

Are Women Leaving IT?

By Stacy Gilliam

That scores of go-getting women have populated a non-traditional career like information technology is a feat to be acknowledged. They've worked their way in, and some of the best have managed to push themselves, rung by rung, up the corporate ladder of success. Still, is there a waning interest in IT among women in 2005?

Over the last few years, the IT industry has struggled to retain women. In 1996, women made up 41 percent of IT workers. By 2002, that figure had dropped to 35 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Experts attribute the decline to a number of reasons – fallout from the dotcom blow up, more women heading up their own IT firms, an increase in global outsourcing, and a male-dominated culture that hasn't exactly rolled out the red carpet for women to join the club.

Fay Payton counts herself among those driven away. A former systems engineer with IBM, she left disenchanted with the company's handling of her career. "There were racial, gender and age issues throughout my corporate experience," says Payton, 39. "People tried to snow me over on one, two or three of those dimensions."

Payton jumped on an opportunity to go back to graduate school – on a full ride and fellowship sponsored by Time, Inc. – and then took her education a step further to get a doctoral degree. Armed with the job experience and two degrees, Payton was primed for a dream job, right? "Even after my Time experience, I had come out of the MBA program with six offers. I decided I couldn't do it," says Payton, now an associate professor of information systems at North Carolina State University. "Something about working in corporate, I couldn't do it." As Payton finished up her doctoral work at Case Western University in Cleveland, she gave birth to her first child. She weighed the hectic and unforgiving pace of an IT career in one hand, and her quality of life with a new family in the other. Her family won hands down.

Women, even the most career-driven across all industries, tackle similar choices every day. When the job isn't sympathetic to the family responsibilities women tend to shoulder, something has to give. Payton made adjustments to her career for the sake of her family. Life in academia affords her the flexibility she desired. Why couldn't life in corporate IT afford her the same?



The Real Problem

Unlike Payton, many women don't leave corporate IT, but still struggle to excel under assumptions that they can't handle coveted IT projects and positions requiring extensive time and dedication. Ultimately, women's abilities are undervalued and not taken seriously, experts say.

As is so with any other outnumbered group, women continue to be plagued by cultural stereotypes that, if not challenged, keep them from advancing in IT. The long-held image of woman as nurturer, caregiver, and emotional supporter doesn't jibe well under working conditions that condone anti-social, anti-woman and overly competitive behavior. Black women, of course, fare even worse.

"It's a young boys' club that creates work norms that are



Birdie Sadberry



Colleen Molter

family unfriendly – long hours, expectations of value-added performance,” says Wanda Smith, a professor of organizational behavior at Virginia Tech University who is studying the recruitment and retention of women and minorities in IT.

“It’s a misfit environment, meaning there are many organizations trying very hard to create a comfy environment for women and minorities in IT. But there still remains a feeling of it being a poor fit. It’s a cultural thing.”

In “Where are the Women in Information Technology?”—a study released in 2005 for the National Center for Women & Information Technology—researchers Nancy Ramsey and Pamela McCorduck write that women, as well as racial minorities, battle with a “people like me” mentality, where those who aren’t white male engineer/computer science types consistently face rejection.

“This excludes women from the informal networks that enhance skills, and denies them the useful informal insights into the politics and power inside their organizations,” the study says.

Smith says that many IT people aren’t “people” people and don’t value soft skills – an area in which many women naturally outshine men. Communication and conflict resolution skills are critical at leadership levels, but those attributes are looked down on in technical positions.

Thus, women may shy away from or altogether ignore hands-on IT jobs deemed too masculine and out of their comfort zones. Women who do this only reinforce stereotypes, adding to the problem, some say.

“Because there aren’t a lot of women in IT, it’s almost a self-fulfilling

prophecy,” says Colleen Molter, president of QED National, an IT staffing and consulting firm in New York City. Molter identifies project management, process analysis and technical writing as roles that have been popular with women in IT.

“They assume it isn’t for them. If we want to change this, we need to educate our children and college-aged students to help them understand what it means to be a technician.”

Birdie Sadberry, 53, couldn’t agree more. Sadberry, manager in information technology for Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway in Fort Worth, Texas, instinctively ventured toward non-traditional jobs during most of her career.

Before a stint in technology, she tackled male-centered careers with the telephone company, the coal and oil and gas industries.

“Women are not trained in the same way as men,” says Sadberry, also a Women of Technology award recipient.

“We’re coddled. We make our men strong and our women emotional. That whole thing has to change.” It must start in early childhood, she adds.

From Molter’s point of view, women aren’t necessarily rushing away from IT, but are settling into the “softer” high-tech jobs, those less competitive and cutthroat.

“The programming, the installation, the operating of computing systems, that’s an all-male thing, still. Women just don’t cozy up,” she says. For a woman to succeed beyond cultural expectations in IT, she has to be a “front liner and a trendsetter.”

Real Solutions

How do we even the playing field, so that women find IT careers inviting enough to stay? Researchers say a combination of on-the-job training, formal and informal coaching and diversity program would be a move in the right direction.

Molter finds that her clients are hip to diversifying their labor force. Companies want women to fill the

more technical IT positions, but often can’t find enough qualified female candidates. “Diversity produces good results,” she says. “We want to build systems and products that suit people on the street.”

Corporate cultures that encourage and support women will go a long way, experts say.

Companies can benefit from making their environments more women-friendly, suggests David Leighton, president of Women in Technology International, a global organization working to empower women in business and technology. “We feel they should look at the gender conversation, because women now make up more than half the workforce,” Leighton says. “Businesses can’t afford to alienate them. The ones that get it will be here in five years, and the ones that don’t won’t be.”

McCorduck and Ramsey’s study documents how crucial it is for women to defy workplace norms and learn to tout their skills.

“Women desperately need training in how to promote themselves effectively, how to get over undue modesty about ‘Brand Me.’”

At the same time, their male colleagues need training to recognize such self-promotion as appropriate to the field, and not some woman’s outrageous ‘aggressiveness’.

Lastly, successful women in IT share that mentoring helped them tremendously in dealing with the strains of working in a high-testosterone workplace and making strategic career moves.

Sadberry says that women should choose mentors ranked at least two levels higher than them, in positions they’d like to occupy someday.

Also, consider a change in attitude and dress. Women should look the part, as if they’ve already moved up.

“The whole corporate world is a ball game. If we’re going to get in the game, we have to learn the game,” Sadberry says. ★

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