).

## Every. Single. Word. Matters.

The use of certain words to describe certain roles is often innate. Although employers and recruiters are not explicitly targeting male applicants, they are accidentally positioning their advert in a way to appeal to a specific gender.

### Most commonly used male-gendered words in UK job advertisements:

Lead (70,539 mentions)  
Analyse (35,339)  
Competitive (23,079)  
Active (20,041)  
Confident (13,841)

### Most commonly used female-gendered words in UK job advertisements:

Support (83,095)  
Responsible (64,909)  
Understanding (29,638)  
Dependable (16,979)  
Committed (13,129)

### Male-gendered words:

Active, Adventurous, Aggressive, Ambitious, Analytics, Assertive, Challenge, Competitive, Courage, Decisive, Determination, Dominant, Forceful, Hierarchy, Impulsive, Independent, Individually, Intellectual, Leading, Logic, Opinion, Outspoken, Persist, Principles, Superior, Self-confident, Self-sufficient.

### Female-gendered words:

Cheerful, Commitment, Communal, Compassionate, Connected, Considerate, Cooperate, Dependant, Emotional, Empathy, Honest, Interpersonal, Interdependent, Interpersonal, Kind, Kinship, Loyalty, Modesty, Nurture, Pleasantly, Polite, Quietly, Response, Sensitive, Supportive, Sympathy, Trusting, Understanding, Warming.

## Tackling the problem

Unconscious gender bias in any recruitment advertisement serves to limit the number of applications that vacancy will receive - proving hugely counter-productive in a difficult recruitment landscape. So be aware of individual words; and always practice meaningful phrasing that appeals to all your candidates ....

### Male-biased Phrasing

We’re looking for strong...  
We’re looking for exceptional...  
Who thrive in a competitive atmosphere...  
Who are motivated by high goals...  
Candidates who are assertive...  
Candidates who are go-getters...

### Female-biased Phrasing

We are a community of concerned...  
We are a team focused on...  
Have a polite and pleasant style...  
Are professional and courteous...  
Nurture and connect with customers...  
Provide great customer service...

**Creating inclusive copy is essential if you’re going to attract all the talent you need into the top of the attraction funnel. Look out for next week’s blog on best-practice recruitment copywriting for more insight into writing the advertisements that will both target and include the candidate communities you need to engage with.**