

A Reflexive Analysis of Questions for Women Entering the IT Workforce

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INTRODUCTION

There are many resources available for young college graduates entering the workforce. Colleges and universities have entire departments and buildings dedicated to the process of moving students into the “real world.” Questions such as “what should my salary be?” “which firm is rated the best in the country?” and “how do I fit into the corporate environment?” are typically asked by both male and female students and are answered by the staff. Yet given that business is generally a male dominated field, questions such as “have you encountered a glass ceiling in your career?” are less likely to be answered with the whole truth. Hence, this article seeks to answer some of the questions that women may have upon entering the information technology (IT) workforce.

As a woman who is graduating from college and preparing to enter the IT workforce, I¹ constantly ask myself questions about what it means to be a minority in a male dominated industry. In order to be prepared for my future career, I synthesized my questions into three central issues of coping strategies, social networking and gender identity:

1. **Coping Strategies:** How do women cope with being minority, and what do women do when treated unfairly because of their gender?
2. **Social Networking:** When should social networking begin, and how does a woman form a personal network?

3. **Gender Identity:** Do women have to display more masculine traits to get ahead in the IT workforce, and does business attire matter?

These questions are of importance because they are typical of the kinds of questions that a woman entering the IT field may have. Hence, the purpose of this article is to address these questions through a reflexive analysis in order to better prepare myself and others for careers in the IT workforce.²

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

In order to address the questions raised previously, two primary sources of data are included in this article. First, a literature review is included that identifies the main themes of social networking, coping, and gender identity. Incorporated in this review are other resources that readers can use for additional information on the topic. Second, a reflexive analysis of the first author is included that details personal reflections from transcribing 25 qualitative interviews with American women working in the IT workforce³ and from internships at a local school district and a large financial services institution.

Coping Strategies

According to Merriam-Webster Online (2006), *coping* is defined as “deal[ing] with and attempt[ing] to overcome problems and difficulties.” This definition is interesting because it addresses two aspects of

coping, both dealing with and overcoming problems. With regard to the IT workforce, it is important to have strategies to deal with and accept issues. Since coping is not always the easiest thing to do, it is important for women to consider coping strategies they might utilize as minorities in a male dominated industry.

Menaghan and Merves (1984) argue that most coping studies look at direct action on environment or self, interpretive reappraisal regarding environment or self, or emotional management. Dornbusch and Scott (1975) suggest that three types of workplace coping exist for employees: (1) leave an organization; (2) lower expectations; or (3) communicate dissatisfaction to the authority system and suggest changes in conditions. Fennell, Rodin, and Kantor (1981) argue that responses that create change are considered constructive, yet occur infrequently. Likewise Lim and Teo (1996) add that most coping does not require change, but primarily support from others.

These authors' arguments align with Trauth's (2004) research on coping strategies used by women in the IT workforce. Trauth explains that women in the IT workforce utilize three forms of coping: assimilation, accommodation, and activism. Assimilation accounts for the lack of stress because one is not aware of gender issues or uses selective perception to deal with hostile situations. Accommodation is the management of gender issues by recognizing the unequal treatment, but not taking action regarding the environment. Activism is the heightened awareness and the attempt to alleviate stress of gender issues through an active tendency toward changing the situation.

Based on a reflexive analysis of the interview transcriptions, it appears that some women in the IT workforce use group support as a primary means of coping. Perhaps people tend to feel better being around those who have similar beliefs, problems, and conflicts. Many of these women stated that they value social networks that allow for issue discussion and resolution. Other women in the interviews attempted to change their behaviors and actions to fit those of the group, such as taking on an activity that others in work are participating in, so they can have something to talk about. Furthermore, some women tended to take matters into their own hands. When faced with workplace issues, these women said

something to their manager or co-workers in order to bring the situation to the attention of others. At times they found that by speaking up, others in their organizations realized the problems that were occurring, and progress was made in attempts to correct them.

Social Networking

There are two main social networking theories. The first considers the strength of weak and strong ties. This theory was created by Mark Granovetter in his 1973 article, "The Strength of Weak Ties." The article is one of the most cited works in social network literature. His main argument is: Our acquaintances (*weak ties*) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (*strong ties*). Thus the set of people made up of any individual and his or her acquaintances comprises a low-density network (one in which many of the possible relational lines are absent) whereas the set consisting of the same individual and his or her close friends will be densely knit (many of the possible lines are present). Put another way, actors gain novel information from less intimate ties than close ties because actors who are strongly connected share information directly; therefore, they possess the same knowledge. New information comes from external connections which are likely to be weak.

Another social networking theory builds upon the weak tie relationships of Granovetter and discusses structural holes within social networks. Developed by Robert Burt in 1992, structural hole theory means that an actor is in a more advantageous position to gain and control novel information if s/he is connected to others who themselves are not directly connected to one another. The more non-redundant connections an actor has, the more information will flow with greater efficiency and with little constraint (Burt, 1992). The theory was developed to explain interpersonal communication within a competitive environment.

Based on a reflexive analysis of the interview transcriptions, it seems as though several women had their own ideas of how to build their social networks, including taking up new hobbies. One woman even went to the extreme. Her colleagues all took flying lessons and they would talk about it at work. She went out and took lessons, too, and could

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