

Women in IT

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Two articles about women in IT appeared in the press recently. Writing in Computing on 8 September, Gillian Arnold explained that, "Recruiting and retaining experienced women in our industry is of paramount importance, and is fundamental to the future competitiveness of the UK's IT industry. In an industry that regards itself as leading-edge in the value it delivers to the UK economy and society, companies can no longer avoid addressing their failure to create a working environment that attracts and retains senior, qualified women. The number of women working in the IT industry fell from 27 per cent in 1997 to 21 per cent in 2004. And even though the number of women employed in the IT industry has stabilised, the sector is still losing experienced, senior women from its ranks. Unfortunately, there are still organisations, or senior individuals, within the technology industry that believe talk of diversity is a meaningless diversion from the conduct and professionalism of everyday business life."

By contrast Female IT managers topple men in pay league appeared on the silicon.com website on 19 September in which Andy McCue reported that, "Female IT managers are for the first time earning more than their male counterparts and women are also climbing the corporate ladder faster, according to the annual salary survey from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI). Across all sectors the average female team leader, at 37 years old, is four years younger than her male counterpart, while female IT managers earn on average £45,869 per year - £779 more than the men do." It was reported Paul Campfield, director of Remuneration Economics, said in a statement: "It is encouraging to see that the number of female managers continues to increase but it is worrying that they are still more likely to resign. The implication is that female managers still face difficulties in the workplace and organisations should address these quickly because, unchallenged, these problems will demotivate and disrupt with the end result being poor performance and productivity levels."

So what is the truth about women's prospects and influence within the IT industry? A number of experts have given their opinions. Professor Alison Adam (UK) pointed out that, "All the evidence so far suggests that women don't fare as well as men in the IT industry in financial terms - things like salary secrets are rife. I doubt this [CMI survey] will mean that there has been a sudden change in the IT industry in gender equity terms-our research [at Salford University] so far suggests that women still have a pretty tough time in the IT industry." Professor Wendy Hall (UK) of University of Southampton agrees, "... it's almost certainly true that less than 20% of the IT workforce is female. And very few of these women get to the top of this very macho world. So those that do

get to the top have to be very good." Similarly, Professor Teresa Rees (UK), Pro Vice Chancellor Student/Staff Issues at Cardiff University explained that, "There is a pay gap among [IT] graduates within three years of graduating, companies may well recruit women but are not so good at retaining or promoting them. These figures [from the CMI survey] should not be used to invoke complacency."

In the US the situation for women in IT is difficult. Caroline Wardle (USA) explained that, "... it is not unusual for women and men to be hired at the same salary levels on entry to high-skilled IT jobs, but after a few year the men's salaries outstrip the women's. It is also the case that women's representation in the US IT workforce has been dropping steadily over the past decade and a half." "According to the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Report 985 produced in May of 2005, women computer and information systems managers earn 79.4% of men's earnings. For computer scientists and systems engineers, women earn 82.6% of what men earn. So the gap has not closed in the US." stated Professor Fran Grodzinsky (USA).

Experts went on to discuss the reasons behind men/women IT employment differences. Eva Turner (UK), Organiser of Women into Computing 2005 pointed out that; "[McCue] does not indicate anything about the power struggles and the conditions under which all workers in today's ICT industries are expected to work (high pressure, highly intensive, available 24 hours/day, no unions etc). ... There is a documented trend of women top managers choosing not to start a family or have children as the pressure of the top success does not allow the to make that choice." This theme was picked up by Professor Fran Grodzinsky (USA); "Our research supports the idea that women are leaving when they have to balance family and child rearing with the enormous time commitment that a managerial role demands. A change in the corporate culture that builds in flexibility might alleviate the drain of top women talent from the industry." If this change does not happen then perhaps the observation by Vanessa Hymas Deputy CEO of IMIS will remain true; "I wonder whether the surveyed females can spot more easily that the battle cannot be won, so move on to an organisation more appreciative of their worth, or whether other pressures on their lives suggest to them that life is just too short to continue the struggle!"

Concerning talent and ability of IT women professionals, Professor Wendy Hall (UK) said, "Increasingly every aspect of what the company does will rely on IT, and so the IT manager/director role is increasingly important in terms of managing up as well as down. These are all skills that bat to the strengths of women." However there was a different view from Professor Vivian Lagesen from the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. She was dismissive of the idea that women are better than men at people skills explaining, "... and as my own research has shown, there is a widespread notion or discourse about women being better at communicating, having better people skills, being more versatile, etc. that makes them better computer scientists and perhaps better managers." She continued, "Since many women seem to be not that obsessed with programming, as some men are, they are more

likely to seek other career opportunities and often also chooses they way out of the most technical areas of computing and toward other areas such as sales, marketing and as this article shows, also management. Also, my own research show that women to a much larger extent than men are recruited to computer science studies because of career opportunities, whilst men are more often recruited because of interest in computers. I think these may be the most important points in this respect."

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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