Issues Raised by the Women in IT (WINIT) Project in England

Marie Griffiths
University of Salford, Greater Manchester, UK

Karenza Moore
University of Salford, Greater Manchester, UK

THE UK IT SECTOR: THE CONTEXT OF THE WINIT PROJECT

This article explores several issues raised by the European Social Fund (ESF) Women in IT (WINIT) project (February 2004 to February 2006) which focuses on women in the IT industry in England. The project consists of an online questionnaire aimed at women currently in the IT sector in England and those wishing to return to IT following a career or "carer" break (a break to care for children, or sick or elderly relatives). The WINIT team aims to target 750 respondents in order to collect and analyse data from a demographically diverse group on a range of issues including perceptions of fairness of pay, promotion prospects and future career aspirations. In addition the WINIT team are currently conducting a series of in-depth interviews with women in the IT industry in order to gain a rich understanding of these women's perceptions of, and experiences in, IT in England.

In order to explore the issues raised by the WINIT project it is important to consider the wider historical and contemporary socio-economic backdrop of individual women's experiences. The IT industry in Britain has experienced considerable expansion over the past twenty years. In November 2004 it was estimated that the IT workforce consisted of 1.2 million people (580,000 in the IT industry, with an additional 590,000 IT professionals in other sectors). There are also an estimated 20 million people in Britain using IT in their everyday work. All the above figures are predicted to grow between 1.5% to 2.2% per annum over the next decade (e-skills UK/Gartner, 2004). In terms of gender, in spring 2003 it was estimated that 151,000 women were working in IT occupations compared with 834,000 men, whilst in the childcare sector, there were less than 10,000 men working in these occupations, compared with 297,000 women (Miller, Neathey, Pollard, & Hill, 2004). To clarify, it is estimated that only 1 in 5 of the IT workforce in Britain is female (e-skills UK/Gartner, 2004). Such statistics indicate a classic case of *horizontal* occupational segregation. However, it must be noted that all statistics regarding the IT industry should be treated with caution given the problems of defining the sector (von Hellens, Nielsen, & Beekhuyzen, 2004).

In the UK, figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) indicate that women accounted for 30% of IT operations technicians, but a mere 15% of ICT Managers and only 11% of IT strategy and planning professionals (Miller, Neathey, Pollard, & Hill, 2004). Although women are making inroads into technical and senior professions there remains a "feminisation" of lower level jobs, with a female majority in operator and clerical roles and a female minority in technical and managerial roles (APC, 2004). Again this is a classic case of *vertical* gender segregation with women more strongly represented in lower level IT occupations than in higher status and higher paid ones (Miller, Neathey, Pollard, & Hill, 2004, p. 69). There is a relatively narrow gender pay-gap in the IT sector in comparison with all occupations. According to the ONS (2003), the gender pay-gap amongst ICT professionals in terms of hourly earnings stands at 7.5%, which is slightly narrower than the figure for all professional occupations.

WINIT'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The under-representation of women in the sector has been the focus of various initiatives in the UK over the last 30 years. These initiatives predominately draw on liberal feminist approaches to the women in computing "problem". Perhaps the most notable aspect of the 'liberalist' agenda is the recommendations for action advocated. The liberal feminist approach to the "problem" of women in computing, typified by Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) and Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) discourses (Henwood, 1996) highlights the need to improve access to ICT, the need to encourage more women onto computing courses, and the need for better Equal Opportunities and Managing Diversity legislation. It is suggested that better gender equity will bring economic benefits for specific employers and for the UK economy, with the IT "skills gap" being narrowed through the greater participation of women in the IT industry (e-skills UK/Gartner, 2004).

There have been many criticisms of the liberal feminist approach in general terms and in terms of the actions advocated to address gender imbalances in IT settings (Cockburn, 1986). These include its tendency towards technological determinism, given that it leaves "technology" largely untroubled and views technology as "neutral" (Faulkner, 2000). The "individualism" of the liberal feminist approach to the "problem" of women and technology has also been highlighted as problematic, situating the "problem" as it does with the "failure" of women to realise the (liberating) potential of technologies (such as the Internet), their "failure" to properly engage with these technologies in home and workplace settings and their "lack" of awareness of the myriad of career options made available through technological engagement. We suggest, with others (Clegg & Trayhurn, 1999), that there is more to the women and computing "problem" than getting more women into the IT industry and into particular (high-paid, more prestigious) posts, although this is of course important.

With the contextualisation of the woman and computing "problem" comes the highlighting of the unsuitability of the IT workplace for many women; the long hours and presenteeism (Simpson, 1998) culture that exists within IT, negative perceptions of part-time workers in the IT sector (DTI, 2004) and of part-time work more generally (Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1999), the instability of the IT market, and the deeply ingrained "masculine culture" of IT—these aspects need to change before (some) women can comfortably find a place within the IT industry. Rather than women, and for example older workers, being forced to "adapt" to the current IT culture, it is suggested that the IT industry needs to broaden its appeal to a more diverse pool of talent (Platman & Taylor, 2004; Women & Equality Unit, 2004). Having explored some of the work on gender and technology which has informed WINIT research, we now move on to some of our main findings at this initial stage.

THE WINIT SURVEY: INITIAL FINDINGS FROM 111 FEMALE ICT PROFESSIONALS

The WINIT team used contemporary literature, and expertise from academic and industry practitioners, to generate pertinent survey themes and questions. The online WINIT survey is securely hosted at the University of Salford. It went live in autumn 2004, and will remain so until autumn 2005. The WINIT team promoted the survey URL to a wide variety of women's forums, networking groups, special interest groups (i.e., BCS [British Computer Society] Women), IT recruitment agencies and female academics. This means that female ICT professionals who completed the survey self-elected to do so. Given that this is an online survey there was no predefined sample.

The majority of the initial 111 respondents were aged between 30-34 years of age (20%) while the second largest age group (16%) were aged between 25-29 years of age. This reflects the predominance of relatively young people within the industry (Platman & Taylor, 2004). In terms of living arrangements, 59% were living in a couple which incorporated being married, remarried, and co-habiting. Geographically initial respondents were predominately located in London and South-East England (40%), with North-West England (12%) having the second

Related Content

Gender and Computing at University in the UK
Ruth Woodfield (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 365-371).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-computing-university/12762

Gender, Education, and Video Games
Anna Escofet Roigand Ma José Rubio Hurtado (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 682-686).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-education-video-games/12810

How E-Daters Behave Online: Theory and Empirical Observations
Celia Romm-Livermore, Toni M. Somers, Kristina Setzekornand Ashley Lynn-Grace King (2012). *Gender and Social Computing: Interactions, Differences and Relationships (pp. 236-256).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/daters-behave-online/55353

E-Dating: The Five Phases on Online Dating
Monica T. Whitty (2012). *Gender and Social Computing: Interactions, Differences and Relationships (pp. 222-235).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/dating-five-phases-online-dating/55352

A Cultural Studies Approach to Gender and ICT
Merete Lie (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 166-171).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/cultural-studies-approach-gender-ict/12732