

Making of a Homogeneous IT Work Environment

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INTRODUCTION

What is the responsibility of the information technology (IT) industry in addressing gender issues? Exploring recruitment and retention issues that exist for women are crucial for increasing the capacity and diversity of the IT profession.

An understanding of the underlying causes of gender under representation in the IT profession is needed to develop effective workplace human resource strategies to attract and retain more of this underrepresented group. Unfortunately, while there is a documented need for a deeper understanding of the imbalance in this field, there is a lack of adequate data, methods and theory to provide a basis for explanation and prediction. Despite numerous efforts to recruit and retain women into both educational programs in IT and the IT workforce, these efforts have largely proved unsuccessful.

Women remain acutely underrepresented at the higher-paying professional and managerial levels (National Science Foundation, 2000; National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, 2001-2002; Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2001; ITAA, 2003; Geewax, 2000; Spender, 1997). While women now represent a significant proportion of the labor force, they continue to be underrepresented in the IT workforce. Women have made few gains in employment numbers in the sector between 1996 and 2002. The Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) (2003) reported that the percentage of women in the overall IT workforce actually dropped from 41% to 34.9%. The underrepresentation of women in the IT workforce can be attributed to a "pipeline" issue. Women earn significantly fewer undergraduate degrees in computer science and engineering than their representation in the United States (U.S.) population. (Camp, 1997; Freeman & Aspray, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical standpoint from which IT recruitment has been viewed in this article is one encompassing the social construction of gender in the IT-enabled workplace. Many of the processes that take place within organizations on a daily basis are imbued with gender attitudes and behaviors, and have strong implications for power, exploitation and control in the workplace. Gender can be seen as a set of patterned, socially produced differences between male and female, which usually involve the subordination of women, concretely or symbolically (Acker, 1992, 1998, 1999). The social construction of gender in the workplace perspective posits the development of and maintenance of a masculinized IT culture that systematically excludes women from IT work and all educational and professional steps leading up to IT work (Trauth, 2002; von Hellens, 2001; Tapia, 2002). This view attributes the problem to the construction of IT as a "man's world." This perspective, although recognizing that there are no universally male or female cultural traits, emphasizes that within the IT workplace certain social characteristics are gathered together in a unit that has come to be seen as "male" and the excluded traits as "female." Female IT workers are faced with two choices: to masculinize themselves and "fit in" or to challenge the cultural system and attempt to feminize the workplace (Cockburn, 1983, 1988; Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Wajcman, 1991; Adam, Emms, Green & Owen, 1994; Balka & Smith, 2000; Eriksson, Kitchenham & Tijdens, 1991; Hacker, 1981, 1989, 1990; Hovenden, Robinson, & Davis, 1995; Murray, 1993; Glastonbury, 1992; Lovegrove & Segal, 1991; Spender, 1995; Star, 1995; Webster, 1996; Woodfield, 2000).

Three Case Studies

Three IT companies who fit the description of a dot-com were examined at various points during their life cycle: *Headsup.com*, *Contentman.com* and *Ebiz.com*. To read more about these studies please see Tapia (2003, 2004). Briefly, the three companies were overwhelmingly male (82%, aggregate data). For example, after 1 year of existence, Headsup.com had 80 employees, 19 of whom were female. After 18 months, 30 employees left, including 15 out of the 19 women. After 23 months, the company had 20 employees, none of which were female. After 24 months, the company officially folded.

Gendered Recruitment

During the era known as the dot-com bubble, how successful was the IT industry in terms of recruiting and retaining women? What lasting effects can we see from the dot-com bubble's social changes on women's role in the future of the IT industry (see Tapia, 2003, 2004)? The dot-com era can be characterized as a time in which the IT industry was facing an acute shortage of employees, and yet, as the analysis shows, chose to create a culture that made it very difficult for female employees to be hired, trained and retained. I argue that in a few small start-up firms, the organizational culture created during this era made it nearly impossible for female employees to be recruited and retained. These cultures may have satisfied the immediate needs of the small start-up IT firm but were disastrous for traditional organizational measures that protected, recruited and retained women in the workforce, and that make the IT workplace hospitable to a variety of people, including women.

The dot-com era and its accompanying get-rich-quick mentality led to unconventional hiring practices, which led to the hiring of homogeneous populations, excluding women, people of color and older professionals. The essential problem with this is that IT has become associated with many material and immaterial benefits in society. This method of hiring systematically selected individuals of one race, gender, age, background, culture and class granted those benefits to a select few.

During this time, technical professionals believed they were capable of starting and managing their own business with no training, no business or managerial skills and no professional human resources help. This led to a lack of protective organizational norms and values. This opened the door to the creation of a hostile work environment. Protective organizations, such as a professional human resources staff, were seen as unnecessary fat in a lean, agile, fast-moving organization. The prevailing mentality fostered a short-timer culture in which anything was acceptable, since most employees would be gone in a matter of months. The rules and policies that would have protected women and minorities from the creation of a hostile work environment were seen as slowing down the process.

According to case data, all three companies used three recruitment strategies: online employment listings (such as Monster.com), personal references and recruitment parties. The most successful method of hiring the most employees was by far recruitment parties. However, the employees who were hired through personal contacts (i.e., friends of the owners) were the most long-lived at each company. The initial growth spurt for each company was accomplished via personal references. For example, during this growth phase, Headsup.com grew from 5 to 20 employees, all male. When asked, the additional 15 employees stated they were friends of the original five. They had known them at college, or in a past job or through a friend of a friend. For Contentman.com, the original 20 employees were very homogeneous. They were all computer programmers, all male, all in their mid to late 20s, and they devoted almost all of their time to work activities. Their time had no competition from external forces, such as families, pets, girlfriends or hobbies.¹

Anticipating that they needed to grow fast, each company developed the second method of hiring: the college tour recruitment party. I argue that the development of this recruitment party was an extension of the first effort to hire more individuals who were just like themselves, but on a larger scale without the personal ties. The first phase of the recruitment party was to send invitations to universities' management information systems (MIS), computer science (CS) and information systems (IS)

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