Research in Progress:
A Field Study of Career Anchors and Women in the IT Force

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HUMAN SIDE OF IT TRACK

The information age has created an increasing dependence on information technology (IT) as it becomes a primary component of the national and global economy. As a result, researching the composition and predicting the direction of the IT workforce has become an important matter for discussion. A major challenge currently facing IT management is the recruitment and retention of the necessary personnel needed to meet the current and future demands of the information age. At the same time, there is growing discourse that points to the importance of diversity in the global IT economy (e.g. Florida, 2005; Gravely, 2003; Trauth et al., 2006). Despite the shortage of IT professionals and the organizational and social benefits of diversity, women are largely under represented in the IT workforce.

A challenge in addressing the under representation of women in the IT workforce is the identification of an appropriate theory for the basis of understanding data about gender and IT. Recently, the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT has been proposed by Trauth (Trauth 2002; Trauth et al., 2004), which focuses on personal characteristics and individual responses to environmental influences in order to understand women and their relationships to IT careers. To date, the majority of the individual differences theory research has improved our understanding of the under representation of women in the IT workforce by focusing on individual and societal factors. At this point the individual differences theory has not been used to systematically explain the role of organizational factors in the under representation of women in IT. Therefore, in an attempt to extend the applicability of Trauth's theory, this study aims to investigate the role of organizational factors, specifically the role of career anchors, in the under representation of women in the IT workforce.

A central aspect of internal organizational factors is employee career anchors. A career anchor is "that element of our self-concept that we will not give up, even if forced to make a difficult choice" (Schein, 1987, 158). A career anchor is seen as a person's self-concept consisting of self-perceived talents, values and the evolved sense of motives that are pertinent to his or her career. Schein (1987) identified eight career anchors of managerial competence, technical or functional competence, entrepreneurship and creativity, autonomy and independence, sense of service or dedication, pure challenge, lifestyle integration and security or stability. DeLong (1982) then added the career anchor of identity and separated security or stability into two independent anchors of organizational stability and geographic stability.

Researchers have investigated the role of career anchors in the female under representation in the IT workforce and their results, to date, have been mixed. Crook et al. (1991) found in their study of over 300 IT personnel, that gender differences were not determinate factors in career anchor determination. Rather, men and women equally valued stable careers (organizational security), helping others (service/dedication) and challenges in their careers (challenge/variety). Yet on the other hand, Igbaria et al. (1991) reported that in their study of 464 MIS employees women were more lifestyle oriented and less technically oriented than men.

The mixed results of these studies, coupled with the complexities in understanding gender and the under representation of women in the IT workforce, presents an interesting opportunity for research. Hence, this study extends the theoretical applicability of the individual differences theory by empirically investigating the role of career anchors in female occupation decisions. In doing so, the following research questions will be addressed: 1) how are career anchors manifested in the experiences of women in the IT workforce and how do these manifestations contribute to the individual differences theory?; 2) do those whose job types match their career anchors report higher levels of job satisfaction and lower turnover intention than those who do not?; and 3) what recommendations and interventions can be made for policy-makers and human resource personnel in order to recruit and retain women in the IT workforce?

The exploratory nature of this research suggests a qualitative methodological approach in two phases. The first phase consists of a priori theme identification of career anchors via an in-depth literature survey and open-coding of an existing qualitative dataset of 120 interviews.[1] The second phase consists of a qualitative investigation for conceptual refinement of factors identified in the initial phase. Approximately 90 minutes in-depth interviews will be held with 30 female participants in the American IT workforce. During the in-depth interviews, the Career Orientations Inventory (COI) questionnaire will be administered, which is a 40 item that provides background information about an individual's area of competence, motives and values. The researcher will also utilize theoretical/selective coding and open coding techniques in phase one and two of data collection.

Findings from this study can directly be applied to industry by exploring the demands and motivations of new workers, comparing how they react to their workplace environment and further examining the administrative structures and policies that successfully accommodate IT workers. Vital in this understanding is the application of a theoretical perspective that is robust enough to account for within gender differences. The research would not only serve as a resource for the current work environment, but also suggests issues and trends for industry to use in a proactive and strategic manner for planning and management. As a result businesses can be better positioned in a holistic manner (e.g. human resource planning, operational expectations and corporate goal alignment) for the rapidly evolving business climate. Finally, findings from this study could be put into practice through recommendations for public policy and initiatives that account for the issues confronting the information society by articulating the ways in which organizational factors are influencing American women and their participation in IT careers.

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ENDNOTES

[1]   The existing qualitative dataset has been collected by Eileen M. Trauth in a multi-year study sponsored by National Science Foundation (Grant Number EIA-0204246).

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