

Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology

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A Reflexive Analysis of Questions for Women Entering the IT Workforce

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INTRODUCTION

There are many resources available for young college graduates entering the workforce. Colleges and universities have entire departments and buildings dedicated to the process of moving students into the "real world." Questions such as "what should my salary be?" "which firm is rated the best in the country?" and "how do I fit into the corporate environment?" are typically asked by both male and female students and are answered by the staff. Yet given that business is generally a male dominated field, questions such as "have you encountered a glass ceiling in your career?" are less likely to be answered with the whole truth. Hence, this article seeks to answer some of the questions that women may have upon entering the information technology (IT) workforce.

As a woman who is graduating from college and preparing to enter the IT workforce, I¹ constantly ask myself questions about what it means to be a minority in a male dominated industry. In order to be prepared for my future career, I synthesized my questions into three central issues of coping strategies, social networking and gender identity:

1. **Coping Strategies:** How do women cope with being minority, and what do women do when treated unfairly because of their gender?
2. **Social Networking:** When should social networking begin, and how does a woman form a personal network?

3. **Gender Identity:** Do women have to display more masculine traits to get ahead in the IT workforce, and does business attire matter?

These questions are of importance because they are typical of the kinds of questions that a woman entering the IT field may have. Hence, the purpose of this article is to address these questions through a reflexive analysis in order to better prepare myself and others for careers in the IT workforce.²

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

In order to address the questions raised previously, two primary sources of data are included in this article. First, a literature review is included that identifies the main themes of social networking, coping, and gender identity. Incorporated in this review are other resources that readers can use for additional information on the topic. Second, a reflexive analysis of the first author is included that details personal reflections from transcribing 25 qualitative interviews with American women working in the IT workforce³ and from internships at a local school district and a large financial services institution.

Coping Strategies

According to Merriam-Webster Online (2006), *coping* is defined as "deal[ing] with and attempt[ing] to overcome problems and difficulties." This definition is interesting because it addresses two aspects of

coping, both dealing with and overcoming problems. With regard to the IT workforce, it is important to have strategies to deal with and accept issues. Since coping is not always the easiest thing to do, it is important for women to consider coping strategies they might utilize as minorities in a male dominated industry.

Menaghan and Merves (1984) argue that most coping studies look at direct action on environment or self, interpretive reappraisal regarding environment or self, or emotional management. Dornbusch and Scott (1975) suggest that three types of workplace coping exist for employees: (1) leave an organization; (2) lower expectations; or (3) communicate dissatisfaction to the authority system and suggest changes in conditions. Fennell, Rodin, and Kantor (1981) argue that responses that create change are considered constructive, yet occur infrequently. Likewise Lim and Teo (1996) add that most coping does not require change, but primarily support from others.

These authors' arguments align with Trauth's (2004) research on coping strategies used by women in the IT workforce. Trauth explains that women in the IT workforce utilize three forms of coping: assimilation, accommodation, and activism. Assimilation accounts for the lack of stress because one is not aware of gender issues or uses selective perception to deal with hostile situations. Accommodation is the management of gender issues by recognizing the unequal treatment, but not taking action regarding the environment. Activism is the heightened awareness and the attempt to alleviate stress of gender issues through an active tendency toward changing the situation.

Based on a reflexive analysis of the interview transcriptions, it appears that some women in the IT workforce use group support as a primary means of coping. Perhaps people tend to feel better being around those who have similar beliefs, problems, and conflicts. Many of these women stated that they value social networks that allow for issue discussion and resolution. Other women in the interviews attempted to change their behaviors and actions to fit those of the group, such as taking on an activity that others in work are participating in, so they can have something to talk about. Furthermore, some women tended to take matters into their own hands. When faced with workplace issues, these women said

something to their manager or co-workers in order to bring the situation to the attention of others. At times they found that by speaking up, others in their organizations realized the problems that were occurring, and progress was made in attempts to correct them.

Social Networking

There are two main social networking theories. The first considers the strength of weak and strong ties. This theory was created by Mark Granovetter in his 1973 article, "The Strength of Weak Ties." The article is one of the most cited works in social network literature. His main argument is: Our acquaintances (*weak ties*) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (*strong ties*). Thus the set of people made up of any individual and his or her acquaintances comprises a low-density network (one in which many of the possible relational lines are absent) whereas the set consisting of the same individual and his or her close friends will be densely knit (many of the possible lines are present). Put another way, actors gain novel information from less intimate ties than close ties because actors who are strongly connected share information directly; therefore, they possess the same knowledge. New information comes from external connections which are likely to be weak.

Another social networking theory builds upon the weak tie relationships of Granovetter and discusses structural holes within social networks. Developed by Robert Burt in 1992, structural hole theory means that an actor is in a more advantageous position to gain and control novel information if s/he is connected to others who themselves are not directly connected to one another. The more non-redundant connections an actor has, the more information will flow with greater efficiency and with little constraint (Burt, 1992). The theory was developed to explain interpersonal communication within a competitive environment.

Based on a reflexive analysis of the interview transcriptions, it seems as though several women had their own ideas of how to build their social networks, including taking up new hobbies. One woman even went to the extreme. Her colleagues all took flying lessons and they would talk about it at work. She went out and took lessons, too, and could

then join in their conversations. While it is not recommended for women to change their lifestyles to fit that of those they work with, adding some additional activities could be beneficial. If coworkers take a half day on Friday or meet Saturday mornings to play golf, perhaps a woman should think of taking up lessons. If not, do not feel as if you must keep at it to impress anyone. The next step would then be to find people in the company who do things that you are interested in. This is where the strong social networking skills come in.⁴

When transcribing the interviews, I also found it interesting that several participants considered why woman would want to be part of the “old boy’s club.” The participant viewpoints on male social networking were numerous and diverse. For example, a few women seemed to perceive female networks as less effective and lacking the power of male networks. There was also the belief that many women did not want to network with other women because they were afraid to share their secrets. Some women enjoyed being the minority, especially if that uniqueness earned them certain privileges. Other women did not like to stand out, and said that blending in with men is the easiest way to not draw attention to oneself in an organization.

Gender Identity and Attire

Sex or gender roles in our society are characteristics that actually differentiate the sexes, are stereotypically believed to differentiate the sexes, or are considered to be differentially desirable in the two sexes (Lenney, 1991). Saunders and Stead (1986) argue that manner of dress has increasingly been used by women to overcome unfavorable gender stereotypes and to improve their employment opportunity and advancement. Likewise, Forsythe, Darke, and Cox (1985) explain that female attire is an important factor in hiring decisions and career advancement recommendations. Furthermore, Malloy (1976) argues that the appropriate business uniform for men is more narrowly defined than it is for women.

In the transcripts, the women interviewed expressed a number of themes about masculine and feminine gender identity and attire. As much as we may hate to admit it, clothing is very important to perception within a company. Although the days of

dressing like a feminized version of a man are over (e.g., Annie Hall), we still have to be conscious of what we wear to work. Because the styles of clothes change with the seasons and years for us, there are more choices. But, are those choices correct for entering the workplace? The Milan outfits from Ralph Lauren or Dior do not showcase shirts, pants, or skirts that are appropriate for the office. Most of the clothes that come off the runways are not ready to wear. In the age of *Sex and the City* and *Project Runway*,⁵ what is a girl to do about shopping for work? Not so long ago, it was socially unacceptable for women to wear pants to work. It was all about the power suit, the navy blue or red blouse/jacket with the mid-length or long skirt. Pants were seen as inappropriate for a woman, leading to other stereotypes about women. Now, pants suits and separates are the most common business attire for women. There are many stores now that specialize in clothing for the professional woman.

In my experiences, what I wore at work was very important. During my job working for a school district, when school was not in session, the technology staff was allowed to wear casual clothes. It was brought to my attention that I was not allowed to wear shorts that were “too short” or any other articles of clothing that would be revealing. I felt offended because this was brought up before I was even able to wear casual clothing. Nothing like it was mentioned to the males I was working with, and I thought that it was unfair. I also paid close attention to what I wore when I worked for a financial institution. Historically, the banking industry is very conservative in the way employees are supposed to dress. The IT section of the company was “business casual.”⁶ For men it is easy—khaki slacks and a polo or a dress shirt without a tie. However, I found it interesting when I received the dress code policy, that the number of things that a woman could or could not wear was much longer. In my situation, I found myself dressing more towards business professional than business casual because I felt that my co-workers would take me more seriously that way. I noticed that the executives, both male and female, still wore the power suits, even when others around them looked like they were going golfing. I learned that clothing

creates an image, and looking polished and professional is important.

There is also more to gender identity than clothing. The biggest example of gender identity that I have encountered is the way that women act in the professional IT world. During my internship experience, the functional manager for my group was a woman. Several teams besides mine reported to her, and she had only been with the company for six years. There were several team members who had been there much longer. She told me that she still felt like a newcomer in the organization, and I found that interesting, because to me, six years is a long time to be somewhere. My team members and I were discussing an issue that was handed down from the functional manager, and they were saying that she liked to have everything a certain way, and that they did not like it that she was that strict and demanding. I made note of the fact that our direct manager did not expect anything less than that from us, and the only difference was that he was a man. I said that maybe she felt that she had to act that way for them to take her seriously or that they were being overly critical because she was a woman. They all said that they had not thought of that before, and that makes sense.

FUTURE TRENDS

The Center for Women and Information Technology (CWIT) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, recommends the following courses of action for those women entering the IT field looking for avenues for discussing issues such as those discussed in this article:

- **Network by Joining an E-Mail Discussion List for Women in IT:** If you join one that serves the area where you live, you should be able to make some helpful personal contacts. To find a local list for women in IT, check out the listings at WorldWIT (<http://www.worldwit.org>) or the chapters of the Association of Women in Computing (<http://www.awc-hq.org/chapters.html>). Many of these discussion groups have e-mail lists and monthly face-to-face meetings. If regional dis-

ussion lists are not available in your area, try a national list such as SYSTERS (<http://www.systers.org>).

- **Learn More about Women and the IT Workforce through Gender-Related Electronic Forums:** A list of international and national forums on women related issues in science and technology can be found at CWIT's Gender-Related Electronic Forums (<http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/forums.html>).
- **Attend Regional Events Offered through Area Organizations:** The Association for Women in Computing (<http://www.awc-hq.org>) is a national organization with local chapters that usually offer regular meetings, e-mail lists, and workshops.
- **Find a Mentor:** To find out more about what mentors do and how they can help, visit MentorNet (<http://www.mentornet.net/>).

CONCLUSION

Social networking seems to be the biggest method of coping. This can mean that a woman either accepts the problems and talks to someone about them, or that a woman looks to change them. Finding a mentor in the organization is an excellent method for coping with an uneven playing field. Women should prove what they can do. There are several examples of women not being taken seriously, and then performing well on a task, and gaining the respect of their coworkers. Most of the time, unfair treatment is the result of lack of respect. Women should pit themselves in positions to make a difference and to be noticed.

With regard to social networking, maybe the answer is not breaking into the "old boy's club," but creating a women-centered club. Other women in a company who feel the same way you do. Maybe there already is a network, and you just need to join. Get to know your coworkers and the women in higher-ranking positions. Have lunch with them, or seek them out on a coffee break. Knowing others within the organization can help when it comes time for promotions and reviews. It also helps to look outside of your direct company. There are lots of

resources on the Internet for building networks of women. There are several conferences that offer opportunities for growth of both your business and networking skills. When you first start with a company, inquire as to the types of programs offered for women. "Is there an on-site daycare for children?" is often a good question to start off with, because if a company does this for its employees, it generally means that there are other opportunities as well.

With regard to gender identity and attire, before you start working, ask what the dress is like for the company. Most IT departments of large corporations have moved towards business casual, but that does not mean that your look needs to be casual. It is written more for the men, letting them know that they do not have to wear a tie and jacket around the office. In the more conservative fields, such as banking and some consulting firms, business professional is still active. If you are unsure of what to wear, dress on the conservative side until you have learned what is appropriate.

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KEY TERMS

Coping Strategies: Mechanisms used to address or overcome issues, problems, and/or difficulties.

Gender Roles: Characteristics that actually differentiate the sexes, are stereotypically believed to differentiate the sexes, or are considered to be differentially desirable in the two sexes (Lenney, 1991).

Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT: A social theory developed by Trauth (2002, Trauth et al., 2004) that focuses on within-group rather than between-group differences to explain differences in male and female relationships with information technology and IT careers. This theory posits that the underrepresentation of women in IT can best be explained by considering individual characteristics and individual influences that result in individual and varied responses to generalized environmental influences on women.

“Old Boy’s Club”: An informal social network where men are able to share information in an informal setting, in order to build trust, personal relationships, and career advantage.

Social Networks: The web of personal and professional relationships that people utilize to exchange resources, information, and services.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Use of first person in this article refers to the first author whose voice is reflected in this article. The second author contributed to the writing, and the third author collected the empirical data used in this article.
- ² This article is based on a research paper that was a requirement of a directed study course with Eileen M. Trauth, PhD, in the final year of the first author’s undergraduate degree program.
- ³ The transcribed interviews are a part of a National Science Foundation study on gender and the IT workforce (grant number: EIA-0204246; principal investigator: Eileen M. Trauth, PhD). The purpose of this study is to engage in development of the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (Trauth, 2002; Trauth et al., 2004).
- ⁴ Additional information on social networking in this dataset can be found in Morgan, Quesenberry, and Trauth (2004).
- ⁵ *Sex and the City* and *Project Runway* are two American television shows.
- ⁶ *Business casual* refers to office clothing that is not as professional as a suit, but more professional than jeans. An example of business casual is dress slacks with a button down shirt.