

Gender

If Women Were More Like Men

by Jillian Weiss

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“No No No!!!” These were the words my new boss had scrawled in red ink across my draft memo. After more than a decade as a big-firm lawyer in the area of complex insurance coverage contracts, I was rather shocked to see such a savage display of temper, and even more shocked to think that my writing, always rated rather highly by other employers, merited such treatment. Little had changed over the past decade — not my hard-driving work ethic nor my clear writing style. The explanation seemed obvious to me, though at first I didn’t want to believe it: I was now a woman.

I had transitioned from male to female in 1998, and my new employer neither knew nor suspected that I was transgender. Now I was receiving the condescending treatment that some of my female colleagues had complained about all along. After several such incidents, I quietly left the practice of law, never to return. As a male attorney, my competence had never been questioned so harshly by my employers, so I assumed that reports of gender discrimination were bogus complaints brought by females who didn’t measure up. As a male, I had been privileged, though I didn’t know it at the time, to avoid much of the harsh treatment reserved for females in a male bastion.

Since then, as a professor and consultant who specializes in transgender workplace diversity issues, I've met many people with stories like mine. (See the December HBR case, "When Steve Becomes Stephanie.") That's why I was particularly interested by a recent article in Time Magazine, discussing a new study of transgender experiences in the workplace. The study, by Kristen Schilt, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, and Matthew Wiswall, an economist at NYU, provides strong evidence that the wage gap between men and women really is the result of discrimination.

Most gender studies compare men and women of similar education level and work experience and they inevitably find that women are paid less than men even when their education and experience are equivalent. But that doesn't by itself prove discrimination. Alternative explanations for the salary gap abound: women lack competitive drive, they avoid conflict, and they consciously stay away from time-consuming workplace challenges in favor of family. Schilt and Wiswall have taken a very different approach, which I think nails discrimination as the problem.

Rather than trying to compare groups of men and women, Schilt and Wiswall looked at people like me. They measured our earnings and employment experiences before and after our gender transitions, and found significant changes. Of course, you could argue that the study merely proves that employers have a problem with transgendered workers. But the results also show that those of us who had transitioned from male to female suffered a loss in earnings of nearly one-third, whereas those who moved from female to male increased slightly (1.5%).

Have transgender women lost our competitive drive, ability to handle conflict, and willingness to put in the hours as a result of changing genders? Or do employers have more of a problem with women than men? I have my opinion; tell me yours.

Dr. Jillian T. Weiss, Associate Professor of Law and Society at Ramapo College, is author of *Transgender Workplace Diversity: Policy Tools, Training Issues and Communication Strategies for HR and Legal Professionals*, as well as a popular blog on the subject. Her work has been featured by the NY Times, Associated Press, and SHRM, among others. She has worked with many Fortune 500 companies to create policies and train employees regarding transgender issues in the workplace.

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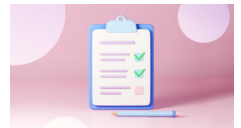


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