

Gender & leadership in market systems development programs: an analysis of inclusivity in job descriptions

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Introduction

With the goal of gaining insight into gendered differences in recruitment and retention of senior leaders in international market systems development (MSD) and private sector development programs (PSD), the Canopy Lab circulated an online survey in late 2019. Though there are limitations, due to the small sample size, ***the [study results](#) suggest salient differences in the experience of women and men Team Leaders (TLs) and Chiefs of Party (CoPs) in the recruitment process. It also pointed to differences between women and men in representation in field locations and in their reasons for leaving.*** Building upon the initial research findings, the study team conducted a second phase of research to zoom in on the recruitment process ***and explored gender and inclusion in leadership roles by looking at one of the most influential aspects on the entire recruitment process-- the criteria listed in TL/CoP job descriptions in***

Good practices for writing inclusive job descriptions

- Limits requirements to 'must-haves'
- Avoids 'gender coded' words and discriminatory language
- Is performance/competency-based instead of skills-based
- Employs flexibility in qualifying 'years of experience' (e.g. related work experience)

Figure 1: Good practices in writing inclusive job

donor tender documents. The criteria in tender document job descriptions sets ‘the rules’ by which all actors play. The development industry is highly competitive and the key personnel included in proposals are scored based on compliance with criteria. Market actors, NGOs and contractors, therefore have no incentive to take a risk on a candidate who does not meet 100% of ‘required’ or ‘desired’ criteria, even when they may believe the candidate is a better fit for the role. As a result, ***we hypothesize that the system continues to produce a homogenous pool of candidates for CoP/TL positions.***

The purpose of this research is to test the hypothesis by assessing the ‘inclusiveness’ of CoP job descriptions in USAID tendering documents. The research approach was informed by academic literature and human resources’ industry guidance on good practice in writing ‘inclusive job descriptions’ (figure 1) and assessed the number of criteria, minimum years of experience and use of ‘coded-language’ among other aspects such as alignment with adaptive management skillsets. The researchers analyzed 67 different USAID tender documents for cooperative agreements dating from 2008 to present.¹

In addition to limitations such as the small sample size, potential subjectivity in coding and that only cooperative agreement tender documents from USAID were assessed², the researchers are assuming that other development organizations choose CoPs/TLs based on job criteria included in the tender documents and do not substantively change the requirements or language in their advertised job descriptions.

This study forms part of the small but growing body of research conducted by the Canopy Lab on the role of diverse leadership on high-performing teams for systems-oriented development programs. It is intended to ***serve as a jumping off point for discussions with industry stakeholders on the biases, structures, relationships, and rules which influence who is selected for which senior leadership jobs and under which circumstances.***

¹ Accessed on www.grants.gov from June 1-30, 2020

² Researchers did not find comparable database from other donors or other types of USAID funding mechanisms during the study period

Key findings



There is an upward trend in average number of criteria and minimum years of experience in job descriptions

The average number of criteria in job descriptions has modestly yet steadily increased since 2008. Recent job descriptions have on average 5.7 number of criteria: a 36% increase. The average minimum number of years of experience started at over 10.5 years and then dipped to below 9 years between 2012 and 2015. It is now back on the rise at just over 9.5 years (as of 2020).

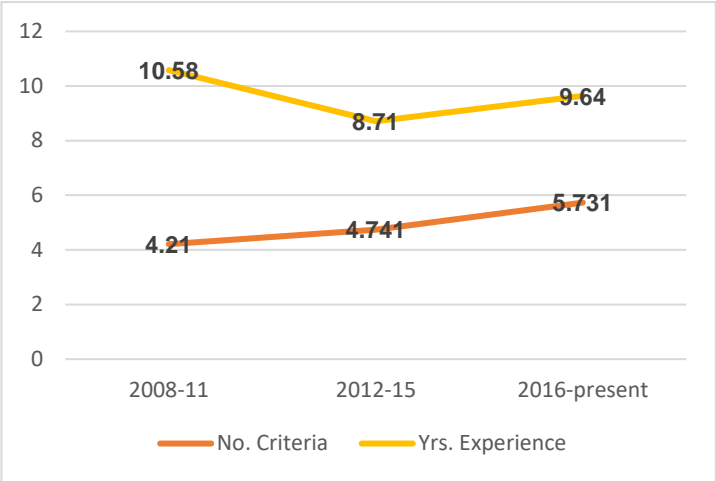


Figure 2: Number of criteria and minimum years of experience

Almost 75% of the job descriptions assessed included four or more criteria and 5% included 10 or more. Many job descriptions could be considered overly prescriptive:

- “The Chief of Party must have no less than eight years of experience in a managerial position in the private sector in Guatemala or in Latin America, with five years’ experience in agricultural export-related experience especially value chain competitiveness, agribusiness management and private sector development.” (Fomenting Agriculture Incomes and Resilience Project – FAIR, 2016)
- “At least 15 years’ experience leading, managing and implementing large international projects, specifically with experience in two or more of the following areas: management, agriculture, natural resource management, ecology or food security, including at least 5 years of experience on seed-systems specific programming.” (Seed System Support Activity Global Project, 2018)

traditional leadership skills instead of adaptive management skills which privilege softer skills like curiosity, communication and listening, comfort with uncertainty and change and critical thinking.³



Lack of inclusive practices and language

The study revealed that senior leader job descriptions lack

inclusive practices and language. With regards to inclusive practices, only 3% of job descriptions listed competencies in the criteria section in the job description and fewer than 9% of job descriptions signaled flexibility in qualifying years of experience.

Regarding inclusive language, only 21% of the job descriptions explicitly signaled their openness to both genders by using the 's/he' pronoun.

None of the job descriptions assessed consistently applied industry guidance for writing inclusive job descriptions but there were a few examples of job description with elements of more inclusive criteria:

Inclusive practices include: limiting requirements to 'must-haves', avoiding 'gender coded' words and discriminatory language, listing performance/competency-based skills and employing flexibility in qualifying years of experience.

Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.

Gender - coded words are masculine and feminine themed words, such as those associated with gender stereotypes

- *“S/he is expected to have the leadership qualities, depth and breadth of technical expertise and experience, and written and oral communication and interpersonal skills to fulfill the diverse technical and managerial requirements of the program description.” (Global Labor Program, 2010)*
- *“a minimum of 10 years of progressively increasing management responsibility in international development projects is required” (Development Food Security Activities in Niger and Burkina Faso, 2018)*

³ [USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning Learning, Discussion Note: Adaptive Management \(2018\)](#)



Figure 4: Weighted word cloud of gender-coded words found in job descriptions

Digging deeper into inclusive language, we found that just 5% of the top 100 most frequently used words in the job descriptions are coded feminine. Though most job descriptions did not employ coded-language, only 2% of the top 100 most frequently used words are coded masculine suggesting that there is not a strong masculine bias in the words used.

Why these findings matter



Unintentionally discouraging women and other diverse candidates from applying

Research shows that both the number of requirements and particularly the minimum years of experience can have an adverse impact on who decides to apply for a given senior leader role. This affects women in two ways. First, women may have fewer years of experience compared to male counterparts because of time taken away from the industry to birth and rear children and or take care of elderly parents. Second, research shows that in order to apply for a job, women feel they need to meet 100% of the criteria. This thinking leads them to screen themselves out; research shows that women apply to 20% fewer jobs than men.⁴

Beyond the criteria, the language employed may also be deterring diverse talent from applying. Research shows that the deliberate use of inclusive and feminine coded words in job descriptions is important in making the job more appealing to women. Research on the subject revealed that women felt that job advertisements with masculine-coded language were less appealing and that they belonged less in those occupations. Whereas for men, feminine coded advertisements were only slightly less appealing and there was no effect on their feelings of belonging.⁵

⁴ Ignatova, M. and Tockey, D., [LinkedIn, Gender Insights Report: How women find Jobs Differently \(2018\)](#)

⁵ Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., and Kay, A., [University of Waterloo and Duke University, Evidence that Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Inequality \(2011\)](#)



Missing out on leaders with adaptive management skills

According to research by USAID Learning Lab, soft skills such as curiosity, empathy and communication directly impacted a team's ability to learn and adapt to effect change. Further, the study encouraged placing value on adaptive mindsets, soft skills and change management experience when hiring for key positions.⁶ Despite the agency's recognition of the critical need for these skills in development programs, the senior leader job descriptions were heavily biased towards more traditional leadership skills. This suggests that USAID and other donors who use require similar traditional management experience criteria may be unintentionally excluding potential candidates with skills that are more suited to the complex nature of international development work and explicit experience with adaptive management practices.

Conclusion & Recommendations

While this initial research examined only a small sub-set of TL/CoP job descriptions from USAID, the findings suggest that USAID and possibly other donor organizations, public and private, may be unintentionally limiting the candidate pool for senior leadership roles and missing out on candidates with adaptive management mindsets and skills. While an admittedly small piece of the overall tender process, the criteria set forth in the job description sets 'the rules' for how other organizations respond. And, given its influential nature, job descriptions can be an effective and important leverage point for ensuring more diverse candidate pools.

The analysis of the job descriptions identified some clear action items for USAID and other development organizations to better comply with good practices in writing inclusive job descriptions including:

- **Reduce the number of criteria to the absolute 'must-haves'.**
- **Use performance or competency-based descriptions** which minimize or eliminate requirements around 'years of experience'.
- **Employ more 'feminine-coded' words in the job descriptions and inclusive pronouns** to signal attractiveness and belongingness to a diverse range of people.

⁶ [USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning, What Difference Does CLA Make to Development? \(2017\)](#)

To act upon these recommendations, USAID and other development organizations should consider:

- **Conducting an ‘inclusivity’ audit of all key personnel job descriptions**
- **Developing guidance and provide training to staff on crafting more inclusive job descriptions**
- **Identifying other ways in which the agency maybe unintentionally influencing ,the rules of the game ‘in favor of a certain group of people**

In addition to making the job descriptions for senior leaders in tender documents more inclusive, USAID and other development organizations should consider **better aligning the competencies and criteria with the skillsets associated with adaptive management**. As part of this alignment, USAID **may want to consider reflecting upon the purpose of requiring advanced education**, especially for positions which may value more entrepreneurial profiles or leaders with more diverse ranges of experiences.

By prioritizing these recommendations to make job descriptions more inclusive and more likely to attract diverse talent with adaptive management skills, USAID and other development organizations have the opportunity redefine the ‘rules of the game’ and benefit from a better suited and more diverse pool of CoP and Team Leader candidates.

The full study is [here](#).

The Canopy Lab, a US-based consulting firm, specializes in the practical application of systems thinking and is led by three Managing Partners. Each partner has led and built teams to implement multimillion-dollar systems change programs. They are also recognized for their work in adaptive management, monitoring and evaluating systemic change, and advancing approaches to WEE and youth employment in market systems programs. Together, they have over 55 years of experience delivering innovative, high quality work in 30+ African, Asian, Eastern European and Latin American countries for a diverse range of clients including Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, DFAT, DFID, SDC, World Bank, and USAID.