

Overconfidence dictates who gets 'top jobs,' and research shows men benefit more than women

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There has been a steady stream of popular literature in recent years telling women to "[lean in](#)," be more confident, and not worry about "[imposter syndrome](#)."

Men, on the other hand, are often seen to be [overconfident compared to women](#). Our [recent research](#) shows they are 19% more likely to self-assess their abilities higher than they actually are—and this difference can actually affect career outcomes for men and women.

We already know that women are [less likely to make partner at law firms](#) and [reach corporate leadership positions](#). But roles such as [chief executive](#), production manager, senior police officer, lawyer and doctor tend to be well paid and secure. The over-representation of men in such jobs may be an important driver of inequalities in the labor market such as the [gender pay gap](#).

[Our research](#) shows that 24% of men versus 16% of women are in such "top jobs" by the age of 42. It also indicates that factors leading to this trend actually start showing up in adolescence. In fact, we believe ours is one of the first studies to link overconfidence captured in adolescence to real job market outcomes in mid-career.

We used data on approximately 3,600 people born in Great Britain who are taking part in the [1970 British Cohort Study](#). This means we can follow them from birth into the labor market and have access to information about their [family background](#), the circumstances in which they grew up, and the life choices they make.

We constructed a measure of overconfidence using their [test scores](#) on a range of cognitive assessments taken at ages five, ten and 16. We compared this to data they provided rating their own ability in several domains. We found that overconfident people were more likely, on average, to be in top jobs at the age of 42 compared to similar adults who didn't overrate their talents according to our overconfidence scale.

When it comes to explaining the gender gap in top jobs, our measure of overconfidence represented up to 11% of the significant 8 percentage

point gender gap in top jobs at age 42 (with men taking more of these top jobs). These results highlight the importance of overconfidence for predicting such achievements, but they also provide some insight into the factors that affect career-related confidence levels.

Confidence factors: university, industry and children

Once we accounted for university attendance and subject, our measure of overconfidence explained 6% of the gender gap in top jobs. This shows the importance of success at school and [choice of university subject](#) and institution in paving the way to a top job by mid-career.

In fact, university participation and subject choice matter quite a lot, according to our findings. The gender gap in top jobs is considerably larger among graduates (15 percentage points) compared to non-graduates (6.5 percentage points), while the role of overconfidence mattered more for those who had attended university.

For example, male graduates were 58% more likely than female graduates to be in a top job in the field of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), and had 34% greater odds of being in a senior role in law, economics and management (LEM). Interestingly, while overconfidence explained 12% of the gender gap in top LEM roles, it did not matter for top jobs in STEM. This may be down to the more technical nature of these jobs compared to those in LEM.

Apart from industry, other factors also seem to contribute to career gender gaps. Unsurprisingly, having children counts. With many adults having families with children still living at home by middle age, working mothers were 27% less likely than working fathers to be in a top job by mid-career. However, overconfidence did not explain any of this gender gap. This suggests that women are simply more likely than men to change their working patterns once they start a family.

How employers can help

[Research](#) highlights how men are more likely to assess their abilities favorably and communicate this to others. And since overconfident people may put themselves forward more often and sooner for promotions, this exacerbates the gender gap in top jobs.

So, our findings suggest that employers should rethink how they recruit and promote people. Employers could give more regular performance-based feedback and encourage women to apply for promotions sooner than they might choose to on their own, for example. This is especially relevant for LEM jobs where we found that overconfidence explained the largest portion of the gender gap.

And since [overconfidence](#) loses its importance among those who have children, lack of childcare and flexibility in the workplace clearly remains a substantial barrier to career progression for women.

Requiring women to "lean in" or engage in confidence-building interventions is not the solution. Focusing on [imposter syndrome](#) or women being underconfident puts the onus on them to change. Instead, we all need to find ways to change the system.

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