Managing New Zealand Women in IT

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Abstract

This chapter discusses workplace attitudes and policies that continue to affect women's participation, retention, and promotion in the information technology (IT) workforce. It draws on data collected from two qualitative studies of New Zealand women working in the industry. The findings reveal that there are some distinct differences in the way in which males and females operate in the workplace, and that women's values and different work practices are often not taken into account by management. Managers of IT professionals who recognise the subtleties of the gendered culture of the IT work environment and who develop and implement equitable policies and strategies will be rewarded by a creative, innovative, and productive workforce.
Introduction

The information rich, technology-driven economies of developed and developing countries require a highly skilled, adaptable, and innovative information technology (IT) workforce. A diverse workforce, constituted of people of different ethnicities, abilities and gender, is recognised as contributing to a more creative, innovative organisation with “business case” benefits that include reducing the costs of labour turnover, improving the understanding of the needs of current customers and enhancing the organisation’s reputation and image (European Union, n.d.; Yasbek, 2004).

Unfortunately, the technology sector of many Western industrialised countries is male dominated with women forming a minority in the skilled and highly skilled computing workforce, especially at the senior level. Males hold the majority of the highest paying, leading-edge jobs and females are concentrated in the lowest areas in terms of skill, status, mobility, and pay (Bernstein, 1999; Edwards, 1994; Panteli, Stack, & Ramsay, 2001). According to figures published by the University of Cambridge in 2004, the number of women in the IT industry in England declined. Between 1999 and 2003, female participation had halved—from 109,900 to 53,700 (Nash, 2005). There is a similar low participation rate in New Zealand. Moreover, salaries for female IT workers are reported as being less than their male counterparts working at the same level with equivalent skills, qualifications, and experience.

The industry is noted for its above-average turnover (Bort, 2003; Gartner Group, 2000) and attracting and retaining women, in particular, is a problem. Some progressive managers, concerned about the IT labour shortage and low female participation rate, have implemented policies and strategies aimed at promoting women and other minorities within the organisation. The initiatives include formal mentoring schemes, targeted training, as well as a variety of work/life balance initiatives. These policies have been found to positively affect business performance in improving staff retention rates, thus saving businesses money on recruitment costs, attracting better recruits, and minimising stress (Yasbek, 2004).

The question of why there is such a low female participation rate in the IT industry in Western countries has been addressed by a number of researchers in recent decades. Explanations include the glass ceiling that restricts advancement to top executive positions, the more subtle gender differences in work experiences such as receiving supervisory career support, being included in the informal communication network and fitting into an established male-dominated computing culture (Panteli et al., 2001; Peters, Lane, Rees, & Samuels, 2002). Harvard University’s President, Larry Summers, called for “rigorous and careful” thinking to explain the gender gap and said the most likely explanations
Managing New Zealand Women in IT
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