

Building Inclusive IS&T Work Climates for Women and Men

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INTRODUCTION

An inclusive workplace climate in IT is one that is equally welcoming and accepting of input and participation from all members of the organization (Major & Morganson, 2009). It is commonly evidenced by strong supervisor-subordinate relationships, supportive coworker relationships, and a supportive workplace culture. Perceptions of the work environment (i.e., organizational climate) have been empirically linked to job outcomes such as more favorable work attitudes, increased motivation, and higher levels of job performance (Parker et al., 2003). However, this only holds true for men and women alike when climate is inclusive and values all employees (Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998)

The issue of *inclusive climate* is especially pertinent to IS&T organizations due to the gender disparity in the workforce. Women have historically been underrepresented in the field (Blickenstaff, 2005); moreover, their participation has declined by 32% over the last three years (cf. BLS, 2009; 2012). Not only are fewer women present in the IT workforce, but the bulk of those who are employed in such work are in less influential positions. In the IT industry, 68% of administrative support positions are held by women whereas 36% of management positions are occupied by women (BLS, 2012).

Because women's underrepresentation is a growing concern in the field, understanding barriers to an inclusive climate is becoming increasingly important.

Thus, this article first reviews common gender-related barriers to inclusive IS&T climate. Next, strategies for fostering an inclusive climate are discussed. Finally, priorities for future research are considered.

BACKGROUND

When inclusive climate exists in IS&T, all employees, regardless of gender, experience a sense of belonging, are able to fully participate in the organization, and have an equal opportunity for influence (Major, Davis, Sanchez-Hucles, Downey, & Germano, 2007). However, compared to men, women in IT are more likely to encounter a *chilly climate*. This is marked by an impersonal, individualistic, and non-collaborative environment. Specifically, the nature of IT work (e.g., long work hours that interfere with family responsibilities, little access to similar peers, preference for independent rather than team work, etc.) largely conflicts with feminine norms and is viewed as less amenable by women than by men (Roldan, Soe, & Yakura, 2004). Such a climate fosters feelings of isolation and intimidation and declines in self-confidence (Blickenstaff, 2005) and can contribute to a number of undesirable outcomes. Because overt workforce discrimination (e.g., harassment) on the basis of demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, etc.) is illegal and violates social norms in many countries, exclusion often occurs in more subtle ways. In this article we discuss subtle forms of discrimination. These sources of bias can act

individually or in tandem to hinder women's retention and upward mobility in IS&T fields (see Streets and Major, in press for a review).

Subtle Discrimination

Sexism is omnipresent and complex. Glick and Fiske (1996) described ambivalent sexism as comprised of hostile and benevolent sexism. Whereas hostile sexism refers to classic, overtly negative sexism, benevolent sexism refers to "a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone [for the perceiver]" (p. 491). Although overtly positive, benevolent sexism is harmful because it reflects traditional views of women and may be perceived negatively by the recipient. Sexist attitudes may be particularly prevalent in IS&T work. In a study of Spanish college students, Fernandez et al. (2006) found that both benevolent and hostile sexism were more common in technical rather than non-technical fields.

A common barrier for women in IS&T fields is *gender stereotyping*, or the belief that men and women have innate and often divergent traits and abilities, and the often associated discrimination. The skills required for IS&T jobs (e.g., programming, calculations, etc.) are commonly regarded as masculine domains in which women are not as competent. Many of the exclusive gender stereotypes about IS&T work are exacerbated by a lack of appropriate role models for women in the field. Because women are underrepresented in IT occupations, there are few examples of women who have succeeded in the domain. Most female IT students cannot name any female IT role models (Thomas & Allen, 2006).

Gender stereotypes typically result in disparate expectations and treatment of men and women in IT. Such beliefs devalue women's professionalism relative to that of men. As a result, women are held to higher standards to prove their competence (Heilman, 2001). In 2002, Trauth conducted a series of in-depth interviews with IT professionals and academics to understand the existing IT climate for women. An IT manager expressed this sentiment, "A male will always know what he is talking about or what he is on about. He has to prove to me that he doesn't know. A

female always has to prove to me that she does know," (Trauth, 2002, p.108). Even when women are able to demonstrate their ability, they rarely enjoy the same level of credit or accolades as their male colleagues. On the contrary, women are often looked down upon if they excel in the field because much of the work is viewed as masculine. Thus, well-performing women may violate gender role expectations, and consequently be perceived as unlikeable and untrustworthy; they are usually less influential than their male counterparts as a result (Heilman, 2001).

This can create a dilemma for women in IT regarding how they carry themselves in the workplace. They may be torn between exhibiting self-promoting behavior (i.e., pointing out one's accomplishments or speaking about one's strengths) that will likely deter from favorable perceptions in the workplace and more demure and retiring behavior that will not convey competence but will increase likability (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010). Women who exhibit masculine traits in the workplace (such as successful performance in IS&T work) may not only be regarded as unlikable but also as undesirable for promotion (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007).

Discrimination tends to manifest itself via a *glass ceiling*, in which a set of barriers inhibit the advancement of women in the workplace. The ceiling is referred to as glass because it is comprised of unwritten or informal obstacles that are thereby largely invisible (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001). It is often not until women try to surpass these barriers that they become aware of their existence. The glass ceiling polarizes the work of men and women in IT, with women typically relegated to routine and specialist work while men are assigned more analytical and managerial roles (Ahuja, 2002). Discrepancies in the types of work assigned to men and women is cited as a reason why women make less money than men (Bell, 2011). In 2012, the median annual salary for men in IS&T was \$90,480 while the median annual salary for women was \$79,404 (BLS, 2012).

Stereotype Threat

A chilly IS&T climate can detract not only from women's experiences and perceptions of the workplace, but also from their performance. This can occur

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