Chapter VIII

Women in Information Technology

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ABSTRACT

IT managers must recruit and retain a skilled and diverse workforce in order to meet the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s increasingly globalized enterprises. The pipeline for women in IT starts small and shrinks as women are disaffected from the profession at all levels of school and career. This chapter surveys the literature concerning the dearth of women and categorizes this literature along dimensions of methodology, variables, and groups studied. Numerous suggestions and guidelines for improving women’s representation have been offered. Recurring themes
include lack of self-confidence, lack of pre-college preparation, the need for mentors and role models, the importance of community groups, and the need to value both family and work priorities. Few studies have empirically tested these recommendations, and much work remains to be done in order to understand and address the real issues. Solutions to recruiting and retaining women may serve other under-represented groups as well, making IT classrooms and IT workplaces more congenial and ultimately more productive environments for everyone.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the fact that recent economic conditions may have reduced the scarcity of information technology (IT) workers, IT managers still need to recruit and retain a skilled and diverse workforce, in order to meet the IT needs of today’s and tomorrow’s increasingly globalized enterprises, where cross-cultural, heterogeneous workgroups are the norm. Numerous data have shown that females select and complete degrees in IT-related fields less often than their male counterparts. Thus, the IT workforce is likely to be missing out on a significant number of potentially valuable human resources.

A range of academic and industry publications have suggested a variety of reasons for female disaffection with IT. However, many of these studies are anecdotal, based on interviews or single cases, or have focused more broadly on science and engineering rather than specifically IT. As a result, the picture of why women leave the IT field, or choose not to get into it in the first place, is incomplete and fragmented. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of what has been discovered or at least suggested as factors that may affect recruitment and retention of women in IT, and concludes with a list of recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

Understanding this issue is complicated by ambiguity regarding the definition of IT. In this chapter, the term information technology (IT) refers to jobs requiring at least a baccalaureate degree in computer science, information systems, or very closely related majors. Although the IT field forms a continuum that spans the spectrum from design of chips to creation of complex business applications, much of the existing data is more narrowly focused on computer science (CS). The National Center for Education Statistics tracks several categories that include IT disciplines: business, computer and information sciences, computer engineering, and library science (NCES, 1998). The
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