Gender and IT Professional Work Identity

Mari W. Buche
Michigan Technological University, USA

We need work, and as adults, we find identity and are identified by the work we do. If this is true then we must be very careful about what we choose to do for a living, for what we do is what we will become. (Gini, 1998, p. 707)

Individuals are in a constant state of becoming, of moving between and through various roles and their attached identities and relationships. (Ashforth, 2001, p. 3)

INTRODUCTION

Our daily work is intrinsically tied to our personal image (Alvesson, 2001; Dahlberg, 2004; Gini, 1998). This is particularly true for Americans, since our personal identity is defined by what we do and how we accomplish our tasks (Alvesson, 2001; Gini, 1998). For example, in social gatherings, after learning a person's name, the first piece of information requested is, "What do you do?" Job references provide a wealth of information regarding income, work habits, tasks, levels of responsibility, educational background, etc. Often, the generalizations that people make from this small bit of information are materially incorrect, but that is not usually considered relevant in the social context. It is more important for society to construct a category for placement of the person. In the literature on motivation, Steers and Porter (1991) posit that work primarily impacts individuals in four ways. First, people typically expect to be compensated or rewarded for their efforts (e.g., salary and bonuses). Second, work provides an opportunity for people to interact socially (with some obvious exceptions). Third, employment may influence people's status in the community, outside of the work environment. This is most evident in the case of corporate executives and various professionals. Fourth, "from a psychological standpoint, [work] can be an important source of *identity*, self-esteem, and self-actualization," (Steers & Porter, 1991, p. 574, italics added). Basically, people are internalizing their work experiences. In other words, when workers look in the mirror, what do they see? How would they classify themselves? To what group do they personally relate? Specifically, is there homogeneity in the work identities of IT professionals?

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the impact of gender on the developmental process of work identity creation in the IT field and its impact on job-related outcomes. This article begins with a general description of work identity in the IT profession, including a review of current literature on the formation of work identities. The next section summarizes research findings on gender from a larger study on work identity in the technology field, providing insights into the effect of gender on job satisfaction and intent to leave. The future trends and conclusion sections provide suggestions and managerial and academic implications.

BACKGROUND

Work identity is not a new concept. However, its application is dynamic and context dependent (Darais, Nelson, Rice, & Buche, 2004; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Social identity and self-categorization theories provide a theoretical foundation for understanding work identity. Social identity theory states that identity, or identifying with others, produces a feeling of comfort or group acceptance for the members (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Ashforth, "Social identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to the social category or role," (2001, p. 25). Workers identify with their tasks, responsibilities, co-workers, and organization. Their sense of self is developed through the ongoing process of identification.

Copyright © 2006, Idea Group Inc., distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI is prohibited.

Self-categorization theory (Hogg, 1992; Turner, 1987) explains the mechanism of group *prototype*; an ideal candidate made up of a composite of personal and professional characteristics that typifies a member of the target group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Self-categorization theory asserts that individuals determine their membership in groups based on a mental assessment of similarities and differences with regard to salient features of group composition. In other words, they perceive themselves as more alike than different based on a few key characteristics. These judgments are socially constructed and influence personal behavior. For instance, workers will modify their actions and appearance to better fit into the target population. The familiar "Dress for Success" concept encourages job candidates to conform to the desired group (Molloy, 1988).

When various factors become internalized into a fairly stable concept of self, a work identity has been created. Wallace (2002) defines work identity as "a person's sense of who she or he is, constituted through his or her positioning within the particular relations of power in the workplace" (Du Gay, 1996 in Wallace, 2002, p. 202). She also discusses the influence of managers in creating work identities, deliberately manipulating and influencing employees to adopt particular values and characteristics in the best interests of the organization (Wallace, 2002). Additionally, work identities will change as circumstances change (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Wallace, 2002, 2003). Wallace (2003) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) discuss the role of management and organizational discourse as contributing elements in the development of work identities. They posit that workers are given or assigned work identities that will either be internalized or resisted by employees. "Internalization refers to the acceptance of influence because it is congruent with a worker's value system and/or because it is intrinsically rewarding," (Steers & Porter, 1991, p. 214). Therefore, if the work identity fits the employees' values and desires, there will be little resistance. Otherwise, the employees will experience decreased job satisfaction, possibly leading to a change in employment.

"Identification, in the generic sense, consists of placing things in terms of systematically related categories," (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p. 62). As researchers, we often classify individuals by gender, religious affiliation, nationality, educational background, etc. Some classifications are changeable and subject to choice, while others are predetermined and fundamentally unchanging. Building on these definitions, it follows that the work identity of IT professionals consists of the categorization of job experiences based on systematically related factors or characteristics intrinsically tied to the work environment (Steers & Porter, 1991).

IT Professional Work Identity is a socially constructed representation of an individual's self-perception of his/her own interactions within the employment environment. (Buche, 2003, p. 11; Darais, Nelson, Rice, & Buche, 2004)

EFFECT OF GENDER ON WORK IDENTITY

Do women in technology-related occupations consider themselves IT professionals? Or, are they more comfortable being classified as *female* IT professionals? Some research suggests that women in male-dominated fields are reluctant to be classified as *female* engineers (Jorgenson, 2002). Specifically, they object to the homogenous characterization of gender-specific exemplars of a work group identity (Jorgenson, 2002). Gender is not only a physical characteristic, it is also a socially constructed factor instilled through education and exposure. Research suggests that girls and boys are socialized differently through media inputs, education structures, and expectations from influential role models (Bartol, Martin, & Kromkowski, 2003; Gentry, Commuri, & Jun, 2003; Putrevu, 2001). Academic institutions and parents affect female participation in engineering and scientific professions by creating barriers to entry and by lowering expectations of performance in the mathematics and sciences (Wraige, 2004). These negative inputs may become self-fulfilling prophecies, eventually becoming internalized into the females' work identities. Organizations have a great deal of influence in socializing workers (Orser, 1994; Schein, 1988). According to Orser (1994, p. 12), "socialization is concerned with the transmission of beliefs and values from one generation to the next." In businesses,

4 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/gender-professional-work-identity/12773

Related Content

Self, Career, and Gender Issues: A Complex Interplay of Internal/External Factors
(2013). *Gendered Occupational Differences in Science, Engineering, and Technology Careers (pp. 79-111).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/self-career-gender-issues/69602

Community and Gender in the Virtual Classroom
Alfred P. Rovaiand Jason D. Baker (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 103-108).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/community-gender-virtual-classroom/12722

The Shrinking Pipeline in Israeli High Schools
Larisa Eidelmanand Orit Hazzan (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 1092-1098).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/shrinking-pipeline-israeli-high-schools/12877

Women in IT: Background
(2014). *Women in IT in the New Social Era: A Critical Evidence-Based Review of Gender Inequality and the Potential for Change (pp. 1-12).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/women-in-it/105213

Political Dis-Empowerment of Women by ICTs: The Case of the Zambian Elections
Sam Phiri (2016). *Overcoming Gender Inequalities through Technology Integration (pp. 54-67).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/political-dis-empowerment-of-women-by-icts/145060