Changing Attitudes Toward Women IT Managers

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ABSTRACT

Essentialism and social constructionism theories have long explained the difficulties women experience as they aspire to higher managerial positions or enter science and technology fields. In the 1970s, the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) sought to determine the extent to which males perceived females as being different from their social group. Given efforts to encourage women to consider IT careers and changes in public law and education that have occurred since the early 1970s, this study revisited the WAMS to compare current attitudes of young people toward women as managers. The results suggest that through the intangible individual differences of women, perspective, overtime, via training, by awareness, and with their greater participation in the workplace, there has been gradual improvement in the perception of women as managers by men in the science and technology fields.

Keywords: Information Technology, Mahalanobis Distance, Sex Role Stereotypes, T-Test, Women as Managers (WAMS)

INTRODUCTION

The positive contributions of female Information Technology (IT) workers is well documented, but concern has been raised in recent years about the decline in numbers of women both in industry and in educational programs leading to IT industry positions. Several explanations have been proposed to explain the decline of women within the IT workforce. Either essentialism or social constructionism theories have long explained the challenges women experience as they aspire to higher managerial positions or entrance into the science and technology fields (Trauth, 2002). Essentialists assert that there are fundamentally different group-based male and female bio-psychological natures at odds with each other. Further, social constructionists suggest a social shaping that argues for positions and job types defined as masculine and outside the female domain.

An emerging view suggests that socio-cultural factors influenced by individual differences may affect a women’s choice of career in the IT workplace (Trauth, Quesenberry, & Huang, 2008). Trauth argues for an individual

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differences perspective on gender and technology that moves away from the group level of analysis to focus on women as individuals (Trauth, 2002; Trauth, Quesenberry, & Huang, 2008). This view suggests that each woman has individual (both tangible and intangible) attributes that allow her to succeed or fail on her own. Tangible attributes like strength and intelligence can be measured while intangible attributes like work ethic and inter-personal skills are harder to quantify. It is our contention that over time, these intangible attributes, with training, awareness, and with greater participation of women in the work place have gradually improved how men view women in the IT workforce.

Given efforts to encourage women to consider IT careers, changes in public law and education initiatives that encourage women to consider the IT workforce as a career occurring since the early 1970s, essentialism or the social constructionism perspectives may only be part of the story of the decline in numbers of women in the IT workforce. We revisited the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) as a benchmark measure to compare current attitudes of young people toward women as managers in response to the decline in the number of young women willing to acquire the education and training necessary to enter and to ascend the ranks of management for successful IT/IS careers. The 1970s Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) sought to assess how males perceived females as different from their social group (Peters, Terborg, & Taynor, 1974; Taynor & Deaux, 1973; Terborg & Ilgen, 1975). Thus, our research question is: “Have the attitudes of young men and women toward women as managers changed since the early 1970s?”

First, the research background for the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) will be reviewed from the prospective of previous developmental methodologies, then the results, and finally limitations to the study. Moreover, our research findings will be juxtaposed with previous results followed by a discussion of women as manager’s trends and some possible directions for future research.

THE DECLINE OF WOMEN IN THE IT WORKFORCE

Over the past thirty years, the United States (U.S.) business environment has experienced tremendous political, social, and economic upheaval often directed toward improved managerial opportunities for women. In the U.S., women have entered all facets of the labor market and are currently about half of the workforce. It can be argued that women have already attained business career parity, including commensurate compensation, for managerial and professional positions in many fields. The leadership of the United States has been mirrored to a lesser extent by Japan and other developing countries but success is seen as tapering off (Owen & Portillo, 2003). In particular, data from the late 1990s shows that general gains in employment opportunities did not extend to similar increases in the number of women holding IT/IS managerial positions. By 2000, American women comprised 47 percent of the total workforce; while only 29 percent of workers in IT/IS were women.

Moreover, many American women in IT/IS experienced lower overall salaries struggling with the incompatibility between career orientation and assigned job tasks (Igbaria, Parasuraman, & Greenhaus, 1997). Of note, 18 percent of men working in IT/IS occupations earned more than $70,000 annually, but only 8 percent of the women earned this sum. Moreover, the U.S. Small Business Administration has suggested that women are an unseen and unheard presence in the technology industry even though they are educated, willing, and experienced.

From the IT user side, women have become a potent force in the information economy. By the end of 2000, 52 percent of online shoppers were women and were a majority of total Internet users. However, there seems to be an incongruity in the workplace. Although, there are increasing numbers of women using the Internet commiserate with tremendous job opportunities existing in the information economy, the number of women entering the IT
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