

## Chapter X

# Understanding the “Mommy Tracks”: A Framework for Analyzing Work–Family Balance in the IT Workforce

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Despite the recent growth in the number of women in the American labor force, women are still under-represented in the IT workforce. Key among the factors that account for this under-representation is balancing work-family issues. This article presents a framework for analyzing work-family balance from a field study of women employed in the American IT workforce. The findings are examined through the lens of the individual differences theory of gender and IT to show the range of ways in which work-family considerations influence women's IT career decisions. The framework is used to support the theoretical argument that women exhibit a range of decisions regarding career and parenthood: the non-parent, the working parent, the back-on-track parent, and the off-the-track parent. These findings illustrate an identifiable theme that crosses geographical regions and timeframes; societal messages are complex and difficult to digest and are processed in different ways by different women, yet they contribute to the decisions women make about their professional and personal lives.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the transition to an information-based global economy, the lines between work and home are blurring as technology reshapes the workplace and as the nature of home life evolves. This evolution of domestic life has brought a shift in societal thinking about mothers working outside the home (McRae, 1996; Trauth et al., 2003). The National Council of Women’s Organizations (2003) estimates that 63% of women with children under the age of six and 78% of women with children ages six to 17 currently are employed in the labor force. Yet, there is still an under-representation of women in the IT workforce. A study produced by the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) Blue Ribbon Diversity Panel (2003) found that representation of American women in high-tech employment fell from 41% to 34.9% between 1996 and 2002. This number is significantly low, considering that during the same period, the percentage of women in all occupations in the U.S. was 46% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996, 2002). Thus, although the number of women in the labor force is increasing, the number of women in the IT workforce is noticeably lower.

Key among the factors that account for the under-representation of women in the IT workforce is balancing work and family. Some researchers have speculated that IT work is not an ideal fit for working mothers because of long work hours, increased conflicts with family responsibilities, and the difficulty of returning after maternity leave to an industry with ever evolving technologies (Kuosa, 2000; Webster, 1996). Thus, the question remains: Does the nature of IT work with regard to work-family balance negatively influence female participation in technical careers? Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to empirically explore the influence of work-family balance on American women’s participation in the IT workforce.

The reasons for doing so are twofold. First, although both women and men report issues with work-family balance (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Milkie & Peltola, 1999), the literature shows that women as a group tend to contribute more time to domestic duties and are more likely to make career sacrifices than men as a group (Hochschild, 1997; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Perlow, 1998). The National Council of Women’s Organizations (2003) found that, on average, women contribute 35.1 hours a week to domestic duties, while, on average, men contribute 17.4 hours a week. Furthermore, women average 11.5 years out of the paid labor force for care-giving responsibilities, whereas men average only 1.3 years. Thus, while men and women both report issues with work-family balance, they exhibit different response behaviors (Mennino & Brayfield, 2002). Second, the literature suggests that women in the IT workforce report higher levels of stress from work-life imbalance than their male counterparts (Duxbury et al., 1992; Gallivan, 2003; Igarria et al., 1997). Therefore, while men and women both report stress related to IT work, they exhibit different behaviors in response to that conflict. Consequently, it is important to investigate more deeply the work-family balance issues facing women in the IT workforce and their variety of responses<sup>1</sup>.

In this chapter, we investigate the particular ways that women in the American IT workforce experience and respond to issues of work-family balance by using the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT. We expand a work-family balance framework initially presented in Quesenberry et al. (2004) to articulate the ways in which individual and environmental factors influence female responses to issues of work-family balance. Finally, we develop a set of proactive responses in order for public policy and employers to address the challenges of balancing work and family.

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