

Net Gains

Success Strategies of Professional Women in IT

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Abstract: This paper explores the strategies employed by ten successful women IT professionals. Tensions and contradictions are identified in this discourse, particularly with regards to the special skills and qualities which women bring to IT work. It is suggested that the 'feminine' skills that are widely regarded as being useful in the IT industry, may actually work against women's advancement to upper management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women remain a minority of Information Technology professionals and, in most western countries their proportion has declined since the late 1980s. This has not gone unnoticed and has been the subject of considerable discussion [8]. Most research on women in the information technology (IT) industry has been concerned with practical questions: measuring disadvantage, establishing the causes, and attempting to put policies and strategies in place that will rectify the situation. Explanations have emphasised the supply factors; the majority of females are filtered out through management hiring choices and employment practices, lack of encouragement at school and, most importantly, by the image of computing as 'technical' and 'masculine'. This paper takes up alternative questions, exploring the strategies employed by women who have been successful in information technology (IT) and the tensions and contradictions in their own discourse about gender and technology.

2. THE RESEARCH

Our paper is based on semi-structured life history interviews with ten women working in the IT industry in Brisbane, Australia, in a variety of positions, in large and small organisations, both public and private. Eight of the women – A, C, B, D, E, F, G, and H - were in managerial positions with an average of 13 years experience, J and K graduated with an IT degree two years ago.

These women are both the subjects of our study and informed observers of the problems faced by women in the industry. We were interested in how these women framed their understandings of gender and IT and what advice they would give to younger women. We asked them to describe their entry into IT, how they reached their current position, their relationships with colleagues and the interface between work and home lives. They were asked to reflect about sexual discrimination, skills and training, technology, workplace cultures and management styles. Their stories offer fresh insights into female success in IT professions and helpful pointers for those concerned with improving the gender balance in the upper levels of IT management.

3. GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY

Despite its military origins, IT was initially perceived as a new industry without a long legacy of sex segregation. Because IT was experiencing rapid growth and was undergoing constant change, it was seen as relatively open to women [5]. However, in the 1980s the sexual division of labour became more entrenched, with men dominating the technical areas [3]. By the end of the decade, the female proportion of the IT workforce was beginning to fall in most western countries, including Australia. It was becoming clearer that technology embodied power relations and that overcoming “sex role stereotyping” was not a simple matter [4, p 8].

Rather than pressing women to ‘adapt,’ many feminists have insisted on the distinctive contribution that women can make. For example Spender [10] suggests that if more women became technicians, IT’s gendered nature will disappear over time, and will be transformed and improved by exposure to ‘female’ values. Many initiatives concerned with ‘getting women into IT’ therefore assume that it will not only be good for women but good for technology [6].

The organisational and communications skills that women are already deemed to possess provide a potential to challenge the associations of technology with masculinity. But, as Henwood [7] warns, this new emphasis

on flexibility and communications has not automatically brought about an influx of women. It is just as likely that these qualities may become absorbed into new models of masculinity and that men will be the first to demonstrate their competence in these new skills.

4. THE OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF IT

The occupational structure of computing work has become increasingly complex and differentiated and includes established occupations such as systems analysts, project management, multimedia, graphic design, network management, sales and recruitment [9].

Some of our subjects compared the IT field with medicine, suggesting a similar growth of fragmentation and specialisation. But while medicine still requires a common first degree in Australia, there is no single core skill that is common to all IT professionals. As C put it, "we have got an industry where the workers range from low expertise call centre people, right through to very senior technical people, very senior management people." There are a wide range of entry points and qualifications and even the most basic, a knowledge of programming, has not been an absolute requirement. Our sample of senior women IT professional illustrates the diversity of formal education. Very often their IT skills were obtained through training courses arranged by hardware and software firms.

While women are not excluded from any area of IT work, there is a degree of occupational segregation, with women increasingly concentrated in low status 'specialties' such as merging and tidying databases [1, p.158], as well as those involving high degrees of interaction with users [2]. Women are consistently paid less for the same work, and the disparity worsens as their careers continue. What then does it take for women to succeed in IT? Are they an exceptional? Do they bring specifically 'feminine' skills to the job? Do they have powerful mentors? And how do they explain their own success? These and other questions are discussed in the following sections.

5. ENTRY STORIES

Given the emphasis that has been placed on persuading more girls to study IT, it is interesting to look at the ways in which some successful women have come into the industry. Most of the ten women interviewed had switched over to IT quite early in their career when they were exposed to computing and realised that they liked it. Five had started off in traditional feminine career paths in nursing, teaching, secretarial and clerical work. One

had an engineering degree and another was a surveyor. Two had worked in banks.

G had been working as a nurse. She described how one day, feeling intense frustration at watching a programmer typing with two fingers, she offered to help him out: "I said, give me the keyboard! You talk and I'll type; and from there, I ended up supporting that system, and supporting the network." She had been good at maths and had received vocational guidance advice that she should go into computing, but she took a Science degree. She took to computing "like a duck to water," trained on the job, learned Oracle and is now a senior project officer. A had been in the top academic stream at school and enrolled in a science degree thinking she would probably go into teaching as her sister had. She took a computer science course on the advice of a friend who said it would be a useful teaching subject. At that time (in the mid 1970s), it did not seem an unusual choice for a woman: twelve of thirty students in her year were women. She realised that she liked it and that it opens up a range of careers other than teaching. Though she had rigorous technological training in her science degree, she prefers the service delivery side and is now a senior manager.

C also planned to teach, having "been brought up to believe that going into the teaching, nursing or social work was the way you could have a family and a career because you could always go back to it after having children." After teaching in a country area and a divorce, at the age of 26 she had to think about other options. Her sister, an electrical engineer, had applied to IBM for a job and encouraged her to do the same. Though she knew nothing about computers, and believed herself to be no good at maths, she found herself working in the national office. After completing a degree in metallurgy F worked as a research scientist but became bored with research. Although she had studied IT at university she had not seen its broader applications. Then, one evening she joined her boyfriend and his friends in the computing industry for a few drinks "and I showed them that a woman can drink as many beers as a man can, and by 2 in the morning I had myself a job." After gaining experience in marketing IT she moved on to another company and created a ten million-dollar business within two years.

It could be argued that these stories derive from an era when few people in the IT industry had formal qualifications. It was characteristic of the time that companies would choose bright young graduates, (even non-graduates with appropriate aptitudes), and train them on the job. Most of the women believe it is important to get tertiary qualifications in IT and that those who have them will be at a big advantage. It is therefore important to encourage girls to do IT both at school and university. But, as D observed: "what you learn at uni [university] doesn't even scrape the surface of what you need to know. It's really a starting point."

6. SUCCESS STRATEGIES

There are several important aspects to the success of these women: being in the right place at the right time, seeing the range of opportunities, hard work, and aptitude. With the possible exception of the last, these are the factors that make for success in any occupation and, on the face of it, they are not the monopoly of men. But the question remains as to whether, and why, it is largely men rather than women who are in a position to make use of these attributes.

6.1 Getting ahead

D observed that to be an account manager you need knowledge of IT but “you need to be strategic and have an understanding of the big picture. You need to know who your contacts are, who can give you the expert information. It’s putting people together, coordinating and understanding the problems from a business perspective.” C believes that her diploma in education provided strong presentation skills, strong articulation skills and people management, “if you can manage a class successfully with all those diverse interests and approaches, then you can transfer that knowledge.”

The interviewees suggest that in IT there are not the old boys’ networks that exist in law and medicine. “IT is based on delivery capability. If you can deliver, the IT industry allows you to deliver” said H, but continued that “women need more encouragement - especially to understand that a career in IT does not necessarily mean a programming career.”

The women also strongly disagreed that they had to adjust to the fairly male-dominated area and thought that once you get a start in IT, it's really your reputation and how well you do things that matter. “It doesn't matter what degrees you've got, or what it is you've got, if you are actually not performing on the job...This is where IT is quite different. You can either do it or you can't” (D).

Although gender discrimination is not reported as a major problem in most areas, it does exist. “If you can do the job, then gender isn't an issue. It's different when you get into the management side...then gender still is a bit of a barrier (B).” C recalled a lunch where a senior executive asked his male colleagues, “has it been OK having a women as a sales rep?” At the time she did not even register that such a question was offensive.

6.2 Balancing career and family

It is clear that successful women IT professionals have typically made a decision to prioritise work over family commitments. A said: “while I loved

my baby, coming back to work was like going to a party every day.” She adds that: “there was no such thing as part time then. Now there is a lot, and they are bringing back women who left long ago to have families.” Others expressed concerns about how they would combine children with a career and several said that although flexitime was available they would not use it, for fear of not being seen as serious. C did take maternity leave and was actually called in to fix problems that had arisen after she left. In the end, even though it had been a difficult pregnancy, she went back to work after seven weeks. It was easier to place her child in childcare than to respond to ad hoc calls from clients and from her manager.

Several women had left the workforce when their children were young, done casual work from home, or relied heavily on their partners. When her children were young, B worked 15 hours a week in a fairly simple sales role, selling products rather than services. As the children got older she and her husband decided they would each work four full days and have one day off each to be with the children. While B’s decision was well accepted, her husband, also in the computer industry, “got a lot of flak.”

6.3 Networking

It is frequently argued that women bring special skills to IT. Women “adopt and adapt” very well, “because we’re used to making do” (G). They have interpersonal skills and enjoy interacting with people rather than machines. They have “an ability to empathize with their customers whether it is businesses they are building a system for or people they are selling to” (H). However, rather than assuming that because they are women they are good with emotions, women have to learn to manage their emotions “to the point where they are able to talk the language that men talk in business” (F).

C is adamant that there is very little difference in the traits of men and women who get to the top. She sees no evidence that women at the top have any greater nurturing skills. At management level it is not the technical skills that count but organisational and networking skills. ‘The skills that are valued in corporate life are accountability, can you read a P & L, can you drive the numbers. Can you make the hard decisions?’ However, women often confuse ‘networking’ with ‘people skills’ and assume that they know what ‘networking’ is and think they are good at it. While women may network well for things like someone to pick up the kids, they have not been effective in extending these skills to those parts of the corporate culture where they are needed. C also pointed out that: “[networking skills] are the things we tend not to teach anybody but men seem to pick it up through their relationships with other senior men...we are not talking about net chat, net coffee, net lunch, net shop, we are actually talking about net work. This is a

big commitment in time and effort, and if you are going to be truly successful then you have to be prepared to put the hours in and its going to be outside of work, outside of the job.” Rather than being admired, “those women who are very savvy and understand male networking and politicking are often derided” (C). She also conceded that most women feel quite uncomfortable talking about their achievements and success but believes they need to do it. “A woman told me that when she became a partner her girlfriend said lets go shopping. Men will say lets go to lunch and talk about the next step” (C).

While denying discrimination, she agreed that women have to be prepared to do whatever is needed to be part of the corporate culture. “Even last night one of the women was saying, you know I still feel uncomfortable when I go out with six men on a boat big game fishing but that is what it takes.” I agreed that “you have to be visible. If you don’t go along to after-work drinks people don’t get to know you and you won’t get put on projects. It is not only experience but getting to know the right people.”

7. CONCLUSIONS

There are many contradictions in the discourse. Although all of the women interviewed did not view themselves as exceptional in terms of their ability to succeed in an IT career, the interviews reveal a number of tensions in views about gender, technology and success. They explicitly addressed the qualities required for success, such as focus and hard work, and mainly indicated that being a woman did not make a great deal of difference. However, several of the interviewees also revealed that women had to adopt ways of working that were not common to most women. They assessed their ability to adapt to the male working environment as critical for advancement. These issues, including the idea of networking, beg the question of indirect discrimination. Women are expected to participate in activities in which they have no immediate interest. Many women have less time than men for such activities because of their domestic responsibilities. Each of the women had found a way to balance work and family life, but the responsibility for achieving this balance still appears to rest with the women.

Women tacitly acknowledge the existence both of direct and indirect discrimination. But feel the difficulties lie more in how to network within a masculine organisational culture than with women’s aptitude for technology. They talk enthusiastically about job opportunities and skills that come into play. Rather than merely celebrating feminine capabilities and encouraging women into the industry, they emphasise the importance of learning from what men do. Our findings support Henwood’s [7] assertion that ‘feminine’

qualities may become absorbed into a new model of masculinity. In particular, one of the women interviewed saw the need to challenge the conventional wisdom that women have superior communication and organisational skills, since men are better at expressing their achievements and networking with other men for career advancement. It remains a question whether women need to adapt to this male model or whether increasing numbers of women in upper management may provide different paths to success.

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