

# Understanding the Mommy Tracks in the IT Workforce

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent growth in the number of women in the American labor force, women are under represented in the IT workforce. Key among the factors that account for this under representation is balancing work-family issues. Some researchers have speculated that IT work is not an ideal fit for working mothers because of long work hours, increased conflicts with family responsibilities, and the difficulty of returning after maternity leave to an industry with ever evolving technologies (Kuosa, 2000; Webster, 1996). This article reports on an empirical study that explored the influence of work-family balance on American women's participation in the IT workforce by using the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (Trauth, 2002; Trauth, Quesenberry, & Morgan, 2004; Trauth, Huang, Morgan, Quesenberry, & Yeo, 2006). In doing so, we summarize a work-family balance study presented in greater detail in Quesenberry, Morgan, and Trauth (2004) and Quesenberry, Trauth, and Morgan (2006) that articulates the ways in which individual and environmental factors influence female responses to issues of work-family balance.

## BACKGROUND

Studies of the IT workforce are mixed on the question of whether the IT workplace is a conducive or an unfriendly environment for working mothers. One stream of research points to the IT industry as having a pragmatic approach to working practices that can have a positive impact on working mothers. These practices include innovations in teleworking,

job-sharing and technical advances that allow more flexibility in work-family balance (Quesenberry & Trauth, 2005; Zimmerman, 2003). An alternative stream of research highlights several difficulties associated with work-family balance in the IT workforce. Trauth's studies in Ireland and Australia revealed that women found it difficult to manage work-family conflicts despite shifts in societal views about working mothers (Trauth, 2002; 2000; 1995; Trauth Nielsen, & von Hellens, 2003). Webster (2002) adds that this is "particularly hard to reconcile with the working rhythms of IT work" (p. 6) and may not be conducive for many women.

Researchers also highlight the consequences associated with work-family balance for women in the IT workforce. Mennino and Brayfield (2002) found that female employees in male-dominated occupations make more family trade-offs and fewer employment trade-offs than employees in other occupations. Ahuja (2002) reports that women may have to neglect certain family obligations to be eligible for promotional opportunities similar to those of men. Baroudi and Igbaria (1994) point to family-related responsibilities as partial explanation for the under representation of women in managerial positions. Likewise, Sumner, and Werner (2001) found the burden on family-career balance from overtime and administrative tasks to be a barrier to women in management.

## MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

This article reports on one aspect of a multi-year, multi-site qualitative field study of women working in IT whose goal is to investigate the female under representation in IT. Our objective is to contribute to

a deeper understanding of specific factors that influence American women in their working lives as IT professionals by examining the work-family balance issues facing women in the IT workforce and how they respond when making decisions about their personal and professional development.

Fifty-seven open-ended, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with female practitioners in the IT workforce were conducted between October 2002 and August 2004. The participants represent a range of geographical locations, ages, demographic backgrounds, educational backgrounds, levels of management and job classifications, relationship statuses and family compositions. The women work and live in three different geographical regions of the U.S.: the Northeast (Boston, Massachusetts), the Southeast (Research Triangle/Charlotte, North Carolina) and the Mid Atlantic (central Pennsylvania). The women range in age from 21 to 58 with the average age being 40.6 years. Furthermore, 35 of the women are married, 2 are in committed relationships, 14 are single and 6 are divorced/not remarried. Thirty-two of the women have one or more child and 26 of the women do not have children.

The guiding theory for this research is the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT proposed by Trauth (2002; Trauth, Huang, et al., 2006; Quesenberry, 2004) that focuses on differences among women in the ways they experience and respond to characteristics of IT work, the IT workplace and societal messages about women and IT. This theory focuses on women as individuals, having distinct personalities, experiencing a range of socio-cultural influences, and therefore exhibiting a range of responses to the social construction of IT. Thus, the theory elucidates the differences *within* rather than *between* the sexes and examines issues at an individual rather than a group level of analysis.

### **Analysis of Work-Family Balance in the IT Workforce**

What emerged from the analysis of life histories of women in IT are four categories of women in the IT workforce: the non-parent, the working parent, the “back-on-track” parent and the “off-the-track” parent. The categories are by no means static or limiting. Rather they are dynamic in nature, and were created to analyze data to support theory refinement.

### **The Non-Parent: Balancing Work-Family Issues without Children**

The *non-parent* category is comprised of women employed in the IT workforce who do not have children. The non-parent represents 26 women or 45.5% of the women interviewed. These women are single, married, partnered, and divorced and range in age from 21 to 53, with an average age of 37.8 years. The non-parents consist of two groups of women: women who have *not yet* had children and women who *are not* having children. This is important to note this distinction because not all non-parents are young, single women who have not yet reached a point to have children. Rather, many non-parents are women who have made conscious decisions not to have children.

Despite the range of explanations regarding motherhood, one common theme arose regarding work-family balance: the non-parents acknowledged their ability to more easily balance work-family issues in the IT workforce than their co-workers with children. The non-parents felt that they were more able to adjust to the temporal aspects of IT work, including longer work days and late hours. In addition, many non-parents felt more able to participate in after-hour networking events than co-workers with children. Further, several participants also commented on the freedom they enjoyed by not having to make work-child trade-offs. Although non-parents have chosen to not have children and tend to acknowledge the increased ability to balance work and life, it does not mean that they are all workaholics who are focused exclusively on themselves or their careers. Many of the non-parents talked about their values regarding personal life and time spent away from the office. They spoke of elder care, responsibility for nieces and nephews, other family commitments and pets.

Another theme raised by the non-parents is coping with the societal message they sometimes received about motherhood. This was explored through discussion of regional cultural attitudes towards women and women working. Many non-parents spoke about a cultural message that women’s family obligations should take precedence over professional obligations. Thus, they should assume domestic child-care roles and men should assume professional income-earning roles. According to this view,

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