Overcoming the Segregation/Stereotyping Dilemma: Computer Mediated Communication for Business Women and Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The fastest recent growth in women-owned firms has been in traditionally male industries such as telecommunications and construction. This development has increased the importance of cross-sex networking to women professionals and entrepreneurs. Women business owners (particularly those working in traditionally male sectors) may be hindered in their efforts to build collaborative relations with male ties because of gender stereotyping. As a response, women may elect to join all-female networks, but because women in male-dominated sectors are relatively scarce, this strategy reduces access to resources. This paper suggests that virtual networking via web pages, email, chat rooms, and networking sites can provide a solution for women in male dominated contexts stuck in a 'segregation/stereotyping bind'. Additionally, virtual communities can provide access to a very large number of diverse others and network maintenance is substantially easier than face-to-face interaction.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Entrepreneurship, Gender Stereotyping, Segregation, Women Business Owners,

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, there has been a swift and sizeable uptake of business ownership amongst women in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002; Lowrey, 2005). Women now own around 40% of all non-agricultural businesses – amounting to an increase of more than 25-fold since records began in 1972 (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2008). Moreover, the fastest recent growth in women-owned firms has been in traditionally male industries like telecommunications and construction. According to the National Women’s Business Council (NWBC), the number of privately held women-owned firms in non-traditional industries1 grew by 17.5% between 1997 and 2002, outstripping the 10.4% growth in the number of women-owned firms in traditional industries 2004 (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2008). Growth has been strongest in the construction industry; between 1997 and 2002, the number of women-owned firms grew by 35.5% Center for Women’s Business Research, 2008).

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All business owners must identify, access, and mobilize resources to put to use in their ventures, and the need for resources is highest in capital intensive, traditionally male industries such as high-technology and construction. Setting up such businesses is no easy task, and network members may be able to provide direct or indirect access to the required assistance, support, information and tangible resources (Kim & Aldrich, 2005). This means that entrepreneurship cannot happen unless a business owner establishes the right connections to the right others (Witt, 2004). Entrepreneurship should therefore be viewed as an inherently social activity; “embedded in a social context, channeled and facilitated or constrained and inhibited by people’s positions in social networks” (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986, p. 4). Little wonder, then, that having well-structured social networks is linked to entrepreneurial intentions (Ljungren & Kolvereid, 1996; Aldrich et al., 1997; Renzulli et al., 2000; Liñán & Santos, 2007), start-up completion (Hansen, 2000), odds of survival (Srinivasan et al., 1994; Uzzi, 1996), opportunity recognition (Ozgen & Baron, 2007), idea gathering (Birley, 1985), ability to secure venture capital (Baum & Silverman, 2004) and finance before floatation (Florin et al., 2003), internationalization (Coviello & Munro, 1995), and growth (Brown & Butler, 1995; Hansen, 1995; Liao & Welsch, 2001; Roomi, 2007).

There is evidence that women operating their firms in male-dominated industries encounter greater levels of gender stereotyping, sex discrimination and difficulty accessing established networks than women in sectors like retail and services (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001; Coyle & Flannery, 2005). These women are thus provided with a clearer motivation for forging homophilious networks – that is, networks comprised primarily of other women. The problem is that relying on same-sex networks for leads and information denies women access to the privileged resources held by men in the industry. The resources, information, knowledge and expertise held by men operating in these fields is likely to be of a better quality due to their longer establishment and better entrenched positions in network hierarchies. As argued twenty years ago “women must break into the ‘old boys’ network by deliberately invading male turf however possible. A ‘new girls’ network will create strong ties and promote social support but with… most of the major corporate and financial centers of power controlled by men, sex-segregated separate networks are a decided handicap for women (Aldrich, 1989).

It is important that women in male-dominated industries are able to network effectively with their male colleagues because the ability to secure resources is a necessary prerequisite for increasing the numbers of women-owned firms in nontraditional sectors. There is evidence that entrepreneurial segregation contributes to levels of gender inequality in similar ways to sex segregation in employment (Marlow et al., 2008). Women earn less than men in self-employment and business ownership, and segregation makes a significant contribution to earnings disparities (Hundley, 2001; Lowrey, 2005). The sectors of the economy in which women’s businesses are concentrated generate lower levels of turnover than typically male sectors such as manufacturing and high technology (Loscocco et al., 1991).

The proposition advanced in this paper is that virtual networking via web pages, email, chat rooms and networking sites is one way that women in nontraditional industry locations might attempt to ‘invade male turf’. As well as providing women who may have domestic responsibilities with a more flexible means of networking (Blisson & Kaur Rana, 2001), virtual communities may help women to reduce the social and spatial barriers preventing them from establishing connections with prestigious or powerful others, whilst simultaneously breaking down gender stereotypes (Nohria, 1992). As Sproull and Kiseler (1991, p. 13) predicted almost twenty years ago, social computing allows individuals to “cross barriers of space, time and social category to share expertise, opinions and ideas”. Additionally, virtual communities can provide access to a very large number of diverse others and network maintenance is substantially easier than face-to-face interaction.
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