



NEWS

# Women who are funny at work are harming their careers, according to this study

Meredith Lepore April 3, 2019



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"Honey, you're a funny girl." That's me. I just keep them in stitches. Doubled in half."

*Funny Girl* may have been a hit on Broadway, but if you are a woman with a sense of humor, you may want to keep it to yourself, especially in the workplace, according to a new [paper](#).

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The study, out of a research team from The University of Arizona and The University of Colorado at Boulder, looked at over 300 employees in the U.S. across a wide variety of industries to see how humor was perceived in the workplace amongst the sexes. They referenced other studies that looked at humor in the workplace not specifically focused on gender and found that "unsuccessful humor attempts can reduce status." In other words, if you try to be funny at work and aren't it does not bode well (that's what she said Michael Scott.) However other research has shown that humor in a leader can help with employee morale and satisfaction.



But this study wanted to see if humor was perceived differently depending on which sex was using it. It found that "women's use of humor will trigger lower ratings of status compared to nonhumorous women, while men's use of humor will trigger higher ratings of status compared to non-humorous men." Women's careers can actually be harmed if they use humor at work.

The researchers conducted the study by presenting participants with four videos featuring a retail manager (played by a female actor in two of them and a male actor in the other two) making a sales presentation. One version of the presentation featured a script with no jokes and the other had the actors incorporate workplace appropriate jokes into them. The funnier men were looked at with higher status by the participants than the non-funny men but for women, it was the opposite. Guess none of these people have seen an Iliza Shlesinger Netflix special.

## Stereotypes change how humor works

It, unfortunately, comes down to stereotypes. Because men at work are looked at as ambitious and focused and have a quality called "agency" which means task oriented and rationale, humor plays into that equation perfectly because it is looked at as something to help relieve stress at work. It acts as a tension reliever. So men get to be associated with the positive interpretation of humor. But women because they are often looked at as less dedicated to their work because they have more family responsibility and therefore couldn't be as focused on their careers as a man get associated with the disruptive qualities of humor. This is when humor is looked at as a nuisance or interruption and makes the woman seem less committed. Somehow women get to be the Al Yankovic of humor while men get to be John Mulaney. In other words, when women are humorous it makes them look like less capable leaders.

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However, the context of this study should be noted as it was based on first impressions. A woman who has shown she is dedicated to her job and also humorous at work may be appreciated more. Hey, Tina Fey didn't become the head writer at *Saturday Night Live* and then the star and producer of *30 Rock* because she wasn't both funny and hard working. Joanne Gilbert, a professor at Alma College in Michigan who studies humor, communication and performance, told [The Washington Post](#) that humor can be a beneficial tool for some women in the workplace. "If she's in a board meeting of all male colleagues and she can make people laugh, I would absolutely encourage her to do it," Gilbert said. For a woman in a position of power, humor can help humanize her a bit even though it should be perfectly normal for a woman to have an authoritative role.

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