

Beyond the Binary

How Genderqueer Employee Identity Affects Manager Decision Making

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Introduction


"Gender" has traditionally been thought of as man or woman, without consideration of the societal norms surrounding these definitions. However, more people are identifying as non-binary or genderqueer, because their innate sex identity is incongruent with either of the binary gender categories.

Non-binarism has historical precedent. Consider the "Two-Spirit" people in some Native American cultures or the use of singular "they" in Shakespeare's great works. Yet Western culture, especially business, doesn't seem prepared for the rising number of non-binary professionals.

There is evidence that suggests male privilege and bias exist against women in the workplace, but research exploring bias toward non-binary or genderqueer is relatively nonexistent. To understand how gender identity impacts workplace experience and career advancement, I examine how an employee's non-binary gender identity affects manager decision making.


Methods

Literature




- 40+ scholarly articles
- 15+ pop lit / news

Experiment & Survey



- 320 responses
- Performance review
- Identity by pronoun
- Pay, level, promotability and more

Interviews



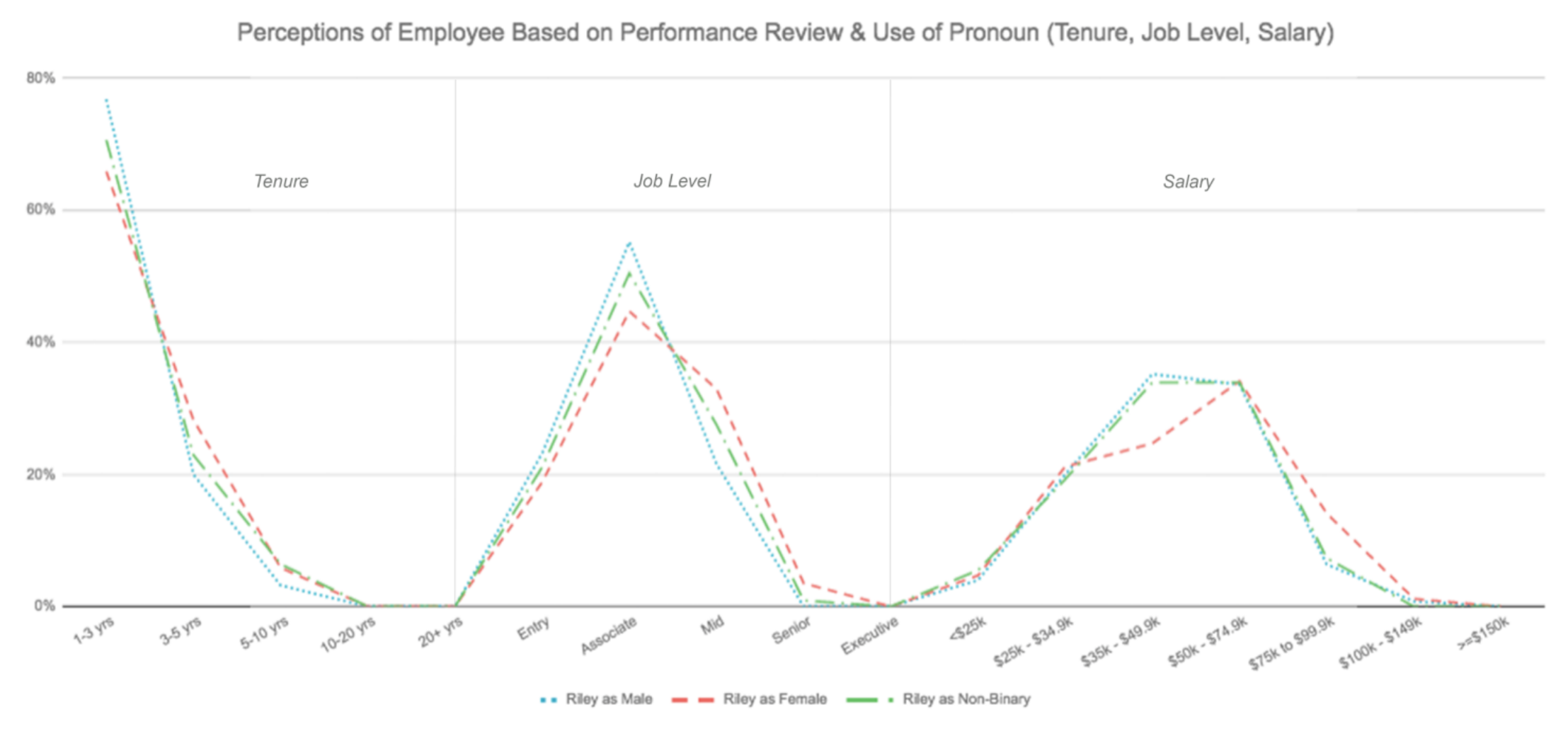
- 7 managers
- 10 non-binary employees

Literature Cited

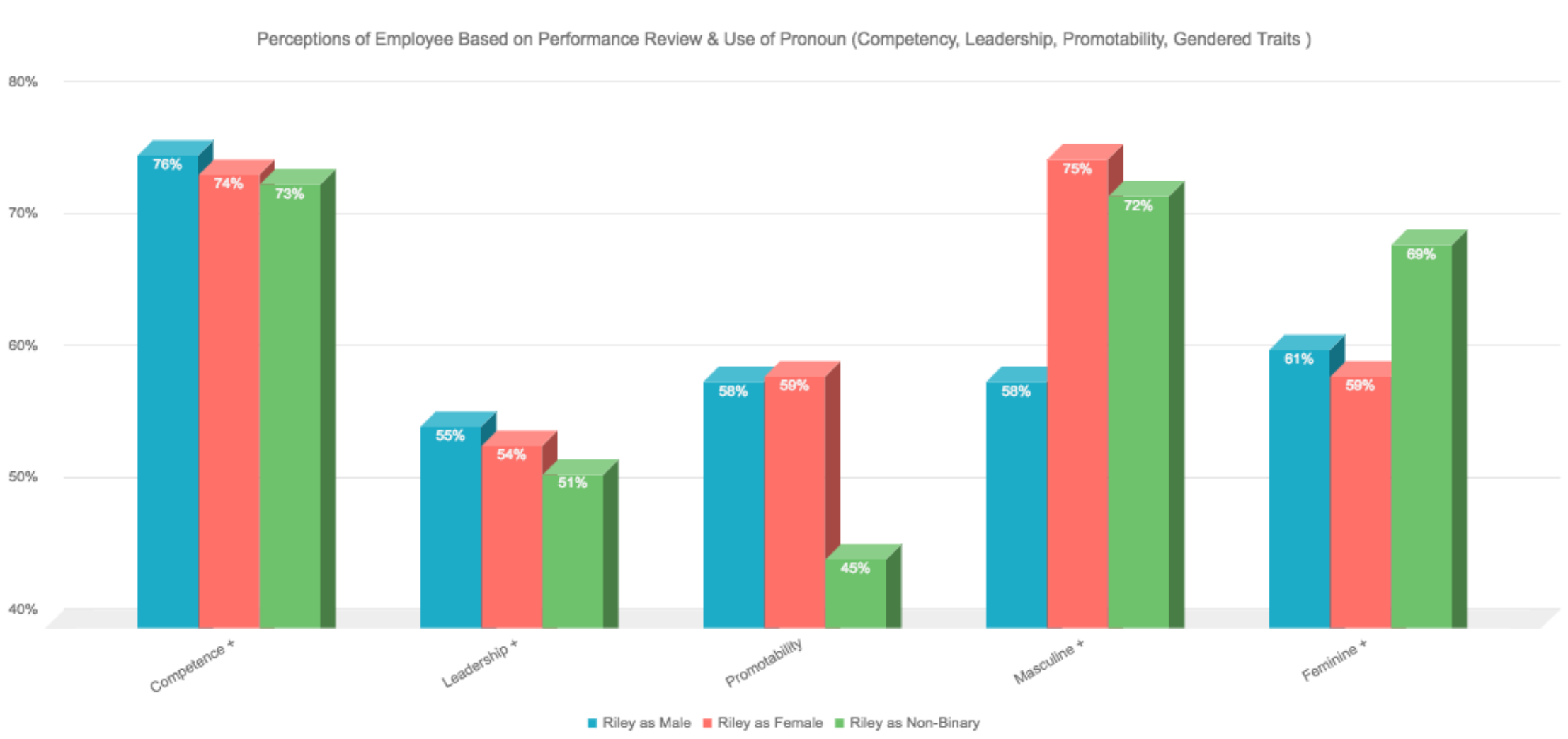
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Results

Survey Data
As shown below, surveys revealed similar results in the male, female, and non-binary experimental conditions. However, slight variances of the female condition were consistent with other studies that show a "double bind" for women hoping to advance their careers.



The non-binary employee was rated ~15% less promotable than the male or female employee, yet all three gender identities were relatively on par in regards to competency and leadership ability. The employee as female and non-binary were seen as more masculine.



Interview Data

[Managers] look to reward on behalf of behavior and skill, but then you add the complexity of bias on top of that — gender, race, whatever it may be. Then suddenly, there isn't an algorithm that you can use to help make your decisions anymore. As human beings, we prefer an algorithm.

The promotion committee had issues with they/them pronouns, so we had to reward. That seems wrong, but it's also hard and confusing to educate people while trying to get the employee through this expedient process. HR systems just aren't up to the task.

It will be difficult for me to self-advocate when it's my turn for promotion, I feel that I can't be my genuine self.

I'm perceived as female by a lot of people. [During performance evaluations] I wonder if I'm going to get the things that a lot of female engineers get. Like... not assertive enough or too bitchy?

I worry about the same thing as other underrepresented groups. You look for people that remind you of yourself in higher-level positions, and I don't see any of those.

Conclusions

Non-binary employees may have a hard time advancing into higher level positions

Despite being relatively on par with the male and female gender identities in regards to competence and leadership ability, the non-binary employee was seen as less promotable. Interviews revealed that a non-binary gender identity may lead to negative associations about that employee unrelated to their work performance.

Managers spend more time forming judgements about non-binary employees than they do male or female

On average, managers assessing the non-binary employee took 19 minutes longer to answer survey questions than managers assessing the male and female employee. Qualitative data reveals this as both a pro (more careful consideration, a good "bias check") and a con (unfamiliar pronouns distracted from the assessment, described as "off-putting").

Women still get the short end of the stick

A female mid-level manager was perceived as having the same qualities and performance of a lower-level male employee. Women were also rated as more masculine, which supports implicit assumptions about women that hold them back from moving into leadership positions.

Everyone values diversity, but identity is foreign

Both cis-gendered managers and non-binary employees agreed that a diverse workforce is important for achieving personal and business goals. However, both groups also admitted that diversity is commonly addressed in terms of race and sex rather than identity. Of the managers interviewed, none reported having any kind of training or resources on non-binary gender identity, but all expressed a desire to recruit and retain diverse talent.

Systematic & cultural change over meritocracy

A focus on merit was highly desired and seen as a way to achieve objectivity. Studies show that most meritocratic processes don't resolve deeply entrenched perceptions of gender that lead to bias. Instead, companies should strive for more widespread education, training, and normalization of non-binarism in an effort to change existing systems and cultures.

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Further Information

This capstone is dedicated to those with the power and agency to make the world a more inclusive place for all, regardless of labels or identities. It is also for those who believe that gender is fluid, non-binary, and most of all, not a construct to be used for inequality. For more information, contact the researcher:

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