

Women and the IT Workplace in North West England

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INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) information technology (IT) industry is highly male dominated, and women are reported to account for an estimated 15% of the sector's workforce (EOC, 2004). In Spring 2003 it was estimated that there were 151,000 women working in IT occupations compared to 834,000 men (EOC, 2004). Additionally, it has been reported that these numbers are rapidly declining, as women are haemorrhaging from the industry in disproportionate numbers (George, 2003). Although they are making inroads into senior and technical roles, "vertical segregation" is observable. Overall, women tend to be represented in lower-level IT jobs, with the majority, 30%, in operator and clerical roles; and the minority in technical and managerial roles, 15% of ICT management and 11% of IT strategy and planning professionals (EOC, 2004). This renders a "feminisation" of lower-level IT occupations. Educational statistics have also shown that fewer women are enrolling onto computer-related courses; there was a drop from 24% in 2000 to 20% in 2003 (E-Skills, 2004a).

BACKGROUND

Women's exclusion from technology has been attributed to the historical and socio-cultural construction of technology as a "masculine domain" due to

the relationship between masculinity and technological skills, rejecting claims that technology is "neutral" (Wajcman, 1991; Woodfield, 2000). Further, Cockburn (1985) argues that power differences between the sexes and their relationship with technology were consolidated in the development of capitalism and the move to manufacturing production. Working-class tradesmen formed into trade unions, which sought to exclude women, therefore denying them access to gain necessary skills to exploit in the labor market.

Wajcman (1991) suggests that "skill" is not some objectively identifiable quality, but rather, is an ideological category, one over which women were and continue to be denied the rights of contestation. Notions of "masculine" and "feminine" skills are problematic in the workplace, as there is more emphasis on the nature of the worker rather than the work. Additionally, categorisations and equations relating to skill are deeply ingrained with sexual bias; for example, men/skilled, women/unskilled (Woodfield, 2000), and further distinctions such as dirty/clean, heavy/light and technical/non-technical, which Game and Pringle (1984) argue have been constructed to preserve the sexual division of labor. Therefore, technological skill has historically been defined as "exclusively male," whereas women's traditional work, such as nursing, is defined as non-technical (Cockburn, 1985). Additionally, as this type of work has been socially constructed as unskilled and un-technical, it has also been under-

valued; consequently, work of women is often deemed as inferior just because “it’s work women do” (Wajcman, 1991). Furthermore, this perception has led to the “gender typing” of roles in the workplace.

Gender divisions are actively created and sustained in organisational and domestic life. IT organisational culture is one embedded in a socio-political context of gender discrimination and the masculine domain of technology. If it is credible that (technical) skill and masculinity are so intimately entwined, then it is hardly surprising that women who challenge these masculine skills by gaining them themselves are subject to working under female unfriendly conditions and in hostile environments. It is also not surprising, then, that women must develop a number of coping strategies to deal with these sometimes impossible situations.

THE WINWIT STUDY

The purpose of this article is to present evidence of the working conditions and the cultural barriers women experience when working in the North West IT workplace. The Women in North West IT (WINWIT) project funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) was established to investigate the current regional situation for women in the IT labour market. The study was conducted over a 12-month period (January 2004-December 2004) by researchers at the University of Salford’s 6* RAE Information Systems Institute. The aim of the research project was to determine reasons for the under-representation of technical and senior women from public and private North West IT organisations and departments. The study explored issues for women entering, progressing, leaving and returning to the industry, as no specific data was previously available at the regional level. The researchers conducted 11 in-depth interviews with a heterogeneous sample of women at various stages of their careers and hosted an online questionnaire via a project Web site (www.isi.salford.ac.uk/gris/winwit). These women were selected from a variety of sources and were highly technical, with various levels of managerial status. The women were chosen for interview on the basis that they were interested in contributing to encouraging other women into or back to the industry and to support those already participating. The

qualitative data was central to the study, as this provided valuable views and experiences from the labor market sample. The researchers developed trusting relationships with the interviewees to alleviate worries and reluctance to participate. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed neutral setting, away from the workplace. A critical approach was taken when analysing the interview data to gain greater understanding of the under-representation of women in the sector. The main themes to arise from the investigation are barriers to work-life balance, organisational culture, pay and problematic equal opportunities and diversity policies.

Working Conditions in IT

The following section will examine the working conditions in IT and offer examples from the WINWIT study. In the UK, current Equal Opportunities legislation makes it acceptable to offer work only on a full-time basis even though this is difficult for many women to take up (Liff, 1997), particularly in the IT sector, as work is typically full-time, with only 5.3% (Platman & Taylor, 2004) of the total workforce working part-time. A long-hours culture is ubiquitous in today’s British companies, where UK employees work some of the highest hours in Europe—more than 48 per week (Rutherford, 2001), often involving unpaid overtime. These practices were reported as problematic for women from both public- and private-sector IT organisations, who gave accounts of long hours being used as a bargaining tool by women with families in return for four-day work weeks and reports of working 50 hours plus; these type of working conditions are indicative of the “hacker culture.” Males and females experience conflict between work and family lives differently, with women exhausted trying to maintain domestic and professional roles; conversely, men regret that they couldn’t spend more time with their children (Liff, 2001).

The flexibility required by clients often means constant availability (Hoque & Noon, 2004), particularly for those in technical and managerial roles. This can involve time spent away from home, sometimes for long periods. An interviewee explained how she often worked long hours and away from home: “I know I am single and don’t have a family to take care of, but I still have priorities and don’t just want home

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