Engaging Women in IT

Winning the right to vote in 1920 was a step change for the rights of women, but nearly 100 years on and the battle for equality, particularly in the workplace, continues, says John Bancroft.

Women often have to work harder than male counterparts and achieve more to progress their careers, yet ultimately they're likely to hit the glass ceiling. The IT industry is often quick to bemoan some skills shortage or another, yet encouraging more women into the profession could help. Not only with the numbers, but a more recent McKinsey study revealed that mixed teams improved innovation and were better able to deal with complex situations. It also found that businesses with more women on the board improved their performance.

INEQUALITY COULD HARM IT OF THE FUTURE

Lord Davies, who is currently carrying out a probe into boardroom bias in FTSE 100 company boardrooms, has held off making it compulsory for companies to employ a percentage of women on the board. He has however, strongly suggested that there should be at least 25% of women on boards by 2015. The McKinsey study found that companies with women on the board delivered a 42% higher return on sales, 66% on invested capital and 53% on return on equity. Surely then, it makes sense to hire and promote more women? However, the picture on the ground tells a different story.

A survey by Women in Technology (WIT) found some startling facts, for example 61% of respondents had more than 10 years' experience in the technology sector, yet only 26% have reached senior management or board level. Most remain at junior or mid-level management, but why is that? Many also felt that they are passed over for promotion in favour of male colleagues.

So why, when studies show that companies with women at board level outperform those without, are women still facing barriers to attaining the top level jobs and how can this change?

Kirstin Duffield, managing director at Morning Data Ltd and recent winner of Best Business Woman at Britain's Best Business Awards 2012 says: "I don't believe mandatory quotas are a good idea, as women could feel they have had a 'free pass' and the men will believe they got there through back door means. However, if companies continue to refute the benefits of women

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at board level then they will be the losers in the long run. Anecdotal evidence is insufficient to drill the message home, but a top down approach through Institute of Directors and other advisory bodies should be used to prove the benefits with hard facts. I believe that we should not forget that the same motivations are not apparent for a group of men versus a group of women. Some women like middle management, there may be fewer who put themselves forward and a woman should not be viewed as a failure if she stays where she is rather than pushing for a board position. Otherwise, it's a little like being made to feel guilty for choosing not to have children."

THE BIG ISSUES

The issues affecting women moving ahead in IT are perhaps not too dissimilar from other professions such as inflexible working conditions, being overlooked for promotion and needing to

work flexible hours. IT is not very conducive to long career breaks, but the WIT survey did find that the 'long hours' culture in IT was also a key concern for 75% of women.

Yet, the use of technology grows year on year. It's more accessible, easy to use and accurate, but how do we encourage more people, particularly women, into IT as a career? There is a general perception of the IT industry as being one full of nerds and this is to some extent driven by the media, films and television shows that typically have a bias to male IT people.

Emma Faulkner a lead software engineer at G4S Monitoring Technologies Ltd ironically suggests: "I think it's the lack of women in IT! Programmes like "the IT crowd" are hilarious but don't do us any favours. IT people are often portrayed as total nerds on TV, but actually we're not all about pizza and gadgets and going to Star Trek conventions. Well, yes we are all about the gadgets, I'll give you that!"

EDUCATING 'IT' GIRLS...

Some people can be naturally talented and attracted to technology. An early brush with code left Faulkner passionate about writing code. "I had a maths lesson in 1983 during which we wrote a BASIC program on an ABC80 computer. Even though nearly an hour of typing only gave us a white bar that moved around the screen, I was hooked."

Our early years tend to shape and inform us. So, getting girls in involved in IT early could help to see more women in senior positions in the future. Clare Patterson, principal advisor at KPMG says: "Schools and colleges need to explain the variety of roles available in IT. I'm an ambassador for STEMNET who create opportunities to inspire young people in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Many of the students I speak to believe a role in IT means you sit and program all day. Young girls are surprised to hear I spend much of my day talking to people, because I work in IT they imagine I spend all my day in a room with only my computer for company!"

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dramatically, but few will ever think of a woman.

"The teachers don't make the introduction to IT something appealing for young girls. It's still considered geeky. Recruiting more IT teachers who are women or simply recognising what girls aged 10 to 14 are interested in would help. Also the contents of the current ICT GCSE should not be an exam, but standard in all parts of the curriculum. Using applications such as Word and Excel for all homework in History, Geography intertwines IT into everything, raising standards in proficiency," says Kirstin Duffield.

CHANGE NEEDED IN THE FUTURE

So, how can more women be attracted to work in IT in the future? Finding more women for IT roles in the future could be even more difficult. "The drastic reduction since 2004, of the number of UK students across the board taking school IT exams. There has been over 65% drop in GCSE candidates from 2004 – 2010 and only 5000 students took computing A-level in 2010. This is having the opposite impact on IT skills that the market needs. We will all be able to use tablets and smartphones, but not develop the systems used on them," warns Duffield, but "by making IT more about all the associated roles, business analysis, project management, training, sales," we can attract more women into the industry.

At the same time, not all women want to move into senior positions. "I'm at a turning point at the moment," says Faulkner who has just stepped into a managerial position. "I need to choose between staying at this level, with some access to programming work or decide that I want to progress and move up. My ambition was always to be a programmer at the top of my game, but I'm really enjoying the analysis and management side of things so I may move more in that direction. I also want to get more actively involved in encouraging young women to come into IT."

In some ways the IT industry itself should be best placed to support the encouragement and advancement of women into all roles. After all we do have the technology. Applied in the right way it could enable more women to carry on working and developing their careers.

"It's a field in which remote working and flexible hours are eminently feasible – certainly for programmers. This means working around childcare, if that's an issue, is a lot easier. The remuneration is often good, although there can still be a bit of a pay gap in some companies. We as women in IT need to get media exposure, get into schools, talk to young women and show them that being a woman in IT doesn't mean you have to kiss good bye to your femininity. We need to raise our profile," concludes Faulkner.

CLARE PATTERSON, PRINCIPAL ADVISOR AT KPMG

I work in information security so my Masters is particularly useful, but much of my work also draws on the wider business understanding I gained through my MBA. I like solving puzzles and building things. IT is always changing, so there are always new things to explore and better ways of achieving things. I like being able to resolve issues my clients are facing. I get real satisfaction from fixing issues for them. I also enjoy being able to translate technical issues into business speak, which enables the business to really understand the issue and make a sensible decision.

I want to be able to help organisations get the most from their IT. When done well, IT has such an important role in enabling businesses to beat their competitors and bring new products/services into the world. This can be masked when people are purely technology focused for the sake of it rather than seeing how it can be used by the business. Clare has a BSc in management science with computer science, an MSc in Information Security, a KPMG EMBA from University of Edinburgh and ENPC.

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EMMA FAULKNER A LEAD SOFTWARE ENGINEER AT G4S MONITORING TECHNOLOGIES LTD

Initially, it was obviously a hindrance having a languages degree. The market was saturated with language graduates in 1994 anyway, and most companies wanted graduates with a maths or science background. As a result, I had to work very hard to get 'proper' programming jobs initially. I started with Excel macros, then Access databases, then VB, then started programming in C+ in 2001 and haven't looked back. After 10 years of working as a programmer/analyst programmer, I have recently moved back into a junior management position but that was a hard decision to take as obviously in this line of work, it means you have to take a conscious decision to relinquish a certain amount of the coding.

I love so many areas of my role. One of my favourite things, though, is delivering something to a customer that they've been told might be a stretch too far or even technically impossible. I thrive on trying to come up with workable technical solutions to customer requirements and helping my team to deliver those solutions. I also really enjoy learning new technologies and skills. Somewhat unusually for a programmer, Emma has a joint BA (Hons) in German Studies and Swedish.

KIRSTIN DUFFIELD MD AT MORNING DATA LTD

I run a software house providing solutions to the insurance industry. I am committed to providing a supportive, flexible, creative environment in the workplace with excellent work/life balance, whilst also being profitable.

My interest in IT came at an early age, my father was a programmer; I just grew up surrounded by systems development. I watched him create computing masterpieces that people wanted, it was like art. I have combined several areas, computing, marketing, and insurance to develop a rounded understanding of the industry I represent and work for. However I still struggle to see much of my computing degree's relevance even in the first years after I qualified. IT just moves too fast. It really does need continuous hands on experience and development.

The variety in the role I play is refreshing, always looking for ways to use the tools available which themselves change and develop, to solve problems, streamline processes and create real efficiencies. I enjoy finding ways to meet regulatory requirements without adding to users' workloads. Kirstin has a BSc (Hons) in computer studies, DipM, CertCii, CertCA, FBCS