

# What Women IT Professionals Want from Their Work

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## INTRODUCTION

Articles in the popular IT press that address the underrepresentation of women often claim that women IT professionals differ from their male counterparts in what they desire from jobs, suggesting that special understanding of women's work-related values is required to improve their recruitment and retention (e.g., Bentsen, 2000; Gotcher, 1999; Paul, 2001). Although a great deal of research has been conducted on possible value differences that may affect women's and girls' attraction to IT as a career choice, there is relatively little empirical research showing that women actually do differ significantly from similarly trained men in the importance they place on particular qualities of work. The tradeoffs IT workers may make across desired attributes and the challenges they face in achieving career goals, however, are likely to show differences along gender lines. More methodologically-rigorous and practically-oriented research in job attribute preferences could help organizations make the changes in job design and personnel policies most likely to increase the representation of women in IT.

## BACKGROUND

In general, little is known about the effectiveness of recruitment and retention practices targeted specifically at a particular demographic pool of applicants, such as women (Barber, 1998). It is well established, however, that the fit between what an employee or applicant desires from work and her perception of what she has is an important driver of both attraction to a job and turnover, as shown by both research in

human resource management generally and with IT professionals specifically (Jiang & Klein, 2002). Thus, a key question is whether there are job attributes that women, on average, value more (or less) than men.

There is a large work of research literature many decades old comparing men's and women's ratings of how much they desire particular attributes of paid work (often referred to as work values), conducted among the general population, with adolescents, and across various educational and occupational groups (see Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000, for a review). Most of these studies have reported gender differences in preferences for at least some job attributes. For example, traditionally it has been widely thought that men value earnings and leadership more, whereas women are especially likely to value social factors such as the opportunity to help others. These beliefs are also found among IT professionals. For example, in a cover story in *Infoworld* (Gotcher, 1999) women IT professionals are described as valuing income less than they value work assignments that allow growth. This article is based on a survey sponsored by Women in Technology International that had no male respondents for comparison purposes, but the underlying assumption is that men *would* respond differently. A software vice-president is quoted to the effect that "it's very different if you're interviewing men or women; I don't get as many questions about money and stock options from women" (Gotcher, 1999, p. 7). However, whether this behavior means that women actually care less about money, or rather that they have been socialized not to ask directly for more (see Babcock & Laschever, 2003), has important implications.

In the most comprehensive review of job attribute preferences, Konrad et al. (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of over two hundred studies, and found statistically significant gender differences for many attributes, generally consistent with gender roles and stereotypes. They note, however, that the effect sizes tend to be small, and that many masculine-typed job attributes, such as prestige and recognition, have become relatively more important to women in recent years, suggesting that aspirations have risen as barriers to equal opportunity have lessened (Konrad et al., 2000).

It is also true that reported job attribute preferences may be shaped at least partially by work and life experiences. Many researchers (e.g., Rowe & Snizek, 1995) have argued that gender differences in job attribute preferences are negligible once such factors as occupation and socioeconomic level are taken into account, which many studies have not done. Konrad et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis did include an analysis of studies of matched adults working in male-dominated occupations. In this subcategory, women rated several feminine-typed items, such as working with people, more highly than men, but they also rated many masculine-typed items, such as earnings, leadership, and challenge, *more* highly than their male counterparts. Most gender effects were small, and suggested a net pattern of greater similarity than difference among men and women currently working in the same predominantly masculine professions.

Research in this area conducted specifically on IT populations by IT researchers is relatively sparse, and the methods used sometimes make comparisons and conclusions difficult. Igbaria, Greenhaus, and Parasuraman (1991) surveyed several hundred members of the Association for Computing Machinery and classified each respondent according to which of eight possible career orientations he or she assigned the average highest score; thus men's and women's average ratings for various job attributes were not given. Igbaria et al. (1991) reported that a much higher proportion of women than men were primarily "life-style integration" oriented, defined as having an emphasis on family concerns and self-development. Conversely, a higher proportion of men were found to be technically oriented (primarily focused on the intrinsic technical content of work). The reported gender differences, however, were not

analyzed controlling for type of work within IT or organizational level.

Other research suggests that men and women in IT might not differ significantly in what they desire from a job. Smits, McLean, and Tanner (1993) surveyed recent information systems graduates (IS) from over thirty U.S. colleges and universities and found that the similarities in desired job characteristics between men and women greatly overshadowed the differences. This study, where respondents had similar educational backgrounds and work tenure, also controlled for achievement level, and supports the argument that men and women are less likely to report significantly different preferences when they are similar on relevant factors.

Likewise, in a recent study conducted by the current authors (details available upon request), we surveyed IS alumni from a single program who had received their bachelor's degree within the previous five years. Men and women respondents did not differ significantly on the importance they placed on any of seven job attributes, including income, opportunity to develop technical skills, leadership opportunities, or social climate. Interestingly, both men and women on average rated work-life balance as most important.

After analyzing a broad survey of IT workers within the United Kingdom who rated the importance of several factors when choosing a new job, Panteli, Stack, Atkinson, and Ramsay (1999) concluded that women's responses were essentially similar to men's, with both men and women most likely to rate "job interest" and "challenging" as very important.

## **FUTURE TRENDS**

### **Methodological Concerns**

One problem with research on "what women in IT want" is that it relies on subjective ratings of very generally described job attributes. Typically, survey respondents are asked to rate the importance of each of a series of factors, such as responsibility, job interest, income, and promotional opportunities. However, priming artifacts and social desirability effects may limit the conclusions we should draw from such direct self-report data. Gender socializa-

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