Understanding the “Mommy Tracks”: A Framework for Analyzing Work-Family Balance in the IT Workforce

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ABSTRACT

Despite the recent growth in the number of women in the American labor force, women are still under-represented in the IT workforce. Key among the factors that account for this under-representation is balancing work-family issues. This article presents a framework for analyzing work-family balance from a field study of women employed in the American IT workforce. The findings are examined through the lens of the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT to show the range of ways in which work-family considerations influence women’s IT career decisions. The framework is used to support the theoretical argument that women exhibit a range of decisions regarding career and parenthood: the non-parent, the working parent, the back-on-track parent, and the off-the-track parent. These findings illustrate an identifiable theme that crosses geographical regions and timeframes; societal messages are complex and difficult to digest and are processed in different ways by different women, yet they contribute to the decisions women make about their professional and personal lives.

Keywords: gender; human resource management; Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT; IS career path; IT professional; organizational diversity; qualitative research; work-family balance

INTRODUCTION

In the transition to an information-based global economy, the lines between work and home are blurring as technology reshapes the workplace and as the nature of home life evolves. This evolution of domestic life has brought a shift in societal thinking about mothers working outside the home (McRae, 1996; Trauth et al., 2003). The National Council of Women’s Organizations (2003) estimates that 63% of women with children under the age of six and 78% of women with children ages six to 17 currently are employed in the labor force. Yet, there is still an under-representation of
women in the IT workforce. A study produced by the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) Blue Ribbon Diversity Panel (2003) found that representation of American women in high-tech employment fell from 41% to 34.9% between 1996 and 2002. This number is significantly low, considering that during the same period, the percentage of women in all occupations in the U.S. was 46% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996, 2002). Thus, although the number of women in the labor force is increasing, the number of women in the IT workforce is noticeably lower.

Key among the factors that account for the under-representation of women in the IT workforce is balancing work and family. Some researchers have speculated that IT work is not an ideal fit for working mothers because of long work hours, increased conflicts with family responsibilities, and the difficulty of returning after maternity leave to an industry with ever evolving technologies (Kuosa, 2000; Webster, 1996). Thus, the question remains: Does the nature of IT work with regard to work-family balance negatively influence female participation in technical careers? Hence, the purpose of this article is to empirically explore the influence of work-family balance on American women's participation in the IT workforce.

In this article, we investigate the particular ways that women in the American IT workforce experience and respond to issues of work-family balance by using the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT. We expand a work-family balance framework initially presented in Quesenberry et al. (2004) to articulate the ways in which individual and environmental factors influence female responses to issues of work-family balance. Finally, we develop a set of proactive responses in order for public policy and employers to address the challenges of balancing work and family.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A dichotomized view of women’s motherhood choices permeates the working mother literature and tends to present two stereotypical women: the devoted mother and the cold careerist. Mason (1988) discusses two types of women: those who work to live and those who live to work. The former place an importance on children at the expense of a career and do not compete for high status or male-dominated positions. Rather, they gravitate toward female-dominated fields. Women who live to work are motivated by career status and feel that equality means competing with men for their jobs. Nevertheless, these women encounter difficulty, because the rules have not changed to include them. De Marneffe (2004) explains that dramatic shifts in women’s lives have created the potential for motherhood to be a chosen activity, something that was not always possible for women. Yet, at the same time, the increase in motherhood choices can create challenges for women. De Marneffe adds that deci-