

The Impact of Rater's Gender on Performance Evaluations of HR Managers

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[Abstract] This study examines the impact of gender on a rater's perceptions of human resource (HR) managers' competencies in their strategic roles. Raters were HR managers and non-HR managers of various organizations. Survey data indicates that male managers rated the competencies of male HR managers at a significantly higher level than those of female HR managers. This gender bias toward male HR managers suggests that gender may impact performance evaluations in organizations.

[Keywords] HR managers; gender bias; competencies; strategic roles; survey

Introduction

Despite the demand on HR professionals to shift their priorities and to move beyond their traditional administrative role, empirical research in the area of HR competencies is limited (Blancero, Boroski, & Dyer, 1996; Caldwell, 2008; Ulrich, Brockbank, & Johnson, 2009; Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung, & Lake, 1995; Yeung, Woolcock, & Sullivan, 1996). In a time of increasing equal opportunity, this study extends our knowledge in this area by analyzing the responses from various managers regarding their perceptions of the competencies of male and female HR managers. The area of strategic management is of special interest because the evolving function of HR requires HR managers to be proactive and strategically contribute to firm performance (e.g., Barney & Wright, 1998; Wright, Snell, & Dyer, 2005). One consequence of this trend is that HR's survival and success become a matter of its demonstrated competencies.

Literature Review

Social role theory suggests that women in leadership roles violate conventions concerning women's accepted roles in society (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Forsyth, Heiney, & Wright, 1997). Individuals with traditional stereotypes about women were found to judge "women leaders more harshly than individuals whose attitudes about women were less stereotyped" (Forsyth, et al., p. 101; see also Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Meta-analyses of male and female leadership echo these perceptions in that female managers exhibiting masculine styles were devalued (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), but they are favored when leader roles are defined in relatively feminine terms (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995). By contrast, male leaders were favored for leader roles defined in masculine terms (Eagly et al.).

More recent research indicates that a description of a good manager in masculine terms has decreased to some degree during the last 25 to 30 years (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 1999). This decrease, however, does not consistently increase the emphasis on female managerial characteristics in men and women. Male students, for example, were found to hold similar gender stereotypes as male managers 15 years ago (Duehr & Bono).

Taken together, some studies on evaluations of managers' performance have indicated gender dependency (Chung, 2001; Deal & Stevenson, 1998; Eagly, et al., 1992; Forsyth, et al., 1997), whereas others have dismissed the impact of gender (Die, Debbs, & Walker, 1990; Eichinger, & Lombardo, 2004; Sywensky & Madden, 1996). Prior research has also shown similarities and differences in the subjective assessments of the ability of supervisors (Daley & Naff, 1998). Even male individuals were found to give higher ratings to women's leadership ability than their female counterparts (Denmark, 1993).

A structured free recall intervention seems to reduce gender stereotypes in performance evaluations (Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Encouraging raters to recall both positive and negative behaviors of ratees may provide objective and balanced evaluations. However, this method may not be effective for a long time frame, such as a 12-month performance appraisal. Nonetheless, negative perceptions of women in general

and as managers seem to be a function of the gender of the evaluator rather than the gender of the person being evaluated (Deal & Stevenson, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Male subjects were more likely than female subjects to have negative perceptions of female managers, describing them, among others, as uncertain and passive and having a strong need for social acceptance (Deal & Stevenson). These perceptions stand in direct contrast to the perceptions of the female subjects who viewed female managers as self-confident, competent, and ambitious. Arguably, stereotypes probably influence these perceptions causing gender discrimination against women in work settings (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman & Glick).

Evaluations of managers are typically defined in masculine terms based on research from the time when hardly any women occupied managerial roles. Consequently, an effective and competent manager is expected to possess behavioral characteristics of a male individual. Therefore, gender may make women susceptible to the impediments due to negative stereotypes about them in management (Chemers, 2000).

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Current literature detailing competencies, critical for the roles of HR professionals in strategic management, was used as a framework for examining HR managers' ability levels in the competencies. A survey instrument incorporating six domains was developed to gather data regarding the ability of HR managers in their strategic function, as perceived by HR managers and non-HR managers. The six domains are: *Strategic management, business knowledge, management of talent, employee relations, quality of work-family life, and information technology.*

Assessing the perceptions of HR managers' competencies from the perspective of both HR managers and non-HR managers is useful for the following reasons:

- a. This comparative study provides an opportunity to look at the perceived ability of HR managers around strategic competencies.
- b. Managers outside of the HR function are likely to have an objective view of HR managers' competencies, as opposed to relying on HR managers' self-reports alone.
- c. Managers, rather than lower level employees, are expected to have an extensive experience of working with HR managers on strategic issues.
- d. Studying the perceptions of HR managers' ability extends an understanding of their competencies and development needs.
- e. Examining the differences between male and female HR managers' competencies, as perceived by those at the managerial level, fills an existing gap in literature.

The purpose of this study is to examine if the gender of the rater impacts the rater's perceptions of HR managers' competencies in their strategic roles. This is accomplished by asking HR managers and non-HR managers of various organizations to evaluate HR managers' current competencies at their organizations.

Method

Participants

The characteristics of the study participants were described in detail in the previous paper (Payne, in press). Briefly, the sample consisted of HR managers (i.e., HR respondents) ($n = 44$) and non-HR managers (i.e., non-HR respondents) ($n = 76$) drawn from organizations in the northern Midwest region of the United States. The subgroups were as follows: Female HR ($n = 30$), male HR ($n = 14$), female non-HR ($n = 33$), and male non-HR ($n = 43$) managers. Primary participants were HR managers who were members of the Society for Human Resource Management. They were asked to identify four secondary study participants at the managerial level outside the HR function within their organizations.

Both female HR and female non-HR participants were predominantly working as managers, whereas male HR participants were likely to be directors and male non-HR participants were either managers or vice presidents. The study participants, to a large extent, represented small to medium-sized organizations with a total employment of up to 500 employees. Their organizations were mostly in services, manufacturing, and insurance, although other types of industries were represented, as well.

Survey Instruments

The study relied on two slightly different versions of a self-administered survey: one for HR managers and the other for non-HR managers. Each survey instrument consisted of 37 mutually exclusive closed-ended statements about HR competencies in strategic management. The statements covered the domains of *strategic management*, *business knowledge*, *management of talent*, *employee relations*, *quality of work-family life*, and *information technology*. Ratings were on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*high*). These numbers were anchored with the following statements: *None at all*, *below average*, *average*, *above average*, and *high*. The end section of each survey consisted of eight demographic items.

Procedure

HR managers were asked to rate their own ability in strategic competencies at their organization. Similarly, non-HR managers were asked to rate an HR manager's current ability level in the same competencies at their organization.

Results

Without taking into consideration the gender of the managers who rated the ability of HR managers, all HR managers were perceived to possess the highest level of ability in *strategic management* ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.75$) followed by *business knowledge* ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.73$) (see Table 1 in Payne, in press). By contrast, their lowest level of ability was perceived in the competency of *employee relations* ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.89$).

An independent groups *t* test was used to identify any significant differences between the mean ratings of HR managers ($n = 44$) and non-HR managers ($n = 76$) (Payne, in press). The *t* test at the .05 level of significance (two-tailed) showed that HR managers rated their own ability levels significantly higher than non-HR managers rated HR managers' abilities for the following competencies: *Strategic management* ($t = 3.78$, $p < .01$), *business knowledge* ($t = 5.11$, $p < .01$), and *management of talent* ($t = 3.09$, $p < .01$).

Since there were significant differences in the data, it was important to locate the differences through a multiple means comparison of the subgroup ratings. The subgroups were male HR ($n = 14$), female HR ($n = 30$), male non-HR ($n = 43$), and female non-HR ($n = 33$) managers. The Levene test of homogeneity of variance was employed to decide which *post hoc* test was appropriate for the multiple comparisons of the subgroup means. This test indicated that the variances in all of the four subgroups were equal. Subsequently, the Scheffé *post hoc* test with multiple comparisons of the subgroup data was performed to determine the locations of the differences with respect to the competency domains of *strategic management*, *business knowledge*, and *management of talent*.

The Scheffé test (data matrix not shown) indicated significant differences between the mean ratings of female HR managers and female non-HR managers in *strategic management* ($p = .01$), *business knowledge* ($p = .03$), and *management of talent* ($p = .03$) at the .05 level of significance. In these competencies, female HR managers perceived their own ability levels significantly higher than female non-HR managers who rated female HR managers' ability. Even larger differences were shown between the ratings of female HR and male non-HR managers for the domain of *business knowledge* ($p = .001$). In this competency, female HR managers rated their own ability significantly higher than male non-HR managers rated the ability of female HR managers. Additionally, male HR managers' ability was rated significantly lower by male ($p = .004$) and female ($p = .04$) non-HR managers than the self-perception ratings of male HR managers for *business knowledge*.

The self-perception ratings of male HR managers ($n = 14$) compared to the self-perception ratings of female HR managers ($n = 30$) showed that mean values were fairly close to one another in all the domains with the exception of *quality of work-family*. In this competency domain, female HR managers self-perceived a higher competency than their male counterparts. But none of these mean comparisons exhibited a statistically significant difference between the ratings of male and female HR managers. As discussed, HR managers ($n = 44$) perceived their own abilities at the significantly higher level than non-HR managers ($n = 76$) in three of the six competency domains (Payne, in press). Independent groups' t tests indicated that the gender of the rater influenced the perceived ability ratings between the two groups of male and female managers (Table 1).

Table 1. Significance Tests of HR Managers' Ability by Gender of All Managers and by Gender of HR Managers

Competency	Male Managers		Female Managers	
	HR Managers			
	Male vs. Female		Male vs. Female	
	t	p	t	p
Strategic Management	2.91	.01*	-1.17	.25
Business Knowledge	2.43	.02*	-1.49	.14
Management of Talent	2.06	.04*	-1.56	.12
Employee Relations	1.40	.17	-1.57	.12
Quality of work-family life	0.64	.53	-1.12	.27
Information Technology	1.16	.25	-1.77	.08

Note. ^a $n = 57$. ^b $n = 63$.

*Significant if $p \leq .05$.

The resulting t and p values showed that male managers ($n = 57$) rated male HR managers significantly higher than female HR managers in three competency domains. Competency domains of *strategic management* ($t = 2.91$, $p = .01$), *business knowledge* ($t = 2.43$, $p = .02$), and *management of talent* ($t = 2.06$, $p = .04$) had significant differences in their ratings between male and female HR managers at the .05 level of significance (two-tailed). In contrast, there were no significant gender based differences observed among the ratings of female managers ($n = 63$). In fact, both t and p values had a fairly narrow range ($-1.77 \leq t \leq -1.12$; $.27 \leq p \leq .08$). Table 2 presents the mean ability ratings of HR managers when evaluated by male and female non-HR managers. A comparison of these ability ratings showed gender-dependent ratings.

Table 2. HR Managers' Ability by Gender of Non-HR Managers and by Gender of HR Managers. Significance Tests of Gender of HR Managers' Ability by Male Non-HR Managers.

		Gender of non-HR Managers ^a					
		Male (n=43)			Female (n=33)		
Competency		Gender of HR Managers					
		Male (n=15)	Female (n=38)	t	p	Male (n=13)	Female (n=20)
Strategic	M	3.98	3.55	1.99	.05*	3.52	3.40
	SD	0.70	0.68			0.78	0.98
Business Knowledge	M	3.37	3.21	0.70	.49	3.32	3.29
	SD	0.71	0.71			0.87	0.65
Management of Talent	M	3.67	3.35	1.31	.20	3.00	3.10
	SD	0.60	0.83			1.30	1.25
Employee Relations	M	3.64	3.26	1.56	.18	2.93	3.13
	SD	0.70	0.80			1.03	1.18
Quality of work-family	M	3.52	3.23	0.68	0.50	3.21	3.38
	SD	0.98	1.46			1.03	1.23
Information Technology	M	3.73	3.29	1.51	.14	3.03	3.59
	SD	0.89	0.94			1.07	1.18

Note. ^an = 76. Ratings were on a 5-point scale (1 = none at all, 5 = high).

*Significant if $p \leq .05$.

Male non-HR managers ($n = 43$) perceived the ability of male HR managers ($n = 15$) at the higher level than that of female HR managers ($n = 28$) in all six competency domains. They perceived both male and female HR managers' ability at the highest level in *strategic management* ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.70$ for male HR vs. $M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.68$ for female HR) and at the lowest level in *business knowledge* ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.71$ for male HR vs. $M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.71$ for female HR). These rating differences between male and female HR managers were only significant in the *strategic management* competency ($t = 1.99$, $p = .05$). By contrast, female non-HR managers ($n = 33$) favored female HR managers ($n = 20$) over male HR managers ($n = 13$) in four out of six domains (Table 2). They perceived female HR managers' ability at the highest level in the domain of *information technology* ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.18$) and at the lowest level in *management of talent* ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.25$). Similar to male non-HR managers, female non-HR managers gave male HR managers the highest ability ratings in the domain of *strategic management* ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.78$ for male HR vs. $M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.98$ for female HR). None of these ratings showed a statistically significant difference between the male and female HR managers' abilities.

Discussion

Overall, male HR managers fared better than their female counterparts, particularly in the strategic and business domains. These domains included knowledge about internal and external environments and understanding how organizational strategies relate to human resources. In these roles, HR managers would need leadership skills to execute strategic plans, which may have given advantage to male HR managers due to a traditionally held view that leadership is better suited for men than women (e.g., Carli & Eagly, 2001; Dennis & Kunkel, 2004). Ergo, male managers are likely to have an advantage over female managers by virtue of greater peer acceptance of holding managerial positions.

The discrepancies observed between the self-perception ratings of HR managers and non-HR managers are consistent with other studies with HR professionals giving higher ratings for their own performance than a non-HR group (Ulrich, et al., 1995; Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001). The data of the self-perceptions of male and female HR managers, however, suggested fairly equal ability levels in all of the competency domains. This finding agrees with prior research showing a rating agreement between the genders (Daley & Naff, 1998; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004).

The ability ratings of male non-HR managers were more favorable toward male HR managers than female HR managers in all six competency domains. This finding is consistent with gender studies indicating the devaluation of female managers' ability in a workplace (e.g., Eagly, et al., 1992; Deal & Stevenson, 1998). Male non-HR managers had, thus, a prototypical view of a manager because they viewed an HR manager in masculine terms. Such a view held even in the stereotypically female domains of *employee relations* and *quality of work-family life*, as the male non-HR managers rated female HR managers at the lower level of ability than male HR managers. This contradicts the two historical trends in HR, namely, that it tends to be female dominated and is associated with a care-taking role. Nevertheless, this result may be due to either female HR managers being underrated for their competency or male HR managers' ability being overrated. Arguably, ratings reflect the male managers' expectations and attitudes towards management positions that they seem to perceive as "male" (e.g., Forsyth, et al., 1997; Sczesny, 2003). A systematic pro-male bias, rather than selective memory of actual performance, may also account for these differences in ratings (Bauer & Baltes, 2002). In addition, the differed ratings by gender may be explained by the possibility that male HR managers were selected on the basis of their managerial qualifications and ability, whereas female HR managers were selected on the basis of some other criteria (e.g., length of service in HR or to fulfill diversity quota).

Male non-HR managers likely overrated the ability of male HR managers and underrated the ability of female HR managers in this study. However, female non-HR managers, too, had gender-dependent perceptions about the ability of HR managers. They favored female HR managers in four out of six domains including *information technology*. Other studies have also shown a pro-female bias in evaluations (e.g., Duehr & Bono, 2006; Furnham & Stringfield, 2001; Die, et al., 1990). Although there was no statistically significant difference, the female non-HR managers favored male HR managers over female HR managers in *strategic ability* and *business knowledge*. They might associate the HR function as "feminine", causing them to overlook the ability of male HR managers in similar roles.

Differences observed in ratings suggest that gender influences the perceptions about ability. A gender-role "spillover" from other contexts, such as homes, may have influenced the expectations of gender roles in organizations (Eagly, et al., 1995; Chemers, 2000). Age and education of non-HR managers and the likability of HR managers, rather than competence, are other possible influencing factors in ability ratings (Heilman, et al., 2004). Generic differences, such as gender, can also cause inter-group stereotyping because "people fail to see anything negative about their in-group and fail to see anything positive about the out-group" (Gibb, 2000, p. 62).

Although the HR field is traditionally regarded as "female", the female HR managers might have violated a predominantly male culture by holding management positions and would, hence, be viewed less favorably than male HR managers (e.g., Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003; Heilman, et al., 2004). Applying descriptive attributes to job positions tends to contribute to raters having gender bias in their perceptions (e.g., Deal & Stevenson, 1998; also Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

Concluding Remarks

Before making any generalizations of the findings, it is important to realize that these findings have limitations (see further Payne, in press). Nevertheless, the findings have some important implications for the HR function in organizations. The overrepresentation of women in HR and the observed gendered ability ratings give rise to the notion that they may partially contribute to HR's low credibility. Viewing the data as employee performance evaluations, the gendered ability ratings imply that organizations involved in the study are likely to manifest gender bias in their employee evaluations.

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