Positive Discrimination - Pros and Cons

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Question 1

Advertise a position for an engineer

- Receive 10 CVs
  9 from men, 1 from a woman
- Don’t review CVs
  Just offer the job to the woman

Is this
A) Legal
B) Illegal
Hold an open day for women only
Encourage women to apply for an engineering position

- Receive 10 CVs
  This time 7 from men, 3 from women
- Review CVs – select best 4 candidates
- Interview 4 candidates – select best candidate for the position – a man

Is this
A) Legal
B) Illegal
Question 3

What if the best candidate was a woman?

If you voted “Legal” before would you now change your mind?
Definitions of Positive Discrimination

“Treating one person more favourably than another on the ground of that person’s gender.”

“Policy of providing special opportunities for and favouring members of a disadvantage group who suffer from discrimination.”

“Intended to promote the opportunities of a defined minority group within a society to give them equal access to that of the privilege majority population.”

“Serves to balance or negate a disadvantage but is itself unjust because its discriminating”
Positive Discrimination

There are 9 “protected characteristics” under UK Legislation: Age, Disability, Gender, Marriage and civil partnerships, Race, Pregnancy and Maternity, Religion and Belief, Sex and Sexual Orientation.

It is unlawful to use these as a basis for a decision.

In other words:
Positive discrimination is illegal under the UK anti-discrimination law.
Positive discrimination is not to be confused with positive action.

Positive discrimination (affirmative action / reverse discrimination) Choosing someone solely on the grounds of their gender and not on their abilities.

Positive action
Describes measures targeted at women to redress past discriminations or to offset the disadvantages arising from existing attitudes, behaviours and structures.

Positive action during recruitment became lawful in the UK in April 2011.
Definitions of Positive Action

Engineering companies can¹:

- Target training at women who are under-represented in certain occupations or grades
- Provide training and special encouragement for returners to the labour market
- Encourage women to apply for positions
- Choose to hire a women over a man, provided they are both equally qualified for the position
- Hold women only events
- Place adverts and recruitment literature where women will see them (i.e. WES Journal)

A company cannot give a woman a job just because she is a woman

¹ http://www.diversitytoolkit.org.uk/glossary/_P/
Pros of Positive Action

- Companies recognizes there is a problem and want to change the gender balance
- Results in more women being hired which will help fill the skills shortage gap
- Results in more women getting promotions
- Improves the social mix in the office
Pros of Positive Action

- Could encourage women to enter engineering as more chance of them climbing ladder quicker
- Could encourage women to stay in engineering as company becomes more family friendly
- Leads to a more diverse company which improves their business\(^1\) and will ensure that the UK remains at the cutting edge of invention

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**Cons**

- Devalues the accomplishment of people who are chosen based on their gender
  - If a woman gets the job did she get it through merit or because she was a woman?

- Often results in the “token” women being appointed
  - If senior women appointed onto boards there is often a backlash and an increase in anti female sentiment.

- Replaces an old wrong with a new wrong
  - Average white male now feels discriminated against
Cons

- Could discourage women from entering engineering
  - If positive action plan in place then there are perceived problems

- Could discourage women from staying in engineering
  - Due to hostile atmosphere in the work place

- At extreme can cause both genders not to work at their best
  - Males – what’s the point won’t get promotion
  - Females – get selected anyway so don’t need to work hard
Solution

- For jobs and promotions there needs to be a fair, open, unbiased, selection process at all levels
  - This also means promotion through “the old boys club” must stop

- The core problem of getting girls interested in engineering needs to be solved
  - Reward schools that get more girls to study physics
  - Extend teacher training bounties to persuade more women to teach maths, physics and design technology
  - Encourage more female role models
Solution

- Need to improve the image of engineering
  - Emphasize the creative side of engineering
  - De-emphasize the repairing machines image

- Need to promote engineering as a future career for both girls and boys

Within a generation we could make a step change in the number of women entering engineering and thus negate the need for positive action.

If the medical society can do it, so can engineering
Answer to Questions

- Question 1 – Receive 10 CVs, 1 from woman no selection process, hire woman
  Illegal

- Question 2 – Hold open day, 10 CVs, 3 from women, fair selection process, man hired
  Legal

- Question 3 – Hold open day, 10 CVs, 3 from women, fair selection process, woman hired
  Legal, but perceived to be illegal
Information

https://www.gov.uk/government/

- A Step by Step Practical Guide to Using Positive Action When Making Appointments
- Creating a fairer and more equal society

“The UK Government support and protect the rights of women by helping women to reach their full potential in the workplace and by helping businesses get the full economic benefit of women’s skills”