

Research geared to keep women from fleeing IT profession

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For years, employers and experts have been trying to reverse the exodus of women from information technology positions.

They're failing.

Studies show that women are significantly underrepresented in the IT field, and the number of women who've graduated with degrees in computer and information science have plummeted from 37 percent in 1985 to 18 percent in 2011.

The failure to "stop the bleeding" stems, in part, from the industry's reliance on an oft-cited, outdated and under-studied research model, said Cindy Riemenschneider, Ph.D., professor of information systems and associate dean for research and faculty development in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

"We have to look deeper into the areas that really need to be addressed," Riemenschneider said, explaining that employers and experts have been focusing on the wrong challenges facing women in the IT profession.

For example, there have been numerous studies and efforts focused on work-family conflict and organizational structures. But a new study shows that those areas are less significant than challenges found in occupational culture and informal interoffice social networks (think: men's office softball teams and informal lunches where men discuss sports).

These areas emerged as more integral in a recent study by Riemenschneider and colleague Deborah Armstrong, Ph.D., associate professor in Florida State University's entrepreneurship, strategy and [information systems](#) department.

They started with a 12-year-old model developed by researcher Manju Ahuja, which, they contend, included popular assumptions that had not been thoroughly tested. Riemenschneider and Armstrong tested those findings by surveying IT professionals from a Fortune 500 company over a period of three years.

Using the results of their research, they were able to build upon Ahuja's model and propose a new model they hope will "re-energize the dialogue regarding creating a more diversified IT work environment," according to the study.

Some areas where improvement can be made, include:

Mentoring – Riemenschneider said women who advance within a company often find few female mentors. She suggested allowing women to utilize peer networking and mentoring via professional organizations.

"The further women move up, the fewer female mentors they have," Riemenschneider said. "Women might be mentored by a male, and the lens he looks through might not be the same one she looks through."

Social interaction – Riemenschneider said co-ed sports teams and offering employees time off to pursue common interests, such as philanthropic service, can bring both men and [women](#) together and build team cohesion.

Career-stage awareness – Understanding the needs of employees at various career stages and life stages (e.g., elder care) is integral,

Riemenschneider said.

"Employers need to be proactive to help employees at whatever stage, to keep them within the company, so they can move up the corporate ladder," she said. "They need to recognize that employees need different opportunities for different stages of their careers."

More information: The [study](#), "The Barriers Facing Women in the Information Technology Profession: An Exploratory Investigation of Ahuja's Model," won the Magid Igbaria Outstanding Conference Paper of the Year Award at the 2014 ACM SIGMIS Computers and People Research Conference.

Provided by Baylor University

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