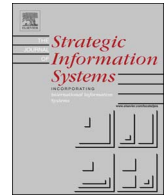




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Strategic Information Systems

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jsis

Sustaining and advancing IT careers: Women's experiences in a UK-based IT company

Gill Kirton*, Maxine Robertson

School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
IT careers
Gender
Women
Under-representation
Inequality regimes

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a growing literature on women in IT occupations. Against a national and international context of women's longstanding and continued under-representation in senior professional roles in IT, our study at organizational level tells the story of women's career experiences in a specific UK-based IT company in relation to its culture, processes and practices. Utilising a concept from the gender literature – Acker's (2006) 'inequality regimes' – the study bridges the gap between the gender and IS literature and feminist theorising in order to shed light on the lack of gender diversity in IT. The article specifically shows how components of organizational inequality regimes, namely, 'organizing processes', 'legitimacy' and 'visibility' of inequalities combine and interact to produce and maintain gender inequality in the IT workplace. The implications of this in the sector more generally are discussed.

1. Introduction

This article responds to calls for further research on gender and IT careers (Trauth, 2011). In the context of the growing digital economy, many countries continue to face IT skills shortages, yet globally the industry has been unable to recruit, and more importantly retain and develop the careers of women IT professionals (Griffiths et al., 2007; Reid et al., 2010; Servon and Visser, 2011). This has attracted considerable policy debate particularly regarding questions of women's career choice and initial entry into IT. Despite various longstanding national campaigns to promote IT education and careers, girls and women remain severely under-represented in IT-related subjects at school and university (e.g. e-skills 2014). This then naturally limits the numbers entering the industry. Against this macro context and pressing agenda, it is unsurprising, but notable, that issues related to *sustaining and advancing* women's careers in IT firms are less studied phenomena.

However, the high female attrition rate and lack of advancement among those who do enter the industry, suggests that IT employers are more or less wholly failing to address issues surrounding women's career retention and development (Griffiths and Moore, 2010; Servon and Visser, 2011). As Trauth (2002) argues, employers are among the many stakeholders that contribute to the social shaping of gender imbalance in the IT profession. Moreover, Armstrong et al. (2012) suggest that the barriers for women *advancing* in the IT profession have shifted from societal to more organizational. Our research contributes to the debate by focusing on women's experiences at organizational level.

Employing the concept of 'inequality regimes' developed by Acker (2006) in order to identify barriers to equality in organizations, the article addresses the following research questions: What workplace organizing processes impact on professional women's capacity to sustain and develop careers in IT? Can organizational inequality regimes change? Our findings demonstrate that organizing processes in the IT workplace are shaped by a masculine workplace culture which reinforces women's under-representation.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: g.kirton@qmul.ac.uk (G. Kirton), m.robertson@qmul.ac.uk (M. Robertson).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsis.2018.01.001>

Received 17 November 2016; Received in revised form 11 December 2017; Accepted 16 January 2018

0963-8687/ © 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Masculinised organizing processes are normalised and therefore appear legitimate, and hence are largely unacknowledged by IT employers. Thus, *gender inequalities*, in contrast to *gendered choices*, remain invisible within IT organizations. This perpetuates the status quo and creates a policy vacuum to the detriment of women's careers. Nevertheless, we also discuss how women can and do demonstrate agentic capacities in their responses to the male dominated and masculinised environment.

We begin the literature review by outlining Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes which we then utilize to organize a brief discussion of extant research on women and the IT workplace, and later to frame the analysis of our findings. A methods section follows, after which the findings highlight the most pertinent workplace organizing processes influencing women's capacity to sustain and advance their careers in the case study firm. We conclude by discussing our contribution in relation to Acker's framework and consider the strategic implications for IT firms.

2. Gendered inequality regimes in the IT profession and workplace

Our primary focus is on the *equality* argument for gender diversity in IT, as opposed to consumer and demographic (business oriented) arguments (Trauth, 2011). Acker's (2006) concept of 'inequality regimes' is widely used in the gender literature as an analytical and conceptual approach for understanding, rather than merely observing, *organizational* inequalities (Healy et al., 2011; Wright, 2015). While Acker (2006) acknowledges that organizational inequalities are linked to the politics, history and culture of the surrounding society, workplaces are one important site where inequalities are lived by individuals and as such are worthy of detailed investigation. However, in the gender and IT literature studies of employees in specific companies are rare, rather studies are generally at occupational level and offer only glimpses of women's lived experiences inside IT workplaces.

Acker (2006: 443) begins with a multi-dimensional definition of inequality in organizations as: 'systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect and pleasures in work and work relations'. Notably, this broad definition of inequality that we adopt here highlights that (for professionals at least) work is not merely about monetary rewards. It is also a social activity central to life, which has implications for the maintenance of inequality regimes insofar as people may be reluctant to protest and challenge organizational inequalities if on balance their job fulfils at least some of their life goals or if from their relatively subordinate position they fear victimisation for speaking out.

Acker (2006: 443) defines 'inequality regimes' as 'interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain ... inequalities'. Inequality regimes consist of six components (Acker, 2006: 445-55): (i) bases of inequality (e.g. gender); (ii) shape and degree of inequality (e.g. steepness of hierarchy, degree of occupational gender segregation); (iii) organizing processes that produce inequality (e.g. long working hours, absence of flexible work arrangements, male-gendered networks); (iv) visibility of inequalities (degree of awareness, especially among the senior and powerful); (v) legitimacy of inequalities (whether inequalities are accepted or challenged); (vi) control and compliance of workforce (rules and procedures, rewards and benefits, extent to which male privilege is taken for granted). According to Acker, it is necessary to study different workplaces in order to find solutions because these components of inequality regimes vary substantively across workplaces.

The concept of inequality regimes provides a bridge between the IS literature and feminist theorising as recommended by Trauth (2011), and a conceptual/analytical path for avoiding the individualised 'gender-as-variable' approach, which characterises much gender and IS research (Howcroft and Trauth, 2008; Soe and Yakura, 2008). Acker's (2006) concept provides the bridge by conceptualising gender rather than as a *property of individuals*, but as an *organizing principle* reflected in workplace hierarchies, policies, processes and routine interactions. In particular, the concept highlights how formal and informal 'rules' governing organizational practices, action, behaviour, and interactions combine to produce what are often subtle and elusive barriers to women's careers. This close examination of organizations is particularly important now that some are claiming that barriers to women's IT careers are shifting from societal to organizational (Armstrong et al., 2012). While focusing attention on *organizations*, the concept is also sensitive to individuals' and groups' (such as women) power and agency within the organizational setting, the constraints they are faced with both in terms of overcoming and challenging career barriers.

Next we consider previous research about gender and IT around the main components of inequality regimes that we analyse in the findings: (i) gender as a basis of inequality and the shape the degree of inequality in the IT profession; (ii) organizing processes producing gender inequality in the IT workplace. Importantly, consideration of visibility and legitimacy (as significant components of inequality regimes) thread through this discussion. The final section here discusses whether existing research in IT suggests that inequality regimes can be changed or their effects lessened, giving consideration to the remaining component of inequality regimes that speaks to an under-researched aspect of why change remains elusive – control and compliance.

2.1. Gender: a basis of inequality, and its shape and degree in the IT profession

Data on the gender composition of professional IT occupations highlights that gender can be regarded in Acker's terms as a basis of inequality in that IT occupations are male dominated and have shown few signs of becoming more gender balanced over time (e.g. e-skills 2014). In terms of degree of inequality, the percentage of women in selected professional IT occupations (where comparable data were available) in the UK and US (the two countries where most studies are located) reveals all occupational categories as strongly gender segregated (Table 1). In terms of shape, in both countries, women are more highly represented in IT management occupations and in newer fields around web development, rather than in the technical/long established software development. On the one hand, this demonstrates the fluid and changing nature of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006), which some might construe as

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6950138>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6950138>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)