



Diversity Recruiting: A Guide to Best Practice Language Usage

UK Edition

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Introduction

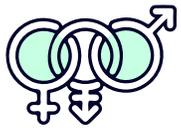
Words matter. They matter when communicating with others, regardless of the situation or method of message delivery.

Needless to say, words also matter in the workplace, including when recruiting and hiring. Words contribute to a first impression during the initial stage of interaction with potential and future employees. So yes, they matter a lot.

Yet, as organisations focus on inclusion and diversity — and more recently, equity, at a few organisations — language sometimes gets overlooked or takes a backseat to other priorities. In an effort to call attention to the importance of word choice, Appcast has created this Guide. Its aim is to provide context for recruitment communication, while helping to further inclusion and facilitate diversity recruiting.

The Guide has been divided into sections, in order to highlight recruiting language as it relates to gender, sexual orientation, age, race and ethnicity, religion, and ability. This is by no means a comprehensive document — for example, [some experts](#) suggest there are more than 25,000 terms that could convey an unconscious bias toward men or women.

Because so many terms would be cumbersome and not all that useful, Appcast instead focuses on how to avoid incorrect and counterproductive common words and phrases when recruiting, with attention to logical use of language.



Gender

Let's start with gender. A University of Waterloo and Duke University study, as referenced by HR software provider [Paycor](#), finds that men and women respond differently to gender-coded words in job ads.

Interestingly, the study finds that use of gender-coded words are problematic only when attempting to attract women candidates. Men are just as likely to apply for jobs when ads include words associated with female bias as when ads include words associated with male bias. But women are less likely to apply for jobs that use words associated with male bias.

Among words associated with male bias are:

- ▶ Aggressive
- ▶ Ambitious
- ▶ Assertive
- ▶ Boast
- ▶ Challenge
- ▶ Compete
- ▶ Confident
- ▶ Courage
- ▶ Decisive
- ▶ Determine
- ▶ Dominate
- ▶ Independent
- ▶ Outspoken
- ▶ Self-confident
- ▶ Self-sufficient
- ▶ Self-reliant

By contrast, words associated with female bias include:

- ▶ Cheerful
- ▶ Committed
- ▶ Compassionate
- ▶ Cooperative
- ▶ Interdependent
- ▶ Dependable
- ▶ Honest
- ▶ Kind
- ▶ Loyal
- ▶ Sensitive
- ▶ Supportive
- ▶ Trustworthy

This is only a partial list. Appcast referenced the entire list of gendered words from the academic study and, utilising our extensive jobs database, examined the frequency of usage in job ads in order to drill down a bit further.

Appcast Research finds that use of male-coded words is more common in job ads for certain job functions. Here are select highlights by job functions.

→ Only 35% of all Science job ads include any female-coded words, while 55% of all Science job ads include male-coded words.

→ Only 23% of all IT job ads include any female-coded words, while 66% of all IT job ads include male-coded words.

→ Only 28% of all Construction job ads include any female-coded words, while 66% of job ads include male-coded words.

Keep in mind that a job ad for any job function may contain female- and/or male-coded language.

Take a look at the different versions of two job ads that were part of the University of Waterloo and Duke University study. Female- and male-coded words have been highlighted.

Note that the analysis doesn't only consider job qualifications; it also looks at how the hiring organisation (identified here as "company"), is described.

Feminine	Masculine
Engineer	
<p>Company description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We are a community of engineers who have effective relationships with many satisfied clients. ▶ We are committed to understanding the engineering sector intimately. <p>Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Proficient oral and written communication skills. ▶ Collaborates well, in a team environment. ▶ Sensitive to clients' needs, can develop warm client relationships. ▶ Bachelor of Engineering degree or higher from a recognized university. ▶ Registered as a Professional Engineer. <p>Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide general support to project teams in a manner complimentary to the company. ▶ Help clients with construction activities. ▶ Create quality engineering designs. 	<p>Company description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We are a dominant engineering firm that boasts many leading clients. ▶ We are determined to stand apart from the competition. <p>Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strong communication and influencing skills. ▶ Ability to perform individually in a competetive. ▶ Superior ability to satisfy customers and manage company's association with them. ▶ Bachelor of Engineering degree or higher from recognized univerzity. ▶ Registered as a Professional Engineer. <p>Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Direct project groups to manage projects progress and ensure accurate task control. ▶ Determine compliance with client's objectives. ▶ Create quality engineering designs.
Plumber	
<p>Company description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We are a committed provider of dependable plumbing solutions. ▶ We have many loyal clients, and deliver honest personal service. <p>Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dependable, with demonstrated commitment to client service. ▶ Can interpret blueprints and schematics. ▶ Licensed/certified plumber from recognized community college or related program. ▶ Previous experience is an asset. <p>Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Service our clients' plumbing systems. ▶ Respond to plumbing problems and find innovative repair solutions. ▶ Collaborate on new building projects, providing plumbing advice. 	<p>Company description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We are a determined company that delivers superior plumbing. ▶ We are proud of our success, and boast an impressive record. <p>Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Self-reliant, with demonstrated ability to perform tasks independently. ▶ Ability to analyze blueprints and schematics. ▶ Licensed/certified plumber from recognized community college or related program. ▶ Previous experience is an asset. <p>Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Maintain customers' plumbing systems. ▶ Analyze problems logically and troubleshoot to determine needed repairs. ▶ Deliver plumbing expertise on new building projects.

Source: Paycor, University of Waterloo and Duke University study

How do you avoid bias? Despite the fact that the academic research study finds men are not influenced by female terms, the best solution is to aim for gender-neutral words and phrases.

Appcast Research finds that gender-neutral terms pay off, big time.

Job ads with gender-neutral language result in 67.76% more applications at a cost that is 68.5% less per application, in comparison to job ads that use a combination of female- and male-coded terms.

Appcast Research also finds that more than half of the job ads for these job functions contained only gender-neutral language, meaning job ads did not include any female- or male-coded words.

Job Function	Percentage of Jobs with Gender-Neutral Language
Skilled Trades	69%
Finance	65%
Banking	57%
Engineering	52%

By contrast, more than half of the job ads for these job functions included male-coded words.

Job Function	Percentage of Jobs with Male-Coded Language
Security	75%
Construction	66%
IT	66%
Travel	63%
Sales	62%
Healthcare	60%
Property	60%
Consulting	57%
Legal	57%
Insurance	55%
Science	55%
Education	51%
Human Resources	51%

Although they weren't part of the academic research study and weren't included as part of Appcast Research, it's important to note that gender-neutral words include pronouns. Most employers know not to use "he" or "she," but organisations sometimes get bogged down when attempting to use gender-neutral language. "He or she" and "s/he" are sometimes used. Other organisations have moved to the now acceptable "they" as a singular pronoun. This gender-neutral pronoun has gained wider usage, largely because of the LGBTQ+ community.

"You" is also neutral: "In this role, you will..."

Or you can avoid the use of pronouns altogether: "The candidate will...", "In this role, the employee will..."



Sexual Orientation

Gender-neutral pronouns will also help you attract more LGBTQ+ candidates. Using "he or she"; "s/he"; or "him/her" is not inclusive, as candidates may not identify as male/female. "They" or "their" is a more inclusive word choice.

Similarly, do not refer to candidates as "men or women," says job description software provider [Ongig](#); "people" is a more inclusive term.

Other words that suggest LGBTQ+ bias include:

- ▶ Maternity
- ▶ Mother (Mum)
- ▶ Paternity
- ▶ Father (Dad)

Here again, candidates may not identify as female/male. More inclusive word choices are "parental leave" or "parental time off" and "parent."

For the most part, "husband" and "wife" have been replaced with "spouse," "partner" or "significant other." But bias still exists.

A recent search of the Appcast database returned more than 1,700 job ads with the word "husband," frequently used in connection with "husband and wife" teams. Sometimes the teams mentioned in job ads are business owners, but the phrase is used with regard to candidates as well. Trucking is among the industries looking to hire "husband and wife" teams.



Age

Term: Recent college graduates

Alternative: Bachelor's degree required**

Term: Minimum GPA requirement

Alternative: This is in the same category as "recent college graduates"; an older candidate may not recall their GPA — and it's no longer relevant.**

*** Many organizations are now choosing to forego post-secondary education requirements and focus on competencies to both combat labor shortages and to take a more inclusive approach to recruiting and sourcing.*

Term: Bold

Alternative: Innovative

Term: Fresh

Alternative: Original

Term: Digital native

Alternative: Specify the computer skills required.

Term: Tech savvy

Alternative: Specify the computer skills required.

Term: Cultural fit

Alternative: Provide details about the culture and allow a candidate to opt in or out.

Term: Energetic

Alternative: Motivated

Term: Entry-level

Alternative: Specify job responsibilities

Term: Five to seven years of experience

Alternative: At least five years of experience

Term: Ninja

Alternative: Employee or job title, such as salesperson; many consider “ninja” to be cultural appropriation, which is reason enough to stop using it and beyond that, job seekers never enter that term as a search query when they are looking for a job.

Term: Rock star

Alternative: Employee or job title, such as salesperson; do not suggest you are recruiting for a guitarist or drummer...unless you are.

Term: 21st Century skills

Alternative: Specify the skills required.

Term: Young

Alternative: Don't use it - even when referring to the organization. “Young company” suggests “young people.” Refer to the company as “a startup” or “a [fill-in-the-blank] company, founded in [fill-in-the-year].”

Term: Overqualified

Alternative: Specify the responsibilities and allow the candidate to opt in or out.

Although “overqualified” tends to be associated with the interview phase of recruiting, the term does appear in job ads. A recent job ad indicates, “MA degree is likely overqualified.” Another job ad, this one posted by a staffing firm, reads, “We have had problems with overqualified candidates coming out of management level positions and the client is not interested.”

"Overqualified" and these other words and phrases can be code for "older workers not wanted," and as such are potentially discriminatory. In addition, use of these terms may keep the candidates you seek from applying, while undermining your diversity efforts.



Race and Ethnicity

As with age, word choices that suggest bias toward race and ethnicity may go unnoticed by employers but can be perceived as such by candidates.

Other terms, related to the tech industry, have been deemed inappropriate and companies have made changes. For example, [Twitter Engineering](#) posted the following message on Twitter:

"We're starting with a set of words we want to move away from using in favor of more inclusive language, such as:

Avoid non-inclusive language	Prefer inclusive versions
Whitelist	→ Allowlist
Blacklist	→ Denylist
Master/slave	→ Leader/follower, primary/replica, primary/standby
Grandfathered	→ Legacy status
Gendered pronouns (e.g. guys)	→ Folks, people, you all, y'all
Gendered pronouns (e.g. he/him/his)	→ They, them, their
Man hours	→ Person hours, engineer hours
Sanity check	→ Quick check, confidence check, coherence check
Dummy value	→ Placeholder value, sample value

Additional takeaway: There are common, everyday words and phrases that are rooted in racism and sexism that people may not recognize as such. Job ads evolve as society and language evolve. It's worth the effort to remain cognizant of this and to opt for more inclusive word choices.



Religion

Although religion may not come to mind when recruiting, hiring organisations may inadvertently exclude people of different faiths when they use one word in job ads. That word is Christmas.

A recent Appcast search returned more than 25,000 job ads with the word "Christmas."

Sometimes "Christmas" appears in job titles, as in "Cashier Christmas Help" and "Christmas Support Team." In other instances, it appears in job descriptions that list paid company holidays.

There are arguably better ways to communicate with candidates, particularly in the early stages of recruiting. For example, changing "Cashier Christmas Help" to "Cashier Holiday Help" creates a job title that is more inclusive.

Similarly, instead of referencing "Christmas" as a paid holiday in the job description, consider changing the wording to something like, "We offer 10 paid holidays, plus generous paid time off." This change may seem insignificant, especially since Christmas is a national holiday. But this simple edit could have a positive impact on your diversity efforts.

The exception is a religious organisation that seeks candidates of the same faith.

Separately, job ads sometimes mention dress codes or indicate that uniforms are required. This too may deter people of certain faiths from applying.



Ability

According to [Statista](#), 22% of the UK population live with a disability.

As a starting point, the correct terminology is "people with disabilities," not "disabled people." To make sure you get this right, it helps to remember that people have abilities, even though they may have a disability.

It also helps to put "people" first when describing these individuals. For example:

- ▶ Person with a disability
- ▶ Person with an intellectual disability
- ▶ Person with a mental health disability
- ▶ Person who uses a wheelchair

If referring to a person's diagnosis, say the individual "has," rather than "is afflicted with" or "suffers from." Similarly, do not define the individual by the diagnosis, for example, "an autistic person." They have autism.

When it comes to language, as it relates to recruiting people with disabilities, perhaps the most common mistake hiring organisations make has to do with one phrase: "ability to lift up to 25 lbs." There are variations of this phrase: "ability to lift/carry" and "ability to push/pull." Weight also varies: anywhere from 25 to "over 50 lbs."

But here's the thing: It's highly unlikely this is a requirement for many of the positions that include the phrase in job ads. Instead, it appears as if this information was "lifted" from a standard template.

As an example, a data analyst may be said to do "heavy lifting," but generally the term is a metaphor; physical exertion is not required. However, a recent Appcast review found ads for data analysts and similar jobs where lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling heavy objects are mentioned and do not seem to coincide with the position duties outlined — which suggests employers may be losing qualified candidates who have disabilities.

In addition to correcting errors in job ads, as a general rule, hiring organisations should indicate if accommodations can be made for people with disabilities, and, when applicable, specify what those accommodations are.

Tools and Processes

There are a number of tools in the recruitment marketplace that can help hiring organisations review job ads for bias and craft ads that will further diversity recruiting.

Among them is the Text Analyser from [Ongig](#), which helps hiring organisations analyze job descriptions for gender bias and readability. [Textio](#) is a provider of augmented writing software, which utilises machine learning to help eliminate bias from job postings.

[Totaljobs](#), a UK job site, features the Gender Bias Decoder, a free tool that is based on the University of Waterloo and Duke University study. Although it doesn't offer alternative word choices, it does highlight male-coded and female-coded words.

These and other tools may prove useful. However, they should supplement the job ad creation process, not replace it.

Experts recommend that hiring organizations take the following steps when writing a job ad:

- ▶ Review all job requirements with attention to any potential bias.
- ▶ Review the job description language for bias.
- ▶ Create a committee or team of diverse employee "gatekeepers," who review the language in all job ads prior to posting.

Similar steps can be followed when crafting other recruitment marketing material.

Yes, these steps add time to the overall recruiting process. But thoughtful language has a positive impact on diversity initiatives.

Words matter.

Diversity Recruiting Language: Quick Checklist

Although this quick checklist is no substitute for the diversity language information contained in the complete Guide, it may prove helpful to print this page and keep it handy.

Gender

- Aim for gender-neutral words and phrases in job ads.
- Opt for gender-neutral pronouns, such as "they" or "you," as opposed to "he or she" or "s/he."
- Use gender-neutral nouns, like "candidate" or "employee."

Sexual Orientation

- Aim for gender-neutral words and phrases in job ads.
- Use gender-neutral pronouns or language that is not gender-specific, like "candidate" or "employee."
- Avoid references to "mother" and "maternity"; "father" and "paternity"; and "husband and wife"; instead, use "parent"; "parental"; and "spouse" or "partner."

Age

- State job requirements in precise terms, such as "bachelor's degree required," while avoiding phrases that target younger candidates, such as "recent college graduates."
- Avoid words and phrases that suggest younger candidates, such as "digital native" and "21st Century skills"; instead, specify the skills required.
- Find another way to say "young," even when referring to your company, as it may suggest "young employees" to older workers; instead, provide specifics about your company, such as date founded.

Race and Ethnicity

- Determine whether job requirements exclude candidates; for example, "strong English-language skills" may be construed as "Hispanics need not apply."
- Learn which words and phrases have negative connotations and why; for example, "cakewalk" and "brown bag" are terms associated with slavery.
- Replace words and phrases that have negative connotations with different language; for example, instead of "tribal knowledge" use "institutional knowledge."

Religion

- Check your job ads and other recruitment marketing material for any suggestion of religious preference.
- Consider replacing the word "Christmas" with "Holiday" in job titles, while opting for a general statement about holidays, as opposed to using the word "Christmas," in job descriptions.
- Review any statements about uniforms or dress codes for potential religious bias.

Ability

- Make sure you refer to candidates and employees as "people with disabilities," not "disabled people."
- Review job descriptions for any inaccuracies that would exclude people with disabilities. For example, does a data analyst really need to "be able to lift up to 25 lbs.?"
- Indicate if accommodations will be made for people with disabilities; in job ads, specify what those accommodations are.



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