

Chapter 23

Social Interaction Technologies

A Case Study of Guanxi and Women Managers' Careers in Information Technology in China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a relationship between social interaction technologies (SIT) and guanxi, a major Chinese informal style of networking, in the context of the careers of women managers in the information technology (IT) field in China. Addressing women's under-representation in non-traditional occupations (such as IT), prior research has established that networking, especially informal, is an important career management tool for women. Recent advances in social capital theory and social network analysis provide a framework for understanding the role of social processes in achieving career success. Today, the growing Web-based social and professional networking in China weighs against the traditional forms of relationships, such as personal networks based on guanxi. The study indicates that SIT and guanxi should be viewed as complementary rather than mutually exclusive influences.

INTRODUCTION

Careers are a window to a network of values of the institutions where they are actually made. Recent advances in social capital theory have helped analyze the ways in which the social networks of individuals affect their careers in organizations (Burt, 1997; Coleman, 1990; Ibarra, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Lin, 1999; Podolny & Baron, 1997). This theoretical

background provides scholars with knowledge for understanding the role of social processes in career success. Information technology (IT) and information and communication technology (ICT) refer to an industry that broadly covers the technologies of information and communication. In China, as in other countries around the world, more and more women are today working in this field as managers—although only a few at the top level (Aaltio & Huang, 2007). Ahuja (2002) stated that the barriers to female positioning in the IT industry

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are due to an “old boys network”—a large pool of more qualified and experienced male professionals, the lack of female role models and mentors, and established discriminatory practices. Kaplan and Niederman (2006) argued that inadequate social networks, skill obsolescence and limited vertical/internal job mobility present challenges to the career success of women in IT. In contrast, women who have more demographically diverse networks generally experience greater levels of career success (Cox, 1994; Ely, 1994; Ibarra, 1995). A lack of social networks and role models has been related to women’s under-representation in the field of IT.

Social relations and ties between actors characterize today’s business culture. As expected, prosperity and social capital cumulate in the interplay between human partners and organizations (Bourdieu, 2005). There is a trend to understand business life more as a product of collective and shared interactions than separate individual efforts. This collectivity is not universal by nature but has country-specific and local features. Recently, *guanxi*, a major Chinese networking style, has been receiving a heightened research interest in the Western management field, with a major expansion in the literature on the growing importance of networks, networking, and network organizations (Puhakka, 2002; Steier & Greenwood, 2000; Tallberg, 2004; Wellman, Chen, & Dong, 2002). This is partly driven by the continuing and changing impact of ICT and the technological and social aspects of networking through them (Wellman, 2001). The very nature of ICT, incorporating both information and communication technologies, reflects how computers, communication, and social networks have become intertwined in people’s everyday life. This is also in line with the argument according to which networks have a positive impact on entrepreneurial success (Puhakka, 2002; Steier & Greenwood, 2000). Leung (2000) points out that gender issues and Chinese cultural traditions, such as *guanxi*, are major factors influencing career development and managerial growth in China.

The development of Internet-based social networking sites have advanced social interaction, collaboration, and sharing of information (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005), which weigh against the traditional forms of relationships—the social network and *guanxi*. According to Barry Wellman and colleagues (2002), *guanxi* can be studied with a social network approach. According to social network analysis (SNA), Internet-based social networking enlarges people’s weak ties, which are different from the strong ties in *guanxi* and are essential to the effective spread of information between people in separate clusters (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, Chen & Dong, 2002). From this perspective, SIT should enhance women’s networks and, therefore, benefit women IT managers’ career development.

Based on a social network perspective and *guanxi*, this chapter explores the impact of SIT and *guanxi* on women managers’ careers in the context of the IT field in China. The chapter starts with a literature review on *guanxi*, SIT, and women’s careers in IT. The authors then analyze the results of a case study conducted in China and continue by covering future trends, a discussion, and a conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Guanxi and guanxi ties

In the Chinese language, *guanxi* has different meanings. It could refer to one of three things: (1) the existence of a relationship between people who share a group status or are related to a common person, (2) the actual connections with people and frequent contact between them, or (3) a contact person with little direct interaction (Bian, 1994). Commonly, *guanxi* is defined as the special relationships that two individuals have with each other, referring to a relationship between a person who needs something and a person who has the ability to give something.

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