Women and Social Capital Networks in the IT Workforce

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, the IT industry is experiencing explosive growth. As the need for more skilled IT workers increases, the focus on the diversity of individuals participating in IT jobs is highlighted. The under represented populations of women and minorities are being evaluated to determine ways to increase their lasting participation in the technology workforce. Although initiatives and programs have been established to recruit a more diverse labor force, the under representation persists. In an effort to address the problem of under represented populations in the IT workforce, it is necessary to evaluate the situation from a variety of angles and views. Specifically, we seek to better understand the "gender gap" in the IT workforce and the effect of social capital networks in the organization on women.

Social capital can be defined as "an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals" (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 1). Social capital among workers in the organization has been attributed to career success due to increased access to information, resources, and sponsorship (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). One of the ways that social capital can be gained is through participation in networks. Overall, the benefits or advantages gained through the networking process are attributed to an increase in access to and sharing of information.

In this article, we consider social capital networks in the IT workforce and whether the existence of these networks assists in explaining the under representation of women in IT. Our research highlights the experiences of women practitioners and academics currently working in the IT field. Our aim is to uncover the story behind the organizational chart. In doing so, we summarize a study on women's participation with social networks in the IT workforce presented in Morgan, Quesenberry, and Trauth (2004).

BACKGROUND

The notion of an informal social network in the workplace is not a new concept. References have been made to the notion of an "Old Boy's Club," in regard to a network of men in a position of power and privilege in an organization who share resources and information to gain advantage and opportunities. This is particularly germane to the IT field since it is characterized as a male dominated industry.

In this situation, if an "Old Boy's Network" exists, then "women's informal isolation [could] result in men's greater influence and centrality" in networks (Moore, 1988, p. 575). So, the study of informal networks becomes even more important within this context (Morgan et al., 2004). The role of social networks may be playing a critical role in the exclusion of women from opportunities in the field. Social or informal networks have been defined as "the web of relationships that people use to exchange resources and services" (McGuire, 2000, p. 1). Research has pointed to the importance of social networks in areas such as status and power in organizations. Additionally, social networks have been linked to gains in skills, job leads, and mobility in an organization. A popular phrase correlated with social networks is that "it is not what you know, *it is who you know.*"

Social capital, which is gained in these networks, is defined as a virtuous circle of trust, including group membership and informal social ties (Putnam, 1993). The level of trust associated with social

capital is critical to access to information. Social capital has a direct relationship to the amount and quality of the information that an individual is privy to. So, it can be inferred that the more social capital one possesses the more advantage they possess in relation to opportunity and resources in the organization.

By the same token, the lack of social capital and access to resources and information may result in a decrease in upward mobility, turnover, and career satisfaction. These factors can be detrimental to maintaining employees and specifically a diverse workforce.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

The literature concerned with social networks highlights the importance of informal and interpersonal relationships with others in an organizational setting. The practice of social networking has been investigated in several industry environments similar to the IT industry. Social networks are often described in terms of strong or weak ties. Strong ties are close personal relationships that are similar in nature to interactions that an individual would carry out with their family or friends. Weak ties reflect more superficial relationships in an organization that a person may have with a co-worker or colleague. The literature on social networks in organizations explains the benefits of them in terms of mentoring, acquisition of information, and sharing of information.

The importance of interpersonal ties in a social network was discussed by Granovetter (1973). According to the author, the "strength of an interpersonal tie" is determined from a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize each tie" (p. 1361). The importance of "weak ties" highlights an opportunity for community acceptance. This takes place due to ties that extend out of an individual's primary social network that connect him or her to other important social networks. These additional social networks are often valuable information resources. Granovetter showed that weak ties were often the source of job opportunities for the subjects in his study. Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn (1981) discuss the effect of networks in the process of job

seeking. This research suggests that a job seeker's ability to reach a job contact with high-status is influenced by their personal resources and use of their weak ties. It has also been argued by Wegener (1991) that social networks are beneficial to subgroups of job seekers in a variety of ways. The study explains that individuals with previous experience in high status jobs benefit from weak ties, while those from low status jobs do not. According to Brass (1985) being connected informally to the management and supervisors of an organization affects a person's influence in that organization. Those in high-level decision making positions in an organization are deemed as the "dominant coalition" (p. 329). Traditionally, men have occupied these positions, something that has increased the difficulty for women to be a part of informal interactions with people in power in an organization. Mentoring is also an important process that occurs in an organization which is affected by the presence of social networks.

The process of mentoring and its effect on women is discussed by Burke and McKeen (1990). The authors point out that a potential hindrance to women participating in cross gender mentor relationships may be due to their inability to access information networks. This circumstance is the tendency to develop relationships with people with similar characteristics, or male management excluding women. Eby (1997) discusses the benefits of the mentoring process in the organization. Mentoring is described as a medium through which individuals gain specialized knowledge and skills, which then provide people an increased ability to adapt to change in an organization. Participation in traditional mentoring increases the likelihood for an individual to develop peer networks. Peer networks, then, may also result in peer mentoring which is an additional point of leverage for the protégé. The expansion of the peer network increases an individual's opportunity to access resources and information regarding skill sets, career prospects, and strategies. The process of information acquisition is another important process which occurs through formal communication and through social networks.

The notion that a large informal network supports a person's mobility in an organization through the acquisition of resources and information is discussed by Podolny and Baron (1997). The absence of

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