Chapter 6.1
Deliberate Leadership:
Women in IT

Kristen Lamoreaux
SIM Women, USA

Dibi Varghese
Stevens Institute of Technology, USA

ABSTRACT

For decades, societal influences, academic ennui, and corporate resistance to change have contributed toward the reduction of the number of women pursuing the computer science field. Technology innovations have enabled greater workplace flexibility, yet gender schemas and negative stereotypes remain. Human Resources organizations are pivotal in altering negative perceptions and reversing misconceptions. HR has low and no cost options available to them to greatly impact their work environment and subsequent female IT recruitment, development, and retention programs. Organizations that do not deliberately address the talent shortfall within Information Technology will clearly suffer recruitment, retention, and business performance consequences. While the focus of this chapter is women in IT, most of the discussion can also be applied to men.

INTRODUCTION

Women who enter the field of technology know they are entering a historically male dominated field, but their passion drives them to pursue their goal. At the lower ranks, the gender divide is evident, but at the highest leadership levels, men outnumber women 8:1. The women who have fought their way to the top don't need HR to clear the path for them, but they could use a partner in making the hike up the career ladder easier for themselves and the next generation of women leaders.

Female CIOs know what it takes to make it –they've done it against great odds. To retain these talented women an organization needs to acknowledge their value financially certainly, but they also need to game plan their next career move.

Average CIO tenure is over 4.5 years, based on Luftman 2009 SIM survey. A female CIO is not going to sit idle. She's going to say, "I reached this summit. Now where's my next mountain?"

At the same time, women tend to turn and look behind them to see who they can help by reaching out a hand. Some women may blaze a path to the top via a straight line. Others may stay on previously cleared paths to reach the summit, and yet more may wander along enjoying the views at different stages of their lives and family. It doesn't matter. There's no one right way. The challenge is transferring the confidence and knowledge that female IT leaders have gained downward to those who are coming up the ranks. Human Resources have a tremendous opportunity to combat social influences and negative stereotypes and to positively impact the women inside their IT organizations via both strategic and tactical ways.

BACKGROUND

Societal Influence

At a macro level, a major social disadvantage is the development of products and services that do not include input from half the human population. This results in products and services that may not take into consideration the cognizant needs of half of the consumers in the world. The NCWIT reports that although women influence or control more than 83% of all consumer purchases, and approximately 66% percentage of home computer purchases, they are not involved in the creation of the many products they consume. They also report that spending data from 2003 indicated that women spent $55 billion on consumer electronics, this figure surpassing that of male spending. The lack of explicit inclusion of females in the development of the many of the goods they consume may result in low levels of consumer satisfaction.

Gender Expectations

Gender role expectations result in a boundary created by the social and cultural environment, and this frequently defines limits to women's career choices (Lang, 2007 and Trauth et al., 2008). These gender role expectations are often based on stereotypes. Gender stereotypes define lower expectations for women in fields of technology, science and math, and that women are outsiders in the domain of IT. Gender role expectations define that men have a higher inclination towards technology or computers and goes even as far as stating that men are more competent when it comes to technology (Martin and Wardle, 1999 and Lemons and Parzinger, 2007). This has a negative effect on female self-efficacy levels, achievement and interest in the field.

Panteli et al. (1999) believe that it is the perception of IT being a male-gendered environment that makes the industry exceptionally unattractive to women. This perception is further upheld by the low levels of female representation at management levels of the IT organization. Cultures that do not perceive IT to be male dominated have higher numbers of female students pursuing IT related education. An example from Trauth et al.'s (2008) research is of Asian female students who receive encouragement from their family and society to pursue careers in IT. Another interesting point from their research was that communist or centrally planned societies were more supportive of females pursuing careers in any field, including IT. In comparison to capitalist western cultures, these societies had less stringent gender role expectations. As organizations expand their recruitment practices, HR groups will need to learn how IT is viewed within each culture.

Media Perceptions

The media, specifically advertising, is also responsible for shaping the social values and attitudes of society towards women and IT (Turner, 2001).

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