

Study finds work climate the main reason women leave engineering

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Women who leave engineering jobs after obtaining the necessary degree are significantly more likely to leave the field because of an uncomfortable work climate than because of family reasons, according to a study being undertaken at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM).

Nearly half of women in the survey who left an engineering career indicated they did so because of negative [working conditions](#), too much travel, lack of advancement or low salary, the study shows.

Despite successful interventions to increase the numbers of women earning degrees in engineering, the field now faces the problem of retaining those female engineers. The study, supported by a half-million-dollar grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), allowed respondents to list more than one reason for leaving, and about half did.

Findings show one in three respondents left engineering because they did not like the workplace climate, their boss or the culture. One in four left engineering to spend more time with family.

"Some women are leaving because of family issues, but that's not the majority of women who responded to our survey," says Nadya Fouad, UWM Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology.

This is the first systematic study of the engineering field's retention of women, says Fouad. She and co-author Romila Singh, UWM associate

professor of business, received input in the form of an online survey on the topic from more than 3,700 women with degrees from 230 universities.

Respondents fall into four groups: those who are currently working as engineers, those who got their degree but never entered the field, those who left the profession more than five years ago, and those who left less than five years ago.

Other key findings include:

- One-third of the women in the survey who did not enter engineering after graduating said it was because of their perceptions of the field as being inflexible, or the workplace culture as being non-supportive of women.
- Women's decisions to stay in engineering are best predicted by a combination of psychological factors and factors related to the organizational climate.
- Women's decisions to stay in engineering can be influenced by key supporters in the organization, such as supervisors and co-workers.
- Being given opportunities for training and development was a key factor that influenced current engineers' career and job satisfaction.
- Women in the survey who wanted to leave their companies were also very likely eventually to leave the field of engineering altogether.

- [Women](#) who graduated with an engineering degree but who did not enter the field are using the knowledge and skills gained in their education in a number of other fields.

Provided by University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

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