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AS SKILLS SHIFT FOR HIGH-PAYING JOBS, WOMEN SEE ADVANTAGES

Research paper shows top-paying occupations require more interpersonal skills such as collaboration and managing others

By Lauren Weber
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Men are losing ground in the labor market, and it's not just the ones without college degrees. Even those with higher education are seeing their chances of holding a good job drop relative to women, according to new research.

Three economists found that the high-paying occupations of the past few decades – from doctors to software engineers to financial advisers – require increasing levels of interpersonal skills such as collaboration, empathy and managing others.

“That’s been favoring women in high-paying jobs,” said one of the study’s authors Henry Siu, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

Women’s advancement in those jobs accelerated from 1980 to 2000. The trend slowed from 2000 to 2014, but even during that period, college-educated women saw their job prospects essentially hold steady while male peers’ prospects declined, according to Mr. Siu and his co-authors, Guido Cortes at the University of Manchester in England and Nir Jaimovich at the University of Southern California.

The economists have been presenting their working paper, “The End of Men and Rise of Women in the High-Skilled Labor Market,” at economics conferences in recent months.

Men are still better-represented in so-called good jobs, which the authors define as paying in the top 25% of all occupations or requiring mostly cognitive skills like problem-solving and analysis. But their chances of being in such jobs have fallen over time while women’s chances are rising.

In 1980, 66.2% of male college graduates worked in cognitive jobs; by 2000, that proportion had fallen to 63.3%, according to U.S. census data reviewed by the economists. Meanwhile, 58.8% of college-educated women held such roles in 2000, up from 54.2% in 1980. By 2014, 61.4% of college-educated men were in those good jobs, compared with 57.8% for their female counterparts.

To see how the skills and temperaments required for high-paying jobs have changed, the authors examined the 1977 and 1991 editions of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, a government manual now known as O*NET. They discovered that many such roles increasingly call for the ability to influence others and to interpret “feelings, ideas or facts.” They then cite research from the fields of psychology and neuroscience, including a paper about the collective intelligence of groups, as evidence that women typically exhibit more sophisticated interpersonal skills than men.

A decline in hiring discrimination may also account for part of women's improving career prospects, but such factors are nearly impossible to measure, said Mr. Siu. And he also cautioned that it's not all good news for women: A wage gap between the genders still puts women at a salary disadvantage.