Career persistence and advancement of women in IT: a company level analysis

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Background

- IT skills shortages in developed countries
- Huge under-representation of women in professional IT work and high female attrition rate among those who do enter
- Under-representation of girls/women in IT-related subjects at school and university
- Career choice and entry routes to IT are more studied than career persistence and advancement
- Focus tends to be on the school to career pipeline rather than on what happens to women when they embark on IT careers
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>UK % women</th>
<th>US % women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT specialist managers (UK) Computer and information systems managers (US)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Programmers and software development professionals (UK)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Software developers, applications and systems software, programmers (US)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>IT business analysts, architects and systems designers (UK)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer systems analysts, network architects (US)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Web design and development (UK) Web developers (US)</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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Career issues for women in IT

- Male domination and masculinisation of this field are not pre-given – e.g. India and former communist CEE countries

- Work–family conflict
  - Attrition rate for women in IT peaks 10 years into the career
  - Women in IT are not atypical in terms of their domestic and family arrangements
  - Full–time working for professional IT jobs is the norm and a strong company level expectation
  - Organizational–level policies can help with WLB
Career issues for women in IT

- Gender and IT workplace culture
  - Reduction in blatant sex discrimination but women still feel like ‘outsiders’
  - IT company organizational structure is typically quite flat – career progression extremely competitive
  - Lateral career moves also competitive
  - Intra-organizational networking is important in context of project team working
  - Absence of female role models and mentors
  - Long working hours; tight deadlines, strict targets
Qualitative, exploratory

UK subsidiary of large IT multi-national with around 10,000 UK-based employees across multiple sites around the country

Workforce comprised 23% women; only 11% women in senior positions; gender pay gap 18%; majority of professional women worked full-time without FWA of any kind

Semi-structured interviews (16 women/12 men) and roundtable discussions (4 x 8 participants); ‘career development for women’ workshop (20 participants); HR managers (2); HR director; one female board member

Company data and policy documents supplied
Explaining Women’s Careers in IT: analytical framework

(Ahuja, 2002)

- Three career components: choice, persistence, advancement
- These components comprise social and structural factors
  - Social factors include social and cultural biases held by others of women and held by women of themselves
  - Structural (organizational) factors include the way work and careers in IT are organized, plus the organizational/workplace support made available or unavailable to women
Comfortable being the ‘odd girl out’?

“... I think my [all male] team has been very supportive ... I should give them credit that they [the team] made me comfortable enough to lead them. I think when I started here I was probably a bit, I wouldn’t say reluctant, but I was doubtful whether I would be able to do it in such a male dominated workplace.”

(Project team manager)
Projecting the strong, confident female identity

“If they’re [women] not perhaps strong, not used to working in a very male orientated environment, which IT does seem to be on the technical side of things, yes, you do see them not being very confident …. Not all men, but there are a few, that might go and take advantage of that and make the woman feel very uncomfortable, but she wasn’t strong in herself anyway.”

(Systems architect)
Career Persistence: the advantage of being ‘different’

- Marshalling ‘feminine charms’ as a manager

“I worked in a team rolling out a new process in the data centre .... This process was going to change a lot of the ways things were done within the data centre environment .... and there were a lot of men there .... Well, because it was all men, they were sort of like “no, we don’t want to do this” and we got a lot of fractiousness. You can find that the feminine side ... can help to calm that down. So you can use your feminine wiles if you like.”

(Project team manager)
Career Persistence: Identity dilemmas

- Ditching feminine identities as a survival and assimilationist strategy:
  - *No fluffy bunnies*
  - *No delicate flowers*
- Instead, adopting masculine identities:
  - *Be one of the lads*
  - *Give as good as you get*
  - *Don’t be easily offended*
  - *Don’t whinge about women’s stuff*
Career Persistence: is change gonna come?

“I have actually suffered far more problems with young male graduates who often haven’t had a woman in charge since primary school than I have with long-in-the-tooth greying engineers. There are a couple of male graduates I’ve had to put in their place and I have done things like given them a female line-manager, a female career manager, a female assignment manager …”

(Senior manager)
Work–family Conflict and Career Persistence: whose responsibility?

- Flexibility for the employer, not for the employee
  - Temporal and spatial flexibility necessary to demonstrate career and organizational commitment
    “Now when I say I worked part-time, I worked 30 hours a week, which protected me from working 50 hours a week. So I was actually working 37, being paid for 30, but I didn’t have to work 50 like my colleagues did”.
- Men and women without children believed that mothers had to make a choice about whether to prioritise career or family
Career advancement: Arcane Processes

- The networking game

‘A lot of the more senior management jobs, although it may look like we do everything the right way [formal recruitment and selection], a lot of them are done by the old boys’ network of, who you know, whose face fits and that’s the way people get promoted to the senior roles. If you’re not prepared to play the games or network or whatever it is they do, then you’re not going to get there.’
Career advancement: Arcane Processes

- Tactical networking
- Getting to know the ‘right’ people
- Reading organizational politics
- Becoming visible
- But, networking is time consuming and increases working hours in return for uncertain dividends
Missed opportunities

- The official company position and the line articulated by HR managers was that development opportunities were open to all.
- Women’s under-representation explained by female deficits and work–family conflict: ‘women aren’t assertive enough’; ‘development programs involve extra hours and are not family friendly’
- Women themselves perceived many structural and cultural barriers: male networks, stereotypes of women, lack of (male) line–manager sponsorship, lack of support for FWA.
“I think the way that we operate is if you join as a graduate or apprentice, you get more care taken, in terms of when you are with the company from an early stage. Then in terms of if you are in a more senior role then you get identified there more from a future leadership perspective. I almost feel like the middle bunting is where we don't necessarily pay enough attention because people have been with us slightly too long to be getting special mentoring and coaching, but haven't got to the point of being identified as having high potential.” (Female executive board member)
Conclusions

- Career persistence achieved by:
  - Women being (relatively) comfortable with an outsider status/identity
  - Women having a large (and unhealthy) dose of stoicism which circumscribed resistance and challenge
  - The company’s accommodation of some individual high achievers
Conclusions

- Career advancement hindered by:
  - Managers’ internalisation of essentialist discourses of womanhood and motherhood
  - Policy failures caused by above, e.g. FWA not really promoted or accepted for all (especially not professional men and women)
  - Male dominated career structures: mentors, sponsors, networks, selectors, line-managers
  - Lack of woman-friendly pathways to advancement