

An Inclusive IS&T Work Climate

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INTRODUCTION

Employees develop perceptions regarding which behaviors are expected, supported, and rewarded in their organization through a series of workplace events, practices, and procedures; these beliefs comprise a workplace climate (Schneider, Wheeler, & Cox, 1992). An inclusive workplace climate is one in which everyone has a sense of belonging, is invited to participate in decisions, and feels that their input matters (Hayes, Bartle, & Major, 2002; Major, Davis, Sanchez-Hucles, Germano, & Mann, 2006). For an inclusive climate to exist, all organizational members should feel equally welcome in the IT work environment and feel free to make suggestions regardless of their gender or ethnicity. Moreover, all organizational members should feel that their contributions have an impact (Major et al., 2006). Rather than simply tolerating diversity, organizations with an inclusive climate embrace it and capitalize upon it. In an IT sample, inclusive climate was positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational and career commitment, and intentions to remain with one's employer (Major et al., 2003). In contrast, exclusion is associated with turnover, reduced organizational commitment and decreased job satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Research has highlighted the role of three contributors to inclusive climate: (1) strong supervisor/subordinate relationships, (2) supportive coworkers, and (3) a supportive culture (Margolis & Fisher, 2003; Major, Davis, Sanchez-Hucles, & Mann, 2003). The current article briefly reviews social factors that have hindered the realization of a gender and minority inclusive IT climate and draws upon these three contributors to identify strategic levers to guide managers and researchers toward fostering inclusion in the IT workforce.

BACKGROUND

Women's underrepresentation in IT education and careers has been recognized as a global problem (Huyer, 2005; Rosser, 2005). In addition, certain U.S. ethnic minority groups, including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans, are underrepresented in programs preparing people for IT careers (Tapia, Kvasny, & Trauth, 2004). Researchers refer metaphorically to a "leaky pipeline" to describe the attrition of women and minorities from pathways leading to participation and success in IT education and careers. From childhood to adulthood, a variety of experiences, such as limited access and exposure to computers, and the unappealing portrayal of the IT industry (e.g., depictions of individuals working in solitude and the stereotypical IT "geek image"), discourage female and minority interest in IT (see Rosenblum, Ash, Coder, & Dupont, 2006, Splender, 1997; Tapia et al., 2004).

Barriers persist in the IT workplace. Women encounter a "glass ceiling," a situation in which men hold top-level positions and women are limited in their ability to move up due to barriers that are not readily obvious or overt (Martin, 2005). In fact, U.S. women hold fewer than 5% of IT executive positions, such as chief information officer (Gingras, 1999). Instead, they are more likely to hold support positions such as help desk operator or support center staff (Belt, 2002). The nature of IT work can be a barrier, requiring long and irregular hours and, in some positions, the flexibility to travel. These job demands infringe upon family life and women are frequently less willing or able to sacrifice their home and childcare duties (Panteli, Stack, & Ramsay, 1999; Roldan, Soe, & Yakura, 2004).

Populated primarily by white males, the IT work climate can be "chilly" because of characteristics that make it unfriendly and inhospitable to women and minorities (Roldan et al., 2004). An inclusive climate is

warm and inviting to all regardless of their demographic characteristics. This review considers key factors that research has shown to contribute to an inclusive climate and to the success of a diverse workforce. We begin with a discussion of self-fulfilling prophecy as a mechanism through which workforce inclusion disparities function. Mentoring, leadership and coworker relationships are each discussed as levers for social change.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Based on experience and perceptions, people develop expectations about what behaviors to anticipate from other individuals. Expectations, in turn, can realize themselves through the actions of the perceiver and subsequent reactions of the perceptual target. Social scientists refer to the tendency of others' assumptions to evoke behavior as *self-fulfilling prophecy* and have highlighted its influence in the professional development and success of women and minorities. Expectations are particularly influential when they are held by powerful individuals. Through the process of self-fulfilling prophecy, managers form expectations of employees and behave according to their expectations by either providing or withholding emotional and social support. In turn, subordinates exposed to high expectations and greater support gain experience, confidence, and ultimately perform better, whereas those confronted with low expectations and a lack of support are less likely to be high performers, given a relative lack of opportunity to bolster confidence and experience (Eden, 1997).

Self-fulfilling prophecy can be either negative or positive and can operate on an individual level or pertain to entire social groups. In IT, women often feel that they need to outperform men to be viewed equally. When they act upon this expectation, the quality of their work may be adversely affected, and they appear less competent as a result (Valian, 1998). Along the same lines, members of underrepresented groups feel extra pressure because they fear confirming and reinforcing negative stereotypes about their group. *Stereotype threat* is the circumstance when this extra pressure reduces performance and persistence (Steele, 1997).

Organizational development experts have recognized the power of positive expectations as an instrument to change work climates for the better. They advocate *appreciative inquiry* or emphasis

upon optimism, positive expectations, and challenge (Srivasta & Cooperrider, 1990). By focusing on what the organization does well, rather than what it does poorly, and acknowledging individual contribution, organizations become better aligned and equipped to achieve inclusive climate. Holding positive expectations can be especially transforming in situations where low expectations are usually held (McNatt, 2000) and when gender and racial stereotypes tend to influence expectations (Jussim & Eccles, 1992).

MENTORING

Mentoring is a process by which a more experienced employee (e.g., a supervisor) guides, advises, counsels and otherwise enhances the professional development of another employee. Mentors act as role models, provide social support, and serve as sources of information, especially early in an employee's organizational tenure. Mentors can be instrumental in the new employee's career development (Scandura, 1992). For example, mentoring is associated with higher performance ratings, more frequent promotions, greater job satisfaction and higher income (e.g. Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Developing an effective mentor-protégé relationship can be challenging for minority and female employees. Although women and minorities may prefer a mentor who is demographically similar to themselves (Murrell, Crosby, & Ely, 1999), they are in short supply given the composition of the IT workforce. Compared to white males, incumbent women and minorities in the IT workforce are more likely to be in the junior stages of their careers. At early career stages, professionals have more limited social networks, and less access to information, and therefore may have limited effectiveness as mentors (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004). White males may be better mentoring resources to the extent that they have greater social status and power in the organization (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

However, mixed-gender mentoring relationships also have obstacles. In the case of a male mentor and a female protégé, concern that others will make sexual attributions about the nature of their relationship can make both parties reluctant to pursue a mentoring relationship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). When mixed-gender mentoring relationships do develop, they may offer

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