Research sheds new light on gender disparities in the workplace

July 17, 2024



A new study by Jasmijn Bol, Francis Martin Chair in Business and PwC Professor of Accounting at Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business, investigates the differential impacts of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) for male versus female employees, uncovering significant gender disparities and highlighting the unintended consequences of using management control systems to promote and reward these behaviors.

OCB refers to the voluntary behaviors employees engage in that go above and beyond their job descriptions, such as helping colleagues, taking initiative and contributing to a positive work environment. While not mandatory, these actions are critical for the smooth functioning and success of organizations.

For the study, Bol and her co-authors investigated how men and women participate in and are rewarded for citizenship behavior at a financial services firm. They found that women are less likely to engage in “agentic” OCB, which includes assertive and strategic behaviors often associated with male stereotypes, and more likely to participate in “communal” OCB, which involves nurturing and collaborative behaviors typically associated with female stereotypes.

“Women tend to take on tasks that are seen as ‘office housework,’ such as organizing events and supporting others,” says Bol. “These tasks, while essential, are often less noticed than the more high-profile agentic OCB tasks like serving on a strategic committee.”

While both men and women are rewarded for doing agentic OCB, only men are rewarded for doing communal OCB.

“Women are expected to take on these communal tasks, so when they do, it is ‘just normal,’” explains Bol. “Men, on the other hand, are not expected to take on these tasks, so when they do people are surprised and consequently reward them for going the extra mile. Ultimately, this disparity can hinder women’s career advancement and contribute to lower promotion rates and compensation levels.”

The study’s findings are made even more compelling by its setting. The financial services firm that the authors studied explicitly tracks and rewards OCB, providing them with a clear lens to examine disparities. The authors found that the firm’s management control system, which was designed to promote “above and beyond” contributions by employees, unintentionally reinforced gender stereotypes. Women were 37% less likely to participate in agentic OCB and 38% more likely to engage in communal OCB compared to men.

“The cycle of gender inequality in the workplace is further perpetuated by the fact that, because women spend more time doing communal OCB, they don’t have the time to focus on agentic OCB,” Bol says. “This is problematic because besides being the only OCB that woman are rewarded for, agentic OCB also tends to provide more learning opportunities and opportunities to showcase skills necessary for promotion to the next level.

“Management systems that aim to promote OCB must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing existing gender biases,” Bol adds. “Organizations need to be aware of these unintended consequences and strive for more equitable evaluation

processes.”

Despite efforts on the part of the firm to create a balanced evaluation committee with equal representation of men and women, gender biases persisted, suggesting that simply having gender-diverse evaluation committees is not enough to eliminate biases. Bol says employers must implement comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of these disparities.

For example, instead of relying on employees to volunteer for certain communal OCB tasks, Bol says the company could rotate the tasks randomly among employees. As another example, instead of asking an employee to volunteer to take notes at a meeting, the company could ask committee members to take turns taking notes.

“Organizations need to recognize the value of all types of contributions and ensure that their reward systems are fair and unbiased,” she says. “By doing so, they can foster an inclusive environment where all employees have the opportunity to succeed.”

Bol's paper, “Promoting Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB): Unintended Gender Disparities in the Participation and Evaluation of Different Types of OCB,” co-authored with Hila Fogel-Yaari, Isabella Grabner and Karen Sedatole, is currently under review.