

## The impact of stereotypes: a man in a "woman's world"

Attitudes about workplace roles are changing. As a result, doors previously closed are opening. For example, about an equal number of men and women are now graduating from traditionally male-dominated law schools. Once in the workforce, women lawyers are finding employment opportunities in male-dominated areas of law. Changing attitudes are creating financial rewards and new career paths for groups that faced "closed" doors in the past.

Can the same be said for men who seek employment in traditionally female-dominated areas of law? Clearly, no. In my travels to legal secretarial schools to educate legal secretaries about workplace discrimination, I rarely observe a man in the class. Why is that? Is there truly a "pink collar ghetto" that no "right-thinking" male would join?

Why do so few men become legal secretaries? Historically, some of the most renowned secretaries were men. Are stereotypes about men who enter traditionally female occupations creating barriers to achieving equal opportunity? I would like to share one man's experience, with his permission, to shed some light:

*I am a 25-year-old Canadian. My lifelong dream is to work in a law firm. My dream is turning into a nightmare. I have several years of office experience and all of the professional and personal skills to succeed in a law office. I never thought that there would be barriers to prevent me from obtaining employment as a legal secretary, but I have found one ... I am male.*

*I bought a new black double-breasted suit and a black leather briefcase with the hope of making a positive impression with my appearance and readiness for a work practicum. The experience was a success and the staff wonderful. With a positive review from my practicum and good grades from my legal secretarial course, I was ready for long-term employment.*

*Over a 2-1/2 month period, I submitted over 150 resumes to various law firms and agencies of all sizes and specialties. Over 100 of these applications were to employers who were actively advertising. The only responses that I received were letters of rejection, except for two female lawyers who offered to circulate my resume even though they were not hiring due to budget cutbacks.*

*I became frustrated. I did more creative things to post my resume. I have still not received a single response. All of my classmates, except for the other male student and one female student, have found employment during this same period of time.*

*I called my instructor to inform her about my unsuccessful employment search. She advised me that law firm representatives had made it clear to her that they were*

*looking for female secretaries. The first thought that entered my mind was, "How am I supposed to change that?" I was very angered and hurt.*

*It is difficult for me to understand how the people who have made their livings representing client rights and freedoms are the same people who destroy the rights and freedoms of men trying to explore a field of employment that was never available to them before because of traditional roles in our society ... In my own experience, the most surprising aspect of this discrimination is that it has not been the women that I have had problems with ... it is the men!*

*For example, while a receptionist at a large Vancouver insurance firm, I had my first experience with discriminatory conduct. I was the receptionist. A male laughed at me, asked if the woman receptionist was off today, and implied that I was gay. After work I went to my martial arts school and, upset, almost beat the kicking bag off its chain.*

*... It is very saddening to see that a lot of firms and agencies do not feel that men, as legal secretaries, reflect our changing environment. I do understand that it can be difficult to keep pace with constant change. However, change cannot be ignored.*

*The impact of discrimination is emotionally devastating. After spending large amounts of money on education and training and working extremely hard to achieve high grades, and then to be rejected continuously simply because I am male, has caused me a great deal of confusion, a sense of loss and a feeling of helplessness.*

*Finally, I want every lawyer and personnel administrator to understand one simple fact: this is the 1990s and men are making career choices that involve secretarial positions more than ever. Those positions give them a chance to gain valuable experience. The traditional roles of the 1960s and earlier have long since expired. When you reject an applicant's resume because that applicant is male, you may be missing out on the best legal secretary that you could ever hire.*

In light of this man's experience, consider examining the hiring practices in your firm. Are you welcoming and accepting of the diversity of today's applicants? Would you be willing to give this applicant a chance?

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