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## **The Movement Toward More Women in IT: Is the Trend Reversing?**

**Paula Santonocito**

*CBS News reports that despite a fairly widespread interest in computers, few girls are interested in pursuing careers in technology. Instead, they are preparing for careers in helping professions, like nursing and teaching.*

While this bodes well for health care and education, two fields in need of workers, it could spell trouble for technology.

Lack of workers means the technology industry is likely to find itself in a predicament. A shortage of available tech professionals could also be more than a little problematic for business in general which has come to rely heavily on technology and the workers who support it.

### **Opportunities Abound**

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that the top seven of the 10 fastest growing occupations are technology related. BLS data also projects that computer and data processing services will be the industry with the fastest salary growth rate.

Such statistics would seem to entice more people, including women, to seek careers in technology.

Yet, despite the opportunities, few women are entering the tech field.

### **On the Decline**

"The trend is not new," says Claudia Morrell, director of the Center for Women and Information Technology (CWIT) at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). She tells *HRWire* the number of women pursuing technology degrees started to decline in the 1980s.

CWIT, which was established in 1998, seeks to understand and address the IT gender gap. Its mission, as described at its web site, is:

- to encourage more women and girls to study computer science and/or information systems and to pursue careers in IT;
- to enable all women and girls to use IT comfortably and knowledgeably;

- to assure that the richness and breadth of women's lives and concerns are fully represented and available on the Internet; and
- to foster research concerning the relationship between gender and IT.

Morrell tells *HRWire* research shows that girls' interest in technology begins to decline in middle school. "The perception is that technology is for geeks, and girls tend to move away from computers," she says.

Lack of interest is evidenced by the fact that girls are underrepresented in high school elective technology classes. Morrell cites a statistic: of those students who recently took the more difficult Advanced Placement test, Computer Science AB, only 10 percent were girls, which is down from 14 percent a few years ago.

It stands to reason, then, that enrollment at the college level has also dropped. Morrell points out that in 1984, 35.8 percent of all technology degrees issued were to women, and says that now, almost 20 years later when there is an even greater demand for tech workers, the number is 26 percent.

The need for people in technology, and for women in technology, is already an issue for many employers, among them NASA and Lockheed Martin, says Morrell. The fact that the number of women entering the field continues to decline is cause for additional concern.

"You've got a train wreck coming," Morrell says.

### **Addressing the Issue**

"What we've seen at the university level is that it's not unusual to have 86 percent male students in technology classes. And so a lot of us began to think about how they can turn those trends around," she says.

In order to do this, CWIT is reaching out to female students when they lose interest: in middle school. "We're trying to make the point when getting the message out, it doesn't matter what career you're going into, you're going to use technology," Morrell says.

To promote technology, videos are being used, role models are visiting classrooms, and CWIT is working with local communities to develop summer programs for girls.

CWIT also hosts an annual event called Computer Mania Day for 500 girls in grades 6, 7, and 8. The program, which this year will be held on May 8, is designed to help middle school girls understand the importance of technology in their lives, encourage them to enroll in elective technology courses in high school, and consider careers in technology. Among the event's corporate sponsors are AT&T and Dell.

Morrell says one of the main objectives of hosting events and taking programs to the schools is to create awareness, and this involves also educating parents and teachers.

"It's not something we're going to crack overnight," she says. "But we've seen success in a comparable field, math, so we know it can be done."

## What Companies Can Do

Morrell tells *HRWire* that business people can serve as role models, and participate in a program like the one offered by CWIT. Likewise, she encourages companies to help promote the message that technology is interesting by getting involved in school activities, such as career day.

She also advises people to make sure the message at home is correct. Citing as an example how women tend to defer to their husbands to fix computers, Morrell says women have to make an effort to embrace technology.

As companies are working on the message they give young people in the schools and at home, Morrell says they can embrace and support an organization like CWIT. Assistance can take the form of financial support. But Morrell points out how items like donated telephone cords and Ethernet cables can be used for instructional purposes. Noting how "kids love stuff," she says interesting high-tech toys or mouse pads that can be used as giveaways help support events.

Meanwhile, Morrell's message for human resources is the qualities women bring to an IT environment. She cites good communication skills and the ability to work well in teams.

"Faculty tell me that adding women to the classroom actually makes a difference in the interaction," she says.

There is value in hiring women for IT positions, and in diversifying the workforce, says Morrell. However, the key is cultivating an interest in girls and young women, so there will be women IT workers to hire.

To support the effort, Morrell encourages companies to keep showing up for college job fairs, even when they're not hiring. Companies can help prepare students by conducting mock interview sessions, and providing them with information, she says.

Also, by interacting with college students, companies can help convey the all-important message to young people, especially young women.

That message? "Technology is still cool," says Morrell.

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