

Gender Considerations for Your Career Plans

By

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As new accounting graduates step onto their initial career path, they have to consider how well they compare to the competition. All students have closely watched their peers in college. They have also monitored their own academic preparation, their grades, their interview skills, and even any insecurity that may be nipping at their heels. And, while it may be true that each person has a given set of skills, talents, and mental capacity, the development of these abilities greatly depends on what can be derived from formal education and life's experiences. The goal of career-seeking people is to make wise decisions in preparations so that in the final evaluation, potential employers will perceive them as more attractive than other applicants.

On the other side of the equation, accounting firms face one of the most critical undertakings of any organization or company: that is its ability to renew itself and to provide an infusion of talent that will allow company activities to proceed unimpeded. The Human Resource Department plays the primary role in maintaining the company's critical mass of talent and skills, plus preparing for the transition of those attributes into the management stream. Thus, a critical transaction takes place between the two parties which is immensely important to all players. Individuals who aspire to enter the organization are simultaneously engaged in a job-search that they hope will succeed in achieving their own personal work and career aspirations. The conjunction of organizational needs and candidate desires can result in a "dual success," when the former, the firm, can identify those qualities that have been related to success in business and the latter, the candidate, has a clear understanding of what qualities may be highly regarded by the firm.

In their quest to understand what qualities seem to be related to success in administrative and managerial endeavors, organizations have a plethora of research available. However, the purpose of this article is not to provide a company with another list of skills, but rather to help the newly minted accounting graduate understand the other side of the equation: what are the company needs and how to better fit those needs. The desirable traits and abilities of a candidate form an

inventory of skill and talents that recruiters seek in candidates.

Further, we'll look for any differences in those desired inventories that might exist between male and female candidates. When a difference in such inventories exists between the sexes, there are potential disadvantages for those who have deficits in their inventories.

The next logical step for any candidate is to address those "soft spots" prior to entering the recruitment process. Knowledge and preparation are preferable to surprise and disappointment, particularly for aspiring accounting candidates who have survived the arduous educational matriculation. After years of intense training, it behooves any candidate to not stumble at this last step. Students should look over their hands and draw revised cards to improve their bets.

Fortunately, early researchers have looked closely at the standard inventory, from both sides of the equation. Edwin Ghiselli (1971) set out to discover "those traits and abilities which are important in determining the extent to which an individual will be successful in performing the many and varied functions of the manager." (p.3) His landmark study investigating administrative and managerial talent resulted in the identification of three categories of characteristics that impact managerial talent:

- Abilities,
- Personality traits, and
- Motivational traits.

Under each general category, he found a set of traits that were key to defining the level of achievement for the category. The defining traits are given in Table 1. Notice that certain characteristics are just given at birth and difficult to change. On the other hand, others can at least be influenced or augmented with diligent effort. This is the critical step to improve a candidate's skill inventory. This is the focus of the article: how individuals may cover their potential soft spots.

Table 1
Management Traits

Categories	Defining Traits
Ability	supervisory ability, intelligence, and initiative
Personality	self-assurance, decisiveness, masculinity-femininity, maturity, and working class affinity
Motivation	occupational achievement, self-actualization,

	power over others, high financial reward, and job security
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The authors studied these characteristics using a group of accounting majors at an accredited university (AACSB) in the mid-Atlantic area of the United States. Included in the representative sample were 33 male (average age: 24.8 years) and 56 female (average age: 24.6 years) senior level undergraduate and graduate students. The study’s goal was to look for differences between male and female accounting students on the thirteen characteristics identified by Ghiselli. If differences exist, what impact, if any, might they have on either group when seeking employment, or more critically, on being labeled (or not) a future “star?”

To help understand the traits, Table 2 provides expanded definitions of each trait.

Table 2
Trait Definitions

Abilities	Operational Definition
Supervisory Ability	The capacity to direct the work of others, and to organize and integrate their activities so that the goal of the work group can be attained.
Intelligence	Intelligence is considered to involve such capabilities as judgment and reasoning and the capacity to deal with ideas, abstractions, and concepts.
Initiative	The possessor of initiative is an inaugurator or originator, one who opens up new fields and who conceives of novel ways of doing things.
Personality Traits	
Self-Assurance	The extent to which an individual perceives him/herself to be effective in dealing with the problems that confront him/her.
Decisiveness	Intended to measure whether someone is a ready, quick, and self-confident decision-maker or is careful and cautious and therefore is

	slower in making decisions.
Masculinity- Femininity	Is the individual robust and forcible, intellectual and logical (masculinity), or gentle and understanding, intuitive and feeling (femininity).
Maturity	Measures the extent to which an individual's self-image is more like that of older persons, or more like that of younger individuals.
Working Class Affinity	The extent to which the individual is likely to be accepted or rejected by those of the working class as a suitable person with which to be associated.
Motivational Traits	
Occupational Achievement	The desire of the individual to achieve the upper reaches of the occupational ladder.
Self-Actualization	The need to utilize talents to the fullest extent; using talents in something that is believed to be worthwhile.
Power Over Others	The wish to seek positions and circumstances wherein one can direct and control the activities of others.
High Financial Reward	The extent to which financial rewards are important both in themselves and as a symbol of success.
Job Security	The extent to which one is concerned about his/her job security and expends a large portion of their efforts and activities directed to establishing and firming their positions in their organizations.

When looking at the definitions in Table 2, remember that these are general characteristics defined in the context of management talent and the capacity to enter and grow in the managerial role. For example, individuals should not be too concerned about IQ scores as a measure of intelligence, but should be more concerned with the mental tasks of management.

Study Results and Suggestions

When comparing male and female accounting students along the Abilities dimension, we found that males in each case had higher numerical averages in each of the three characteristics. In fact, males had a statistically significant higher score on intelligence. Thus, according to the definitions given by Ghiselli on these characteristics, one might generalize that males responded

in such a way as to demonstrate a greater capacity to direct others, organize and integrate the work of a group, exercise judgment, and conceive and inaugurate new ways of doing things. Thus, in general, male candidates should understand their potential positive characteristics in this area and give examples to demonstrate experiences in that vein. On the other hand, female candidates should understand that this is an area where extra efforts need to be applied. For example, females might be well advised to look for opportunities where they could hone or develop these skills. Then, they should be prepared to elaborate on those experiences to a potential employer. In the educational setting, females should look for leadership roles in student organizations, or move beyond the school for similar experiences within the community at large. For example, a person who did volunteer work at a local hospital might seek a leadership role in that work, and thus help with the organization and running of the program.

When results of personality traits were examined, we found virtually no difference between the sexes on self assurance and working class affinity. Males recorded a slightly higher score on decisiveness and masculinity while females scored higher on maturity and femininity. These differences were not statistically significant, and the masculinity/femininity traits are a given. It behooves all graduates to seek experiences that help demonstrate the sophistication to differentiate them from the student role, which is often viewed an extension of adolescence. The working class affinity must be carefully presented; remember, even persons who identify with the blue collar workers are entering a white collar supervisory world. They should be prepared to look at that world as a manager with a company perspective.

The Big Difference

The final group of characteristics showed the greatest differences between males and females. Men demonstrated significantly higher scores on occupational achievement and self-actualization. Here is a key soft spot for women to look at their career plans and develop an advancement path that can demonstrate a drive for achievement. They should be prepared to outline the steps needed to get to their goals. They should include a desire to achieve a reasonable progression along that path. This is not advice to be assertive to the level of “pushy,” but rather about planning a career path in adequate detail to show the expectation to succeed.

There was virtually no difference on either power over others or high financial rewards. However, females reported a significantly higher concern for job security. A search for security is a noble goal, but individuals should not start that quest too soon in their careers. Job

candidates should be prepared to take some risks, try new locations, new experiences. Further, they should not ask about retirement plans at the first interview. This is a stage in a person's career where security is not a key goal. A career can be restarted with little damage and probably some bragging experience for at least the first 5 to 10 years of a person's professional life. As a professional, you will always be able to land on their feet. At the beginning of a career, you may experience a few false starts, but remember your drive down the educational road will not be completed without perseverance and dedication.

Given the differences that may be associated with gender, new candidates should spend some time looking over the traits in Table 2. Then candidates might consider their experiences and personal characteristics that follow the trend, or perhaps, do not follow the general model. They should be prepared to address each area. If you feel you may not be up to speed for a particular trait, you should think about changes that you can make in your behavior to strengthen those soft spots. Job candidates should be honest with themselves, but be ready to move out of their comfort zone and take the risks needed to demonstrate their preparation. For example, those who do not make decisive, rapid decisions should think about the decision models and techniques presented in school, and practice quickly executing one of those models. Thought should be given to each step and how to progress along those steps in a rapid fashion. For decisions, people often delay and fret about making the wrong choice. The result is indecisiveness. So to avoid that, individuals should be prepared to live with a few mistakes, make well structured decisions, and move on. As a recent military chief of staff would say, admit it and get over it- move on. Do not let your ego be linked to your decision.

Implications:

If we assume for a moment that accounting students who successfully complete their course of study should be reasonably homogeneous in their abilities to successfully pursue a career in business based on performance/knowledge criteria, then can we also assume that opportunities afforded both sexes should be equal? Will such job applicants be perceived by potential employers as a non-differentiated commodity? Probably not. Males seem to demonstrate, albeit in most instances with a small plurality, certain abilities and traits that are perceived to be associated with managerial success. Whether such abilities continue to evolve and grow is not certain. Entrance into an organization can often lead to the development of competencies that

might initially be perceived as not present. Thus, female accounting majors might be at a disadvantage in certain recruitment situations where the employer's emphasis may rest on one of the abilities investigated in this study. Female students need to be cognizant of those areas where they might be perceived deficient. Since much research has shown that employment decisions are made very early in the interview process, female accounting students need to be prepared to answer questions relating to those abilities in very circumspect ways. The goal is not to be deceitful but to realize that while there may be some differences between candidates upon entering an organization, such differences may have little consequence as the individual becomes more socialized within that company's culture and develops latent ability as experience on the job is gained.

Ghiselli, E. E. (1971). *Explorations in Managerial Talent*. Pacific Palisades, CA. Goodyear Publishing Company, Inc.