

Research shows 'merit' is highly subjective and changes with our values

August 22 2018, by Sue Williamson And Linda Colley



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Who is meritorious, what constitutes merit, and how merit and gender targets can operate together are widely misunderstood questions, as [our new research](#) shows.

We spoke with almost 300 public sector middle managers. The vast

majority said they wanted "the best person for the job". They had less idea, however, of just who that "best person" might be.

Merit is assumed to be an objective standard, based on set criteria, which people meet or fail to meet. There are countless examples, however, of public positions that might not have been filled on merit. [Questions](#) are being raised about several recent high-level appointments in the Australian Public Service.

While generally considered sacrosanct and enshrined in policy, in practice "merit" has been highly subjective and has waxed and waned according to social values. Until the 1960s, seemingly objective recruitment processes were [highly discriminatory](#) on the basis of class, ability and race. There were requirements for minimum health standards, certificates of good character and passes in subjects offered only in private schools.

These processes were also highly [gender](#)-discriminatory. Merit was interpreted in ways that benefited men and worked against [women](#). Examples included limits on the number of single women that could be employed, and a [bar preventing married women from competing for jobs](#).

In the 1980s, there was a brief spotlight on merit and gender. New equal employment opportunity laws [established clear rules](#) for assessing merit and monitoring gender in employment outcomes.

However, waves of public management reform led to more departmental autonomy and a reduced central focus on merit and gender.

Two areas of confusion

Fast forward to today, and this lack of attention to how merit and gender

equity can coexist has led to confusion and a simplistic understanding of merit in two main areas.

The first is that managers perceive that they are hampered by process. Public sector managers largely follow a set recruitment procedure. They advertise, develop selection criteria, read resumes, shortlist, interview, check references and then appoint a suitable candidate.

The problem with this is that using the same narrow method and criteria may lead to a [fallacy of composition](#), recruiting more of the same without regard to the context and current gaps in a team.

Biases can influence selection panel members' decisions. Researchers [have found](#) that job advertisements and selection criteria may not be gender-neutral.

Unconscious biases can also come into play when assessing resumes and interviewing candidates. Research shows that selection panels [interrupt women more than men](#) and ask them more follow-up questions, subtly questioning their competence.

The second area of confusion relates to recruitment and gender targets. Some public sector organisations use targets to counter women's under-representation in senior ranks. In Australia and internationally, [targets have contributed](#) to an increase in women in leadership positions.

Managers we spoke with, however, were concerned that women being appointed to meet a [target](#) were "tokens", or were chosen over better-qualified men.

How do you set targets and select on merit?

Merit and targets can, however, co-exist. Some managers recognised that

recruiting to targets can [improve organisational outcomes](#). Others argued that recruiting a diverse range of employees reflects the community they serve.

Some managers were innovative to advance gender equity while recruiting on merit. We heard stories of senior managers directing selection panels, which had shortlisted only men, to take another look at the women applicants or to broaden their search and encourage meritorious women to apply.

Managers recruiting for an ICT position reviewed the job requirements, realised the skills required were not technical but communication-based, and re-advertised based on an amended job description. This attracted more female candidates and a woman was duly appointed on merit.

Additionally, for jobs requiring technical competence, managers considered that technical skills could be learned on the job over time. They viewed capability as more important.

Systemic approaches work best

While training for selection panels is important, systemic approaches can more effectively ensure the merit principle is upheld. Organisations may benefit from approaches that include:

recruiting for capability rather than past performance providing training that recognises the myths around merit encouraging conversations to counter the pervasive misunderstanding of the merit principle.

Some public sector jurisdictions are [providing advice](#) on how to undertake recruitment and selection to minimise biases and promote merit-based processes. But there is still a long way to go for this to become common knowledge.

The [public sector](#) has traditionally been considered to be a [model employer](#). Implementing leading-edge practices that combine merit, gender targets and diversity can ensure it maintains this status.

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