

Career Management Concerns for Women in IT

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INTRODUCTION

Frequently researchers cite the perceived masculinity (Ahuja, 2002; Muryn Kaminiski & Reilly, 2004; Trauth, 2002) of information technology (IT) jobs as one of the main reasons that more women are not in the field. Such a diagnosis, while helpful for strategizing plans to attract new women into IT, does not address the needs and concerns of women currently in IT positions. These women are already aware of the degree to which IT is a masculine profession. They have entered the field in spite of this because they have a natural affinity for the work, found a niche that is comfortable for them, or developed a coping strategy. While these women may have overcome important barriers to enter the profession, entry does not constitute the last hurdle that they will have to face in their careers.

Certainly, the path for women intending to make a career in IT is an uphill one. One only needs to look at the disparity between the numbers of men and women working in the industry (United States Census Bureau, 2005) to sense that the playing field is not level. While acknowledging that women are overtly discriminated, it's important for women to become aware of the unintentional ways they are discriminated against, how they may inadvertently contribute to this, and possible methods for overcoming it.

Specifically, the authors will discuss how inadequate social networks, skill obsolescence, and limited vertical/internal job mobility present challenges to career success. While not unique, these challenges are more tangible and pervasive barriers to career success for women in IT. Also, while other scholars have identified similar career hurdles for women in IT (Ahuja, 2002), the current discussion differs from past scholarship in several key areas.

First, these issues are discussed with an emphasis for women once they have started their careers and not their initial career choice. Second, each section includes a vignette that provides an example and context explaining the underlying processes. Third, the paper goes beyond diagnosis and explanation to offering specific strategies for overcoming these barriers.

INADEQUATE SOCIAL NETWORKS

The local team (it doesn't matter what sport) just played an incredible game, Tom who is a big sports fan can't believe they pulled it out and are in the playoffs, as he sits down to the meeting with Sally and their manager, Alex, he asks if either caught the game over the weekend. Sally says no. But Alex and Tom start talking about key plays, bad calls, and their favorite players. Eventually they settle down to the meeting, but Alex decides to continue the conversation over lunch, as Sally wasn't a part of this conversation she wasn't invited. Its not that Tom and Alex don't like Sally or don't think she's talented, it's just they're talking sports so don't think to include her along. Unfortunately for Sally, Tom and Alex get into the habit of going out to lunch. As a result, Sally misses critical opportunities to bond with her manager and doesn't build the same relationship with Alex that Tom has. So when it comes time for promotion or assigning an important project, to whom does it go? While there is no conscious intent to discriminate against Sally, it is just that Alex, like most people, wants to see his friend do well. So all else equal, Tom is more likely to get the high profile assignment or promotion. Further, seeing the old boy's network at work once again,

Sally is more likely to feel disenfranchised and more apt to consider leaving the organization.

While this vignette describes a single example, the basic facts are repeated over and over again for both men and women. Companies like hiring and promoting individuals with personal connections because those personal connections provide greater assurances that the individual will fit into the culture. These personal connections, even if not work related, can also create a sense of mutual obligation and trust. Assuming that all else is equal in terms of work quantity and quality as well as future “promotability,” why take a chance on Sally when the management team already likes Tom? This similarity selection bias has been explained and documented in both the psychological (Schneider, 1987) and sociological (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) literatures.

Because of the gender composition of the workforce, this represents a particular problem for women in IT. The percentage of women among all IT workers varies between 20 and 30% for most IT jobs (US Census Bureau, 2005). Accordingly, this classifies women in IT jobs as a minority rather than tokens (Kanter, 1977). This means that there should be sufficient number of women to create gender-exclusive networks, making it more challenging, but not impossible to create such networks. Women in organizations or professions where they are tokens would, ironically, not have the luxury to create such networks and may by necessity create cross-gender relationships.

So women can improve their outcomes by starting to read the sports page, right?

Not exactly/completely. Developing an interest in sports won't help unless the rest of the conversation changes. Women need to be more strategic when deciding with whom they should develop relationships within their organization. Research has shown that women, in male dominated organizations, and minorities who have more demographically diverse networks generally experience greater levels of career success (Cox, 1994; Ely, 1994; Ibarra, 1995).

Managers can also help compensate for this phenomenon. One organizational strategy would be to take advantage of the potential of diversity training. If men and women in the organization

become conscious of how their default conversational topics can impact careers, they have a greater chance of changing communication patterns and thus promote cross-gender relationships (DeJanasz, Dowd, & Schneider, 2002). This requires that organizations develop training strategies that go beyond mere compliance issues.

Another way that an organization can help overcome this networking problem is by developing a mentoring program (Cox, 1994). Research has shown that mentoring improves the career outcomes for the protégé. Mentors improve employment outcomes for individuals by helping their protégés with career planning, acting as role models, navigating organizational politics, and providing the protégé with access to their own social networks. While the networking function is only one of many ways that the mentor contributes to the career success of the protégé, it's the function most relevant to the current discussion.

While mentoring programs have, in general, been shown to be effective, the overall success rate of formal mentoring programs is relatively less than informal ones (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Unfortunately, given the issues involved in the formation of personal networks the likelihood of large numbers of women entering into informal mentorship programs with men seems remote. Still, organizational intervention with a formal program is preferable to no program.

While mentors and protégés that share common interests will develop stronger relationships, organizations should be careful about the obvious matching of men with men and women with women. This is not to say that a woman would not make a good mentor for another woman, just that a main reason for instituting such relationships is to help overcome the cross-gender networking problem. Selecting women as mentors is perfectly okay as long as the potential mentor has a diverse/powerful social network. Otherwise, all else equal, a potential female protégé could arguably benefit more by being paired up with a male mentor, as this would address the important cross-gender networking concerns.

SKILL OBSOLESCENCE

While who you know might get you into a specific position, what you know will keep you there. Thus

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