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Women Job Seekers May Be Limited by Contact Networks

Women job seekers in professional, technical, and managerial fields who use their personal contacts for job lead information hear of lower-paying jobs than do men job seekers of similar training and experience who also use their contacts to find jobs.

So says the study, "Social Networks and Job Search Outcomes Among Male and Female Professional, Technical, and Managerial Workers," published in the journal "Sociological Focus."

The study was conducted by Matt L. Huffman, a professor of sociology at UC Irvine, and Lisa Torres, a sociology Ph.D. candidate at UC Santa Barbara.

In their study, Huffman and Torres show that while both men and women rely on contacts as an important resource for job lead information, women may be disadvantaged in terms of the salary offers that result from their contacts compared to those received by men.

That's because, as Huffman and Torres found in their study of 524 professional, technical, and managerial workers, men tend to network with other men while women network with both women and men.

Thus, the "gender differences in the sex composition of (men's and women's) networks may result in men receiving higher quality job leads than women ...," the study said.

Huffman and Torres suggest that because men occupy the upper echelons of many companies and because men have other men as contacts, male job-seekers will have a distinct advantage over women job seekers when using their contacts to locate job opportunities.

"While the sex segregation of women and men across jobs and occupations has been found to significantly contribute to earnings inequality, it also leads to sex segregation of personal networks," Huffman and Torres said. This, in turn, may perpetuate inequality in employment outcomes such as salary.

Huffman and Torres do not advocate that women not use their contacts for job lead information, given how important contacts are for both men and women, but rather that organizations need to attend more closely to their hiring and promotion practices. "Though individuals may initially learn of job possibilities through their contacts, organizations are the true gatekeepers determining who gets paid what," they said.

Other findings of their study were that:

Both men and women in professional, technical, and managerial jobs preferred using their personal networks to more formal job search methods such as employment agencies and newspaper ads.

Both groups preferred using business contacts to social acquaintances. Huffman and Torres plan to continue to study gender-based inequality in employment.

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