Harvard
Business
Review

Gender

Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified

by Tara Sophia Mohr

August 25, 2014

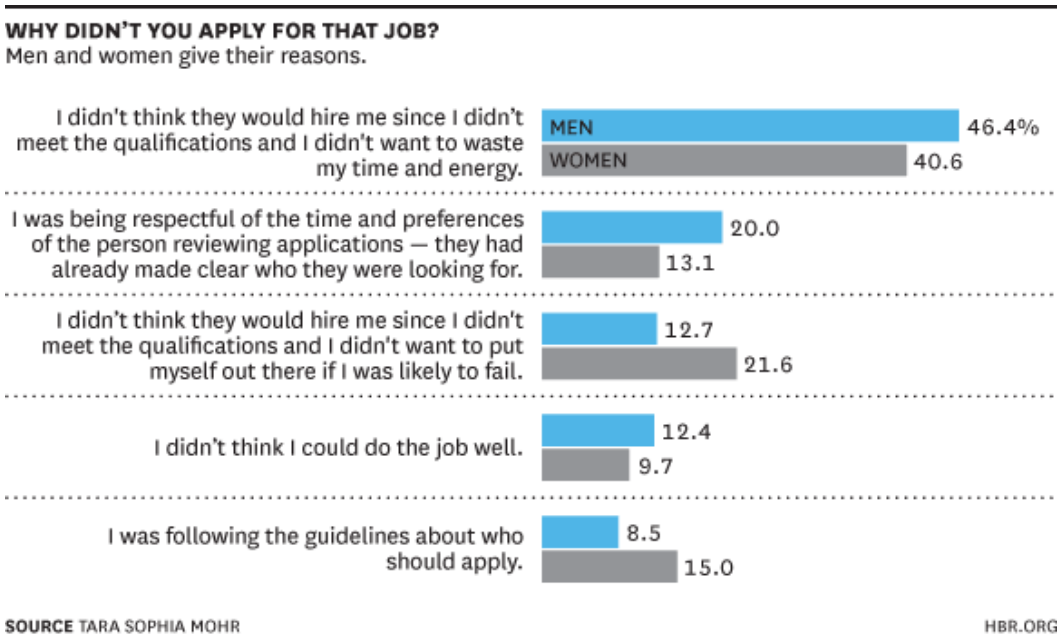
You've probably heard the following statistic: Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them.

The finding comes from a Hewlett Packard internal report, and has been quoted in *Lean In*, *The Confidence Code* and dozens of articles. It's usually invoked as evidence that women need more confidence. As one Forbes article put it, "Men are confident about their ability at 60%, but women don't feel confident until they've checked off each item on the list." The advice: women need to have more faith in themselves.

I was skeptical, because the times *I* had decided not to apply for a job because I didn't meet all the qualifications, faith in myself wasn't exactly the issue. I suspected I wasn't alone.

So I surveyed over a thousand men and women, predominantly American professionals, and asked them, "If you decided not to apply for a job because you didn't meet all the qualifications, why didn't you apply?"

According to the self-report of the respondents, the barrier to applying was not lack of confidence. In fact, for both men and women, "I didn't think I could do the job well" was the *least* common of all the responses. Only about 10% of women and 12% of men indicated that this was their top reason for not applying.



Men and women also gave the same most common reason for not applying, and it was by far the most popular, twice as common as any of the others, with 41% of women and 46% of men indicating it was their top reason: "I didn't think they would hire me since I didn't meet the qualifications, and I didn't want to waste my time and energy."

In other words, people who weren't applying believed they needed the qualifications not to do the job well, but to be hired in the first place. They thought that the required qualifications were...well, required qualifications. They didn't see the hiring process as one where advocacy, relationships, or a creative approach to framing one's expertise could overcome not having the skills and experiences outlined in the job qualifications.

What held them back from applying was not a mistaken perception about themselves, but a mistaken perception about the hiring process.

This is critical, because it suggests that if the HP finding speaks to a larger trend, women don't need to try and find that elusive quality, "confidence," they just need better information about how hiring

processes really work.

This is why, I think, the Hewlett Packard report finding is so often quoted, so eagerly shared amongst women, and so helpful. For those women who have not been applying for jobs because they believe the stated qualifications must be met, the statistic is a wake-up call that not everyone is playing the game that way. When those women know others are giving it a shot even when they don't meet the job criteria, they feel free to do the same.

Another 22% of women indicated their top reason was, "I didn't think they would hire me since I didn't meet the qualifications and I didn't want to put myself out there if I was likely to fail." These women also believed the on-paper "rules" about who the job was for, but for them, the cost of applying was the risk of failure – rather than the wasted time and energy. Notably, only 13% of men cited not wanting to try and fail as their top reason. Women may be wise to be more concerned with potential failure; there is some evidence that women's failures are remembered longer than men's. But that kind of bias may lead us to become *too* afraid of failure—avoiding it more than is needed, and in ways that don't serve our career goals. The gender differences here suggest we need to expand the burgeoning conversation about women's relationship with failure, and explore how bias, stereotype threat, the dearth of women leaders, and girls' greater success in school all may contribute to our greater avoidance of failure.

There was a sizable gender difference in the responses for one other reason: 15% of women indicated the top reason they didn't apply was because "I was following the guidelines about who should apply." Only 8% of men indicated this as their top answer. Unsurprisingly, given how much girls are socialized to follow the rules, a habit of "following the guidelines" was a more significant barrier to applying for women than men.

All three of these barriers, which together account for 78% of women's reasons for not applying, have to do with believing that the job qualifications are real requirements, and seeing the hiring process

as more by-the-book and true to the on paper guidelines than it really is. It makes perfect sense that women take written job qualifications more seriously than men, for several reasons:

First, it's likely that due to bias in some work environments, women do need to meet more of the qualifications to be hired than do their male counterparts. For instance, a McKinsey report found that men are often hired or promoted based on their potential, women for their experience and track record. If women have watched that occur in their workplaces, it makes perfect sense they'd be less likely to apply for a job for which they didn't meet the qualifications.

Second, girls are strongly socialized to follow the rules and in school are rewarded, again and again, for doing so. In part, girls' greater success in school (relative to boys) arguably can be attributed to their better rule following. Then in their careers, that rule-following habit has real costs, including when it comes to adhering to the guidelines about "who should apply."

Third, certifications and degrees have historically played a different role for women than for men. The 20th century saw women break into professional life – but only if they had the right training, the right accreditations. These qualifications were our ticket in, our way of proving we could do the job. We weren't part of an old boys club in which we'd get the benefit of the doubt. That history can, I think, lead women to see the workplace as more orderly and meritocratic than it really is. As a result we may overestimate the importance of our formal training and qualifications, and underutilize advocacy and networking.

When I went into the work world as a young twenty-something, I was constantly surprised by how often, it seemed, the emperor had no clothes. Major decisions were made and resources were allocated based not on good data or thoughtful reflection, but based on who had built the right relationships and had the *chutzpah* to propose big plans.

It took me a while to understand that the habits of diligent preparation and doing quality work that I'd learned in school were not the only—or even primary—ingredients I needed to become

visible and successful within my organization.

When it comes to applying for jobs, women need to do the same. Of course, it can't hurt to believe more in ourselves. But in this case, it's more important that we believe less in what appear to be the rules.

TM

Tara Mohr is an expert on women's leadership and the author of *Playing Big: Find Your Voice, Your Mission, Your Message*, named a best book of the year by Apple's iBooks. She is the creator of the Playing Big Facilitators Training program for coaches, mentors, managers and leadership development professionals who want to support women in playing bigger. Access more articles and resources from Tara here.