

Chapter 24

Online Participation Shaping the Networks of Professional Women

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction technologies present women with powerful tools to extend their network of professional contacts. This chapter considers the use of online networks by professional women, specifically those working in science, engineering, and technology, who may face particular barriers in advancing their careers; it explores the potential offered by online participation and interaction for overcoming these difficulties. Recent discussions about women's networks and networking strategies are extended, and the authors investigate how these strategies are being affected by the growth and evolution of online social networking. Different approaches to online networking for career development are discussed, together with an examination of associated Internet and Web 2.0 technologies and the potential these approaches and tools present to women working in science, engineering, and technology.

INTRODUCTION

Networking with other professionals may benefit an individual's career and bring advantages to the organisations that they are affiliated with (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Emmerick, Eu-

wema, Geschiere, & Schouten, 2006). Networking enables new business contacts to be established (Lea, Yu, Maguluru, & Nichols 2006) and provides the means by which to sustain existing ones. Associated activities may include: participating in organised events or training opportunities; socialising; and the sharing of experiences, exemplars of good practice,

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knowledge and resources. There has been much interest recently in how online networks are being used for professional networking purposes (Stone, 2007). That is, using tools such as web forums and social network sites to foster the relationships, and undertake the activities, described above.

Online networking strategies may be particularly beneficial to women working in male-dominated professions. The challenges facing these women are numerous and can be exacerbated by limited possibilities for face-to-face networking (Brass, 1985) or by participation in networks that are not well recognized or connected (Vinnicombe, Singh, & Kumra, 2003). Online environments, where connections may be formed regardless of physical restrictions, can be used to provide networking opportunities for women striving for career development.

Science, engineering and technology are sectors that have particular difficulties in recruiting and retaining women (Bebbington, 2002). This chapter considers the use of online networks by women working in these sectors in the U.K. It explores the different approaches to online networking that can be adopted and the tools available to participate in such activities. The chapter discusses the potential these approaches and tools present to women, and whether this potential is currently being realized. The current state of research pertaining to online social networking by women in general is also reviewed.

BACKGROUND

The challenges facing women working in professions (such as science, engineering and technology) are well documented (Bebbington, 2002; Fox & Anderson, 2004; Michie & Nelson, 2006). Issues such as “macho” workplace cultures, inflexible career paths and reward systems, and extreme work pressures are still a major contributor to the low entry and retention rates (Bebbington, 2002; Fox & Anderson, 2004; Hewlett et al., 2008). However,

isolation and restricted opportunities for interacting with other professionals can exacerbate these problems. Inadequate social networks can limit progression opportunities (Kaplan & Niederman, 2006), provide access to too few role models and lead to isolation and insecurities (Hewlett et al., 2008; McCarthy, 2004). This chapter focuses on science, engineering and technology since the challenges facing women employed in these sectors are particularly prominent. However, the issues presented and patterns of online networking activity observed may also be pertinent in other male-dominated professions.

Different approaches to tackle the networking difficulties facing women are being used. One response has been the formation of women’s corporate, public or professional face-to-face networks (McCarthy, 2004; Singh, Vinnicombe, & Kumra, 2006). Professional networks aim to overcome organizational and social barriers that may be present and provide a platform for women to meet and share career development strategies. Features that these environments provide include support, extended access to female role models and contemporaries (Singh, Vinnicombe, & Kumra, 2006) and relationships fostered within a social atmosphere. However, to achieve work-life balance, time constraints are often in place and these can limit travel options and render some of these face-to-face networks inaccessible. Therefore, additional communication channels that facilitate interaction over long-distances and support asynchronous participation could be beneficial.

The growing online social networking culture is increasingly being used as a tool for career progression (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Gefter, 2006). Many professionals have been using e-mail, mailing lists and web forums for conducting career or business related interactions for well over a decade. As Internet technologies and applications evolve, social network sites are becoming more and more popular for facilitating online social interactions. In addition, specialist career-based social network sites are now available that allow people to increase

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