Recruiting and retaining women in IT jobs requires new policies

May 24 2007

Recruiters wanting to hire women for information technology positions have to go beyond the typical sales pitch emphasizing job promotion and security in order to get results, according to a Penn State research study of 92 female IT practitioners.

Human-resources personnel need to recognize that women have diverse values and motivations throughout their careers and tailor hiring and retention practices to fit those needs, said Eileen Trauth, professor of information sciences and technology in Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology.

"You can't classify women by a single category whether that category is desire for technical competence or organizational security," Trauth said. "Women's career motivations change and human-resources personnel have to recognize that in order to keep women in IT fields."

While women represent almost 60 percent of the workforce, they account for only a little more than 32 percent of the IT workforce. Addressing women's under-representation not only will help tackle the anticipated IT worker shortage but will help foster a diverse workforce, a cornerstone of both innovation and economic development, she added.

The research is described in a paper, "What Do Women Want": An Investigation of Career Anchors among Women in the IT Workforce," given at the recent SIGMIS Computer Personnel Research Conference in St. Louis. Co-author Jeria Quesenberry, an IST doctoral student, is

extending this research area in her dissertation.

Traditional models for understanding workers have focused on "career anchors," or the factors that motivate individuals, career choices. For their study, the researchers focused on three of those anchors–-technical competence, managerial competence and organizational security-–and interviewed women from a variety of racial and ethnic identities, ages and backgrounds. The women work in IT positions ranging from CIO and upper-level managers to Web developers and IT administrators. Among the researchers' findings are: Contrary to traditional theories, none of those anchors alone was a deciding factor in the women's career choices. While about 30 percent indicated they valued careers that afforded them opportunities to perfect skills in technical areas, others said they wanted careers with managerial opportunities. In addition, there was little overlap among the women who reported that managers give up technical skills to develop management skills.

The researchers also discovered that women's career choices are motivated by a number of factors, and those shift and change throughout their careers. This reinforces the researchers' conclusion that static hiring policies won't appeal to women, Trauth said.

Source: Penn State