

Women Returners in the UK IT Industry

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INTRODUCTION

IT is a sector that incorporates the newest industries, consisting mainly of young firms and relatively freshly constituted forms of working practices. Despite this, several studies exist to-date that show that opportunities are limited for those women who aspire to have a career in IT. Recent research in the UK has revealed that between 1999 and 2003 the proportion of women in the UK IT workforce fell by almost 50%, from 21% to 12.5%, following steady growth (Platman & Taylor, 2004). The focus of the article is to examine a specific group of female IT staff: women returners. The work presented here explores the factors that often constrain women returners to the IT industry and discusses the findings in relation to the characteristics of the industry; it is part of a bigger study that looks at advancing women in high-tech industries¹. If women are not found in positions of influence in the IT industry, one of the most growing industries, then what image is being given to prospective students, their parents and careers advisers? What influence will women have on the future developments within the discipline, hence on the industry itself?

BACKGROUND: WOMEN RETURNERS IN IT

IT has been a fast growing industry with an impact on most organizations, large and small, traditional and emergent and vast employment opportunities. Indeed, computing work is characterised by growth in demand but it is also simultaneously characterised

by obsolescence of skills (Wright & Jacobs, 1995). That means that computer workers have to go through extensive training most of the time in their career if they want to stay up-to-date with the frequent changes in software, hardware and programming. Also the sector, although a comparatively new one, has been characterised as predominantly white, middle-class and male-dominated (Panteli, Stack, & Ramsay, 1999b). This indicates that men hold high profile posts such as developers and managers of systems whereas women are more likely to be seen as the users of those systems. This phenomenon has also been illustrated by Platman and Taylor (2004) in their recent report. They clearly stated that the UK IT industry is male dominated and full-time, which designates that there are substantial obstacles for women working in IT.

Accordingly, despite the industry growth and increasing job opportunities, several research studies exist to-date that draw attention to the gender inequality in IT employment (Panteli, Stack, Atkinson, & Ramsay, 1999a; Panteli et al., 1999b; Roldan, Soe, & Yakura, 2004). For example, women in IT are increasingly concentrated in areas of work that are low in status, power, and rewards. As women move up the career hierarchy, their representation shrinks, thus the proportion of women in this high tech sector remains underrepresented in top management posts and in key technical jobs (Panteli et al., 1999a; Roldan et al., 2004).

For the purpose of this chapter, we take a focus on a particular group of female employees: women who seek re-entry following a career break, thus women returners. Most of the academic studies on women returners have focused on women's choices

and career orientations (Doorewaard, Hendrickx, & Verschuren, 2004) as well as on trying to identify either the demands of women for returning to work or their fears and their differences compared to men (Healy, 2004; Healy & Kraithman, 1991; Shaw, Taylor, & Harris, 1999). A major difference for example between men and women is that women shape their working lives around the competing domestic demands, (e.g., childbirth, household etc.). They link and adjust their work with the different phases their life is going through.

A career break is a period of time where an employee is not working for very specific reasons (Institute of Physics, 2004). The length of career break may vary according to the needs it attempts to cover; for example a maternity leave can be from 26 weeks and over, and it is often the main reason for taking a career break (Rothwell, 1980). Another reason for a career break includes the need to study (e.g., for a further qualification or to follow one's partner on sabbatical leave or on a foreign assignment) (Warrior, 1997). Research has also identified a pattern for women's re-entry to the labour force. According to Rothwell (1980), this pattern includes an "in-and-out" period while children are young, followed by a part-time period, and eventually a return to full-time employment when the children grow up. Rothwell (1980) explained that this pattern depends on women's job ambitions, on family's financial conditions and on the local labour market.

Another barrier on women's return to work is the lack of affordable, accessible, quality childcare. Paul, Taylor, and Duncan (2002) found that 18% of mothers of pre-school children who are working part-time reported that they are prevented from working longer hours by having to look after children, compared with 25% for part-time mothers with school, but not pre-school, children. This proportion according to the authors shows that they could work longer if suitable childcare was available. Other studies have showed that many women with caretaking responsibilities at home tend to accept relatively low-skilled part-time jobs (Doorewaard et al., 2004; Houston & Marks, 2003).

Shackleton and Simm (1998) argued that women returners require training in both "hard" and "soft" skills. Generally, such training takes a focus on the updating of existing skills, confidence building, and

training in new technology. Work experience may also contribute towards raising the self-esteem levels of those wishing to reenter the labour market, who often feel that they lack the necessary work-related skills to compete. In particular, in the field of IT the rapid change in technological advancements and IT applications in the recent years has affected a great area in an organization's life including personnel requirements and training. Up-to-date training appears to be an imperative for women returners in particular in coordination with more management support so they would be able to return to their previous job.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

The study presented here, which is part of a bigger project on advancing women in the high-tech industries (i.e., ITEC), was carried out using qualitative information based on in-depth interviews with women returners. These were undertaken during the period December 2004 and January 2005. In particular, women who have returned to work after a career break, are currently on a career break, or are planning one, have been invited to participate in our study. The majority of the interviews (84%) were conducted over the telephone due to the geographical dispersion of the interviewees whilst the rest were face-to-face interviews.

Though the interview questions were pre-determined to ensure that the necessary information was collected, these remained open-ended in an attempt to record the views and perceptions of the respondents. This allowed questions and issues that were revealed during the interview to be explored further. Interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes and were tape-recorded when the interviewees granted permission. The interview data was transcribed selectively. The analytical approach adopted was exploratory as the aim of this report is to explore the main issues around women's employment in the IT sector and in particular women returners. A simple way to explore data at this stage of the project is to recast it in a way that counts the frequency (i.e., the number of times that certain things happen), or to find ways of displaying that information.

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