



Chapter V

The Retention of Women in Information Technology—A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The retention of women in Information Technology (IT) is a global problem. This chapter reflects on the results of a comprehensive study of women in the South African IT Industry. Areas covered are demographics, experience and qualifications, the work environment, discrimination, gender issues, technical abilities, mentors and other issues related to women in the IT industry. Factors affecting the retention of women in the South African IT Industry are identified, and popular beliefs with regard to the preferences of female IT employees are examined. The authors believe that the findings reported on in this chapter can provide valuable insights that can be used by companies world-wide to enhance employment policies as well as recruitment and retention strategies aimed at women in IT.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reflects on the findings of a study that investigates women in the South African Information Technology (IT) Industry. In line with the rest of the world, women represent only 19 percent of IT employees in South Africa (Jovanovic, 2001). The objectives of the study were to find out how they, as a minority group in the IT-workforce, experience the industry and to establish the factors influencing the retention of women in the industry.

BACKGROUND

Worldwide, there has been a strong drive to promote IT as a career for women and to attract them to IT-related courses. As De Palma (2001) points out, a wealth of available literature speculates about the reasons that so few young women enroll in IT-related courses. Many studies (Myers and Beise, 2001; Cuny and Aspray, 2000) focus on attracting and retaining female students and suggest ways to increase the number of young women preparing for and entering the IT Industry. This groundwork would be futile when these women enter the IT industry and an effort is not made to retain them as part of the workforce.

Carver (2000) hypothesizes that in order to attract more women to IT, the workplace must have flexible hours, part-time career options, the possibility of reduced work-hours, work-from-home possibilities and childcare facilities. These and other issues related to women in IT are investigated in this study.

Data for the study was gathered from women currently in the IT industry. The study aims to separate myth from reality in terms of what women want, their perceptions of the industry and what keeps them there, and to recommend employment strategies and management policies.

METHOD

A Web-based questionnaire was used to collect data. To reach as many women in IT as possible, the questionnaire was presented to the IT industry through an article in ITWeb, an important IT news site for Southern Africa. Women completing the questionnaire were also requested to forward the URL to female colleagues. To encourage participation, anonymity was guaranteed. After submission, respondents had the option to provide an e-mail address for further contact, which was stored independently of the questionnaire details. Although the questionnaire was comprehensive in its coverage, questions were designed to be quick and easy to complete. It took on average 10 minutes to complete and was available for a three-week period from late November until mid-December 2001.

DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 299 women, representing nine major industry sectors and eight of the nine provincial regions in South Africa responded, with 32 percent of the respondents from the Western Cape and 61 percent from Gauteng. These two regions are the economical strongholds of South Africa. Respondents are from across the racial spectrum, with 6 percent Asian, 6 percent Black, 5 percent Coloured and 82 percent White, while 1 percent elected the Other-category. The 17 percent non-white vs. 82 percent White respondents is a fair reflection

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