IT Work in European Organisations

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INTRODUCTION

Employment in IT professions has increased greatly in recent years. Aside from the crisis of the dot.com crash in 2001, there has been significant growth in hardware manufacturing and particularly in software and IT services. In the European Union, employment in computer services doubled between 1997 and 2001, and grew by 10% in 1998 alone.

This pattern has not been matched by a parallel increase in women's participation in IT work. Women's employment in IT has remained resolutely around an average of 28% across the EU; in the professional areas of IT work (as opposed to clerical and other non-professional occupations), women made up only 17% in 2001 and their representation is in fact declining (Millar, 2001; Millar & Jagger, 2001; Webster & Valenduc, 2003).

It is an issue of some concern to policy makers, employers, and indeed gender equality practitioners that, despite more than 20 years of attempts to attract women into this comparatively well paid and privileged area of the labour market, women remain such a small and, worse, apparently declining, proportion of IT professionals. Why are women still so poorly represented in IT professions in the EU? What is the nature of working life in IT and what are the working conditions like? Why have more than 20 years of initiatives to get more women into technology professions had so little apparent impact?

BACKGROUND

This article summarises the results of a European research project which attempted to answer these questions, focussing on the situation in seven EU countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and the UK. Entitled "Widening Women's Work in Information and Communication Technologies" (WWW-ICT), the project combined biographi-

cal interviews with female and male IT professionals with case studies of employing organisations in the IT services sector, and was conducted between 2002 and 2004.

As Table 1 shows, women still made up less than one-fifth of IT professionals in these countries in 2001, with the exception of Ireland. Indeed, IT professionals in Europe are typically male, young (in their mid twenties), and without domestic responsibilities. The majority of women working in the sector are also young and childless. These employees are among the most favoured in the labour market. Wages are relatively high, and many IT workers are paid in a combination of cash and share options. Moreover, employment contracts involving individually agreed pay, terms and conditions replace the fixed pay grades traditionally found elsewhere. Performance-related pay or bonus schemes are common (Valenduc et al., 2004).

Employment is predominantly on full-time permanent contracts. Part-time employment and flexible working arrangements are very unusual, though

Table 1. Employment in IT professions (ISCO213) in the WWW-ICT countries, 2001 (thousands of employees)

	Female	Male	% Female
EU15	265.4	1264.8	17%
Belgium	8.8	49.7	15%
France	50.3	250.3	17%
Ireland	6.0	14.6	29%
Italy	(2.0)	9.0	(18%)
Austria	(1.4)	8.8	(14%)
United Kingdom	63.5	351.1	15%

Note: Data in brackets and on Portugal are considered unreliable by Eurostat
Source: Eurostat, data from the Labour Force Survey, quoted in Valenduc et al. (2004)

they are more common among female employees. Full-time working often means long working hours. Project work can be unpredictable, involving tight deadlines, so evening and weekend working is common. Working hours often exceed those laid down in employment contracts, though overtime is rarely paid for. Employees can arrive at and leave work according to their own preferences, but this tends to translate into long hours, which are often self-imposed (Mermet & Lehndorff, 2001). Consequently, in France, for example, the implementation of the 35-hour working week has been very problematic in this sector; even the imposition of the legal limit of 39 hours was fraught with difficulties. Given these kinds of working patterns, it is unsurprising that the sector employs predominantly young men able (and apparently willing) to provide the total availability needed by their employers.

In employment and industrial relations, the IT sector is a world away from traditional companies. Trade union membership and collective bargaining are weak, and there is corporate antipathy or hostility to unions. There are particularly low levels of unionisation on U.S. owned green-field sites. The fact that computer services employees are young, highly skilled, and up until recently, operating in a favourable labour market, also militates against trade unionism. Even in countries with strong collective bargaining frameworks (for example, Belgium, France), union membership is low and employment relations are highly individualised. Pay and conditions are agreed bilaterally, and often kept confidential from other employees. Pay is based partly on performance assessed through individual appraisals carried out periodically by line managers. Performance systems, bonus systems, and stock options have been relatively lucrative for IT professionals, but since the 2001 downturn, they have been more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the stock and labour markets. Communication—not consultation—is carried out on a one-to-one basis between employers and employees (Valenduc et al., 2004). This is the context within which we attempt to understand the under-representation of women in the professional areas of IT.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

The Organisation of Work

IT companies tend to be flat structures with few hierarchical layers. It is common for IT professionals to be organised into project teams, led by a project manager. These teams may be temporary, operating only for the duration of the project, or semi-permanent. They may consist of interdependent workers with complementary skills, or individuals with the same skills working independently of one another within the team. Women are often undervalued in interdependent teams, where their technical skills are taken for granted relative to the interpersonal or team-working skills of their male counterparts (Woodfield, 2000).

Working Time and Work-Life Balance

IT work is predominantly full-time work. Much of it is deadline-driven, particularly where it is governed by project timetables or client demands. Long working hours are the norm, as is availability to the company and to clients. Hot-desking and client-based working are common among IT professionals, as is home-based working, with systems provided by employers. This can extend working hours; it is common for IT professionals to work at "unsocial" working hours—late at night after children are in bed, or very early at weekends.

Working hours? They are exaggerated because no one can say a simple "no" to the client. This is the company's policy. You have to give all your availability and energy to the firm: working overtime and sometimes also at home after work. (Marta, Italian IT company, quoted in Webster [2004] Case Studies of Work Organisation [WWW-ICT Deliverable No. 7], www.ftu-namur.org/www-ict)

Part-time working is very unusual in this sector, and is principally done by women returning from maternity leave. It has been found to severely limit progression prospects, with companies demoting and marginalising part-timers. Other family-friendly

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