

Gender and the Australian IT Industry

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INTRODUCTION

From its very beginnings in the post second world war years the information technology (IT) industry in Australia has exhibited gender stereotyping with the relegation of women to lower paid and lower status jobs. Unfortunately the words of Game and Pringle (1983) are as true today as when they were written more than twenty years ago:

The sexual division of labor is not a remnant from the feudal past that is gradually being eliminated, but is a fundamental structural feature of capitalist society. (p. 81)

The first IT projects were funded by the military when IT had a mathematics or science image. Neither of these characteristics was likely to make an IT occupation attractive to women. However some women were employed by small IT consultancies wanting to save money because in the 1950s in Australia, women were only paid around 75% of a male wage (Game & Pringle, 1983, p. 84). Opportunities arose for women to move into the IT industry in the late 1960s due to a skills shortage. However this had little long term impact as today women are still under-represented in the industry.

BACKGROUND

The trends over the three most recent census years (see Table 1) show little overall change in women's participation rate in the Australian IT industry. The drop of 2.6% in women's participation rate from

1996 to 2001 was at a time when the number of employees in the IT industry increased by 52%. The 2001 census data shows that few women are in management roles in IT in Australia. Also, as in most other occupations there are income disparities between men and women with women concentrated in lower income occupations. For a full discussion and analysis of the Australian IT industry data for the census years 1996 and 2001 see Byrne and Staehr (in press).

During the same period, the number of women with IT qualifications decreased by 6.3% despite the total number of persons with IT qualifications having increased by almost 70% between 1996 and 2001 (shown in Table 2).

The figures in Table 1 and Table 2 show that there are far fewer women working in the IT industry than there are women with post secondary school qualifications. Note that one reason for more women with IT qualifications than women in IT occupations is that the women with occupations that come under the heading of education (e.g., secondary, TAFE, and university teachers) are not included in the figures in Table 1.

The number of women working in the IT industry is affected not only by the number of women gaining IT qualifications from universities, but also from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges

Table 1. The participation rates of women (WPR) in the Australian IT industry (ABS, 2002a)

Census Year	Women	Persons	WPR
1991	17370	72889	23.8%
1996	32733	126375	25.9%
2001	45408	192132	23.6%

Table 2. Post-secondary school qualifications in IT (ABS, 2002b)

Census Year	Women	Persons	%Women
1991	18986	51633	36.8%
1996	33114	90704	36.5%
2001	46707	153183	30.5%

and private education providers (e.g., Computer Power). In addition, there will be women both already in, and entering the IT industry without formal qualifications in IT. It is only since 1997 that membership of the Australian Computer Society (ACS) at the highest level normally requires formal IT qualifications. Accenture, a well known IT consulting company, advertises for graduates from Commerce, Law, Arts, Engineering, and Science as well as IT. Therefore, there are multiple pathways for women to enter the IT industry in Australia.

However, there is anecdotal evidence to show that women with IT qualifications are choosing to work in other occupations (Fisher, 2003). The figures in Table 2 are particularly disturbing since during this period the Australian Government and the universities made considerable effort to increase the participation and retention rates of women in IT education (Newmarch, Taylor-Steele, & Crupston, 2000). The actual numbers of women obtaining IT qualifications has increased from 1991 to 2001 but has not kept pace in relative terms with the overall employment trends in the Australian IT industry.

Thus, no matter how you look at it, the Australian IT industry is failing to attract/retain women and the situation is getting worse. Possible causes that have been identified are misconceptions about the nature of IT work, unfriendly male dominated workplaces, and the fact that long hours required by some IT work making it difficult to balance work and home responsibilities (Johnson & Miller, 2002; von Hellens & Nielsen, 2001). However, a close examination of the job roles available reveals that IT offers opportunities to work with people in a team environment, challenge and variety in work tasks, good pay and opportunities to travel, all attributes that women are likely to find attractive in a career.

One avenue for investigation of the under representation of women in IT is through an examination and comparison of the effect of individual company policies and government legislation on what women

actually experience in the IT workplace. The national culture of an organization and public policy usually impact on company policies (Trauth, 2002; Trauth, Nielsen & von Hellens, 2000; von Hellens & Nielsen, 2001). For example, the culture of an American company located in Australia would be different to the culture of an Australian company within Australia. An example is an IT professional who was happier working for a Scandinavian company in Australia rather than an Australian company as she believed there was a strong workplace culture of equality coming from the Scandinavian head office (Trauth, Nielsen, & von Hellens, 2000; von Hellens & Nielsen, 2001). This suggests that company policies based on a culture of equality may positively affect an individual's workplace experiences. In contrast though, Woodfield's (2000) study of a software company in the United Kingdom found that although official company policies valued individuals with the right mix of skills regardless of sex, this did not necessarily match what happened in practice. And some people believe women are in the IT workplace to meet with government affirmative action legislation and not for their actual skills and abilities (Trauth, 2002).

It is claimed by Kirner and Raynor (1999, p. 170) that anti-discrimination laws are better accepted in Australia than in any other western country. Australia has had a Federal Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency since 1986. This agency administers the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999. The Act requires companies with 100 or more employees to establish a workplace program to remove the barriers to women entering and advancing in the workplace and to report regularly to government. The sanctions for non-compliance are that the company will be named in parliament and the company will be ineligible to tender for government contracts and industry assistance. Companies with particularly good policies are eligible to win awards and have their names publicized in the media, providing incentives for companies to have woman-friendly workplace policies.

There are also a number of Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory government laws that make sexual harassment and discrimination unlawful (e.g., Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth), Equal Opportunity Act 1995 (Vic). In addition, even Federal industrial laws seek to achieve anti-discrimina-

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