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Mentoring Relationships, Gender and Work-Family Conflict:
The Case of IT Careers

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Abstract

Mentoring has long been considered important in career advancement in many fields. It is important to pay attention to issues related to mentoring because it appears to be related to a number of organizational and individual-level outcomes. In this paper, we examine certain factors that may lead to a more effective mentoring relationship, thereby increasing the likelihood that the relationship will be lasting and beneficial for the individual and organization. Specifically, we suggest similarities based on gender and work-family conflict will be related to effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Propositions are presented with respect to these relationships. Although we do not directly link mentoring with retention, the outcomes discussed above will likely result in reduced turnover in IT-related jobs. These outcomes are likely to be negatively associated with women's likelihood of remaining in IT fields and their performance and advancement in the IT field.

Introduction

Mentoring has been found to be critical in the advancement of professional careers (Dreher and Ash 1990, Kram 1983). Mentoring is "an intense developmental relationship of relatively long duration in which proteges receive a range of career and psychological help exclusively from one senior manager (Clawson 1980, Kram 1985, Levinson et al. 1978)" (Whiteley et al. 1991, p.133). A mentor is "an experienced, productive manager who relates well to a less-experienced employee and facilitates his or her personal development for the benefit of the individual as well as that of the organization" (Noe 1988, p.65).

Research has shown that although women can benefit as much from mentoring as men, there is a lack of female mentors in organizations (Noe 1988, Parker and Kram 1993, Ragins 1989, Warihay 1980). It has been suggested that the number of mentoring relationships (mentorships) available to women does not appear to be keeping pace with the increasing number of women needing mentors (Berry 1983, Shockley and Stanley 1980). We argue that a proactive facilitation of mentorships may be beneficial for development and advancement of women in IT careers.

Some researchers suggested that the lack of female mentors in organizations could be explained by the fact that women in high positions don't want to share the limelight with others and because competitive feelings toward other women prevent them from filling this role (Gallese 1993, Parker and Kram 1993, Powell and Mainiero 1992, Ragins and Scandura 1994, p.966). Counter to these suggestions, Ragins and Scandura (1994) found that the desire to become a mentor is as strong for women as it is for men.

It is important to consider and perhaps counter the trend discussed above because mentoring appears to be related to a number of organizational and individual-level outcomes including promotion (Dreher and Ash 1990, Whitely et al. 1991), incomes (Dreher and Ash 1990), career mobility (Scandura 1992), career satisfaction (Fagenson 1989), pay and benefit satisfaction (Dreher and Ash 1990). One way to do this is to better understand the factors that make a mentoring relationship effective.

Riley and Wrench (1985) have reported that women who had one or more mentors experienced greater job success and job satisfaction than women who did not have a mentor. Some researchers have argued that the benefits of mentoring may be amplified for women. Consider the following statement made by Ragins and Scandura (1994) – "Women may expect and receive greater benefits from the mentoring relationship than men not only because the relationship meets their developmental needs, but also because mentoring role expectations are more aligned with gender role expectations for women. Specifically, the essence of mentoring involves helping proteges and nurturing their development. These behaviors are certainly aligned more with traditional female than male gender-role expectations." (p. 960).

Mentoring has other implications for organizations as well. For example, as Noe (1988) pointed out, Ilgen and Youtz (1986) and Martinko and Gardner (1982) have suggested that one major outcome of the lack of mentorships for female employees is reduced job effectiveness. Poor job performance may result from limited opportunities to develop interpersonal and task-oriented skills, which may mean that fewer women are likely to be promoted to supervisory positions. This further perpetuates the problem of lack of role models and female mentors for female employees. Finally, it has been

suggested that women's intellectual functioning and self-efficacy may be curtailed if mentors are lacking in the workplace (Miller, Schooler, Kohn and Miller 1979; Hackett and Betz 1981).

A Model of Mentoring and WFC in IT Careers

As suggested above, if mentoring is important for any worker, it may be even more important for women in the sense that it could help women to overcome advancement barriers (Kanter 1977). In general, women face more gender-related interpersonal and organizational barriers in their obtaining a mentor than men (Ragins and Cotton 1991, Kram 1985). Women have less access to informal settings necessary for initiating and building mentor relationships (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Other reasons for this may be that men and women find it more comfortable to mentor proteges of the same gender (Kram, 1985) and traditional expectation for women to take a passive role in initiating relationships (Hill, Bahniuk & Dobos, 1989).

The focus in this paper is on IT careers. We assume that IT represents a particularly stressful career, especially in the modern age of "electronic briefcase". In many IT-related jobs, workers are expected to work late, be on-call to solve technical problems and travel. While several studies have successfully demonstrated the effect of mentoring and WFC on women's advancement in various fields (Kram, 1983). To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted to assess its effect in the field of IT.

Researchers and practitioners alike have expressed concern that the IT field is not developing and advancing enough women to the higher ranks. One reason for this may reside in a lack of mentoring opportunities for women. If we are to ensure that organizations select their employees from a complete and broad pool of human resources, they must ensure that women employees have ample mentoring opportunities.

In the early career development stage where women make critical decisions about their careers, presence of female mentors can be very instrumental in steering them in one direction or the other. By their very presence, mentors as role models provide evidence that a successful career in the field is a possible and unremarkable occurrence (Pearl et al, 1990). Since only 5% of upper management in IT industry (Science, 1992) and 6.5% of faculty positions (Frenkel, 1990) are held by women, such guidance and support for women in IT fields is limited.

In this paper, we examine certain factors that may lead to a more effective mentoring relationship, thereby increasing the likelihood that the relationship will be lasting and beneficial for the individual and organization. Specifically, we suggest similarities based on gender and

Work-Family Conflict (WFC) will be related to an effective mentoring relationship.

Similarity with Regard to Gender

The theory of interpersonal attraction posits that individuals are most comfortable interacting with those who are similar to them (Dreher and Ash 1990). This theory suggests that similarity with another person yields more favorable perceptions of and greater liking for that person (Heider 1958).

This theory has been empirically tested in the context of mentoring relationships. This research has shown that men and women prefer interacting with members of the same sex in the work environment (Larwood and Blackmore 1978). As a result, "women may find themselves without a mentor because male managers may prefer developing mentorships with male subordinates" (Noe 1988, p.70). Researchers have suggested that men are afraid to mentor women because of the grater risk that stems from the perception that women tend to be highly visible and to attract attention. The seniors managers may perceive a greater likelihood of receiving adverse publicity which could stymie the attainment of his or her own career goals, if the mentorship is unsuccessful (Noe, 1988).

Similarity with Regard to Work-family Conflict

WFC can be a source of occupational stress, especially in the modern age of "electronic briefcase". In many IT-related jobs, workers are expected to work late, be on-call to solve technical problems and travel. WFC has been defined as "a form of inter-role conflict that occurs when the demands of work and family are mutually incompatible in some respects for career oriented men" (Higgins and Duxbury 1992). Models of WFC suggest that conflict arises when demands of participation in one domain of life are incompatible with demands of participation in another domain and that this conflict can have an important effect on the quality of both work and family life (Greenhaus 1988, Greenhaus and Beutell 1985, Netemeyer et al. 1996). Recent research has recognized that the relationship between work and family is bi-directional (Frone et al. 1992, Gutek et al. 1991), i.e., family can interfere with work and vice versa. Following this line of thinking, Adams et al. (1996) attempted to distinguish between family-work conflict (family interfering with work) and work-family conflict (work interfering with family) and developed separate scales for each. They found that family-work conflict might be associated with level of involvement with work. Higher level of work interfering with family predicted lower emotional and instrumental commitment.

Many women's early career experiences coincide with the stage in a woman's life when she is marrying and starting a family. At this stage in their lives, professional women are faced with trying to manage a career, a home, and child-care. Additionally, women who have full personal lives may be viewed as lacking a strong commitment to their work or not being as serious about their careers as their male colleagues (Barinaga, 1992). It is at this point that women begin to lag behind men in terms of promotions. Duxbury and Mills (1990) did profile analysis of 359 dual career couples and found that women who put their careers first or on par with their husbands careers face more conflict at home than women who put their careers second. Also, men and women who do not use the "electronic briefcase" (working at home on the computer for work) experience similar levels of WFC while the women who used the "electronic briefcase" experienced significantly more conflict than the men who did and women who didn't.

Research has found that organizational structures do not provide enough flexibility to men and women in dual-career marriages. Higgins and Duxbury (1992) examined differences in the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict with a homemaker spouse and those with a spouse in a career-oriented job. They found that dual-career men experience a significant spillover from their work domain.

WFC has been negatively linked with several organizational outcomes, including job-satisfaction, organizational commitment, and distress on the job (Frone et al. 1992, Thomas and Ganster 1995, Wiley 1987). We propose that a mentor who experiences WFC will be more understanding of a protégé's constraints due to WFC. This understanding will enable the mentorship to be more supportive and effective.

A model of mentoring and WFC in IT Careers is presented in Figure 1. Based on the above arguments, we propose -

Proposition 1: Similarity (dissimilarity) with respect to gender will be related to a more (less) effective mentoring relationship.

Proposition 2: Similarity (dissimilarity) with respect to WFC will be related to a more (less) effective mentoring relationship.

Proposition 3: Similarity (dissimilarity) with respect to gender AND WFC will be related to a most (least) effective mentoring relationship.

Model Testing

The data will be collected using the survey method. The survey relies on validated scales for the constructs that are available in the literature. A questionnaire designed to test these propositions is being developed. The sample will include employees in the IT departments of a variety of organizations.

Conclusions and Implications

The proposed model suggests that similarities with regards to gender and WFC will result in effective mentoring relationships. Although we do not directly link mentoring with retention, the outcomes discussed above will likely result in reduced turnover in IT-related jobs. These outcomes are likely to be negatively associated with women's likelihood of remaining in IT fields and their performance and advancement in the IT field.

Work-family Conflict

	Similarity	*Dissimilarity*
Gender		
Similarity	Most Supportive	Supportive
Dissimilarity	Supportive	Least Supportive

Figure 1. A Model of Mentoring and WFC in IT Careers

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