

December 2002

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Recommended Citation

Franke Kleist, Virginia and Degregorio, Gino, "THE REPRESENTATION, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION OF HISPANICS IN U.S. IT EMPLOYMENT" (2002). *AMCIS 2002 Proceedings*. 210.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2002/210>

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THE REPRESENTATION, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION OF HISPANICS IN U.S. IT EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents a brief literature review, conceptual model and research design intended to explore issues regarding the representation, recruitment and retention of Hispanics in information technology (IT) employment in the US. Hispanics are the second largest cultural subcategory in terms of the US population, yet data seem to indicate that Hispanics are proportionally underrepresented in terms of information technology education, use and employment. Remarkably, there is little prior research extant in the information systems management literature on the specific topic of Hispanics and IT employment. This paper discusses three key points: 1) the paper will first explore current sociological literature on Hispanics and the “Digital Divide; 2) second, the paper will discuss theoretical work from the similar topics of women and African Americans and IT employment, as well as cover the cultural relevance of the Internet for Hispanics, ethnic and minority self-identity, and concepts from the recruitment and retention literature; 3) the paper presents a conceptual model that relates the literature to the research problem in order to establish the theoretical foundations of the research; 3) the paper will briefly describe the research question and research design for the proposed research agenda. Finally, the paper will conclude by discussing the larger considerations of this research, including any relevant policy concerns and potential implications in terms of good business practices. As an added incentive, it may be that those firms actively seeking and promoting the development, hiring and retention of Hispanic employees as an internal policy of social responsibility are subsequently more successful in understanding this important and growing business market, thus adding to firm performance.

Keywords: Computers and society, cultural differences, employment, human resource IS, IS staffing issues, social issues

Introduction

It is important to examine the nature of information technology employment practices in the workplace in the midst of the stream of research on the current information revolution and its transformation of business organizations. Just as IT has changed firm organizational structure and the nature of competition, it has also changed the nature of jobs (Zuboff 1988, Landauer 1996). Work in information technology requires training and technical skills, and the demand for information technology workers and their skills exceeds the supply (Department of Commerce 2001). Indeed, investments in education pay off better in earnings over the long run more than investments in physical capital (Becker 1993). Yet, some research suggests that the Hispanic population of the US is under-trained, underutilized and under-prepared for work in the new, digital economy (Hall 2000).

The purpose of this research in progress paper is to introduce a conceptual model designed to explore the nature of the employment of the Hispanic population in high technology careers in firms, examining if interventional corporate action can preempt and change the ways that Hispanics are developed, recruited and retained for information technology jobs. The paper is divided into five sections: The first section briefly examines the concept of the Digital Divide of “haves” versus “have nots” in technology, the second section describes the study research objectives, the third section establishes the theoretical foundations of the research, the fourth section lays out the proposed research agenda and the last section analyzes potential contributions from this research stream.

Hispanics and the Digital Divide

Social inequality begins in the labor markets, where workers' race, ethnicity and sex influence wages, displaying evidence of the social stratification in the US (Reskin and Charles 1999). Latinos have made some progress in achieving wage growth in the previous decade, but there remains a "digital divide" in terms of true ownership of the skills of a highly technological society and Hispanics. For example, Hispanics lead African-Americans in household income, but lag this population segment in PC ownership (Jones 1999). Although Latino ownership of computers rose to 30 percent of households between 1994 to 1998, one-third of Hispanic US population have never used a computer (Tomas Rivera Policy Institute 2001). While well over half of African-Americans and Hispanics have household incomes under \$30,000, these two minorities have less than five percent of household incomes over \$100,000 (Jones 1999). Nevertheless, Hispanics are the fastest growing population segment in the US, with projections that one in four US residents will be Hispanic by 2005 (Romano 2000). Data indicate that whites are more likely than non-whites to use a computer at home, and the digital divide is real in regard to less online usage by minority groups (Brown 1998). Less IT usage in the home may be linked to lower IT employment rates in the US Hispanic population.

Hispanic and Latino are only two of the many terms used by the Census Bureau to describe the second largest subcategory of Americans. Hispanics are younger, may speak Spanish at home, 38 percent read Spanish newspapers, and many tend to have socioeconomic weaknesses that undermine their ability to make progress in keeping up in the information technology age (Barreto, et al., 2000). US Latinas, or Hispanic women, lag behind Latinos in web usage, third generation Latinos may use the web more than first or second, and Latino web users tend to be foreign born and Spanish speaking in a world of mostly English language websites (Barreto, et al. 2000). A lack of opportunity combined with the lack of culturally appropriate Hispanic material may be associated with lower US Hispanic information technology experience.

Exploratory Research Objectives

Current information systems researcher knowledge of corporate hiring and retention practices for IT workers of Hispanic or Latino extraction is incomplete. Social equality in hiring practices in high technology would suggest that the representation of Hispanics in IT employment should at least match the representation of Hispanics in the population, all else equal. The fundamental questions of this exploratory research are the following: Are Hispanics and other minorities proportionally represented in terms of employment in information technology careers in corporate America? If a firm has evidence of employing Hispanics in technology related jobs, what, if any, kinds of internal and external support programs were in place to assist in attracting Hispanics to the firm in order to achieve this measure of parity? Can minority employee attraction, development and retention managerial practices lead to successful Hispanic IT employment, and, if so, are there some downstream benefits of Hispanic employment practices on corporate success? If a corporation has a managerial culture that may be perceived as being supportive of diversity employment, is this culture related to successful Hispanic employment? Are diversity employment policies sufficient to attract and retain Hispanics, or do customized Hispanic recruitment and retention programs better enhance the perceived success of Hispanic IT employment? These questions are designed to explore and understand the nature of Hispanic employment practices in the information systems technological job market.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

From a theoretical perspective, the conceptual model includes variables for race, sex and educational background. Income, race and education are known factors in web usage, for example (Brown 1998), as well as variables in measures of social equality (Reskin and Charles 1999). It may be that the lack of fit of the Hispanic cultural background to the Internet yields a lack of practical experience with technology, as well as contributory effects from the factors of income, race and educational levels, making it that much harder to get a population subcategory interested in pursuing information technology jobs. The conceptual model incorporates constructs for firm cultural attitudes toward inclusion and diversity, including formal management practices such as programs for the hiring and retaining of minority employees. Proactive diversity activity in minority and Hispanic employment practices may be elements of good business management strategies, reflected in a model that shows perceived success in achieving diversity in IT employment as a construct ultimately related to subsequent perceived successful business performance.

Proposed Methodology and Research Agenda

Having established the theoretical groundwork, a survey instrument was developed based on the literature, as no previously validated instrument was available. The proposed methodology will be to first study a pilot sample of a 100 firm mailing in order to validate the survey instrument, and to assist in developing the constructs into valid measurement variables. A second follow up study is planned for 500 additional firms after the pilot data are analyzed and evaluated, and the survey instrument is modified and refined for construct development purposes. The second study using a modified questionnaire is intended to gather more data for the analysis. The study population for the model is of all firms employing information systems personnel in US firms. The sampling unit for the pilot study consists of the 100 of the largest publicly held California firms. California was chosen for the pilot test and for the subsequent mailing because it the state with the highest representation of Hispanics in the US, and it also has the most number of information technology firms as well as jobs in information industries (Census Bureau 2000). The sample is not representative of smaller firms or privately held firms, so the study results will not be able to be generalizable to all sizes of corporations in general, only to large, publicly held corporations in the US. Large corporations were selected for the sample because they are often known to have desirable, stable and high paying kinds of jobs available, and thus it can be assumed that these are the most desirable kinds of companies to learn about first for purposes of understanding how best to correct for employment gaps.

The questionnaire is designed to explore the degree of Hispanic representation in information technology employment, to identify successful employer retention techniques such as mentoring, and to uncover employer Hispanic IT skill development activities. The survey instrument will be mailed to 100 IS executives with a cover letter requesting the return of the instrument, as well as including a stamped, pre-addressed envelope. The letter requests a return of the instrument regardless of if the individual is capable of answering all of the questions. Instructions are included in the letter asking the individuals to write "Copy of results requested" on the response, and include a business card for follow up purposes if they like. A second mailing will be sent to ensure a good response rate to the questionnaire. The instrument was developed based upon the theoretical constructs presented in the previous section, as well as reviewed by five academic experts and one student for input and comment. Many verbal and written comments were received back from the initial, exploratory research instrument, and these suggestions were incorporated in four iterations of the instrument. Follow up telephone interviews will be conducted with a few, proactive firms in order to gain more understanding through a blended questionnaire/case approach for establishing content validity.

Anticipated Contributions

Research has shown that some positive effect may result when proactive solutions increase technology exposure to underserved interest groups (Computers in Our Future 2002). California is the state with the highest proportion of Hispanics or Latinos (32.4 percent), the highest number of employees in the information industries (450,511), with the largest information industries employee payroll (nearly \$23 billion annually), and also with the largest technology industry sales receipts (\$109 billion). If the research finds evidence that Hispanics are underrepresented in this unique constellation of the technology-rich and Hispanic-laden employment environment of California, then this finding might suggest that the root causes of underrepresentation of Hispanics can and should be addressed with corporate and community action plans. Thus, this research is designed not only to study the representation of Hispanic minorities in IT, but also to explore successful corporate hiring, retention, and recruitment best practices in hopes that a better understanding of these practices might be useful when deployed in organizations beyond those of the study sample. Understanding the nature and underlying issues of Hispanic employment in corporate information technology jobs is critical to developing a perspective of diversity in the workplace that is necessary for marketing success in today's multicultural economies (Snyder 2000).

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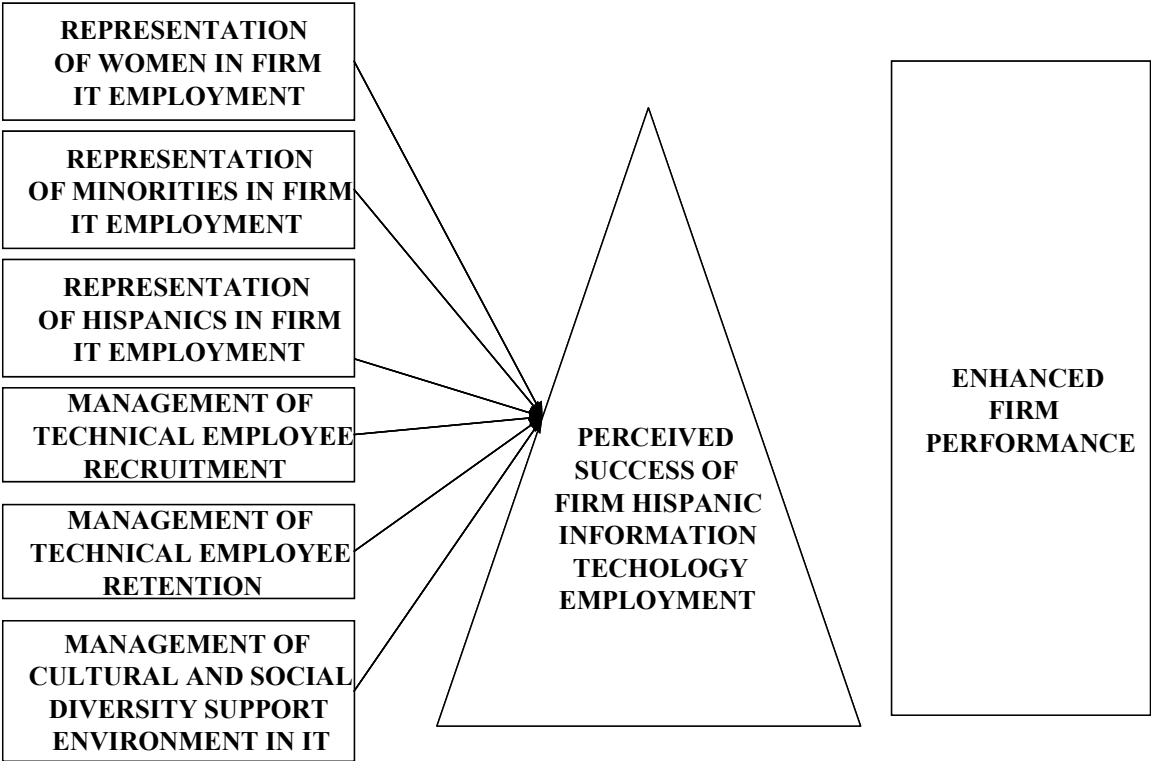


Figure 1. Theoretical Contributions to a Conceptual Model of Recruitment, Retention and Representation of Hispanics in Information Technology Employment