Abstract

Organizational strategies and practices aimed at building a diverse workforce: a focus on women in ITEC

Professor Judith Glover and Dr Christina Evans, Roehampton University Business School

Information technology is crucial to the competitiveness of global businesses. Yet despite the growing importance of technical skills, such as e-skills, to the competitiveness of global businesses (Lanvin and Pasman, 2008; E-skills, 2010), ITEC organizations continue to experience skills shortages. Given this context, women are perceived as a valuable pool of labour that organizations could tap into. Yet despite numerous initiatives to attract more women into ITEC, women’s representation in ‘computing and related’ employment within the UK has fallen to 23% (Guerrier et al 2009). Poor retention of women in highly qualified roles (i.e. roles that require a significant investment in education and training), has been cited as a particular issue (DTI 2005; Hewlett et al 2008; E-skills 2009).

This paper draws on two research projects, conducted by the author and colleagues, linked to a wider European Social Funded (ESF) programme designed to promote employment and career opportunities for women in ITEC and related businesses. The first project involved empirical research investigating ‘best practice’ in the recruitment of women into skilled IT roles. Structured interviews were conducted with twenty-eight senior HR and IT managers in UK-based knowledge intensive organisations (private and public sector). The second project involved desk based research to produce a set of ‘Guiding Principles’ aimed at encouraging managers in ITEC and related businesses to introduce change that would lead to greater workforce diversity.

The ‘best practice’ recruitment research highlighted the importance of adopting a strategic approach to recruitment and selection, taking into consideration areas such as job/role design, competency frameworks, use of flexible working policies, as well as managing organizational reputation. We found that some organizations had removed the essential requirement for a computing or science degree, and thus were encouraging graduates with arts and humanities degrees to apply. Others had introduced competency frameworks into the recruitment and selection process that sought to identify behavioural characteristics. The view from some of our participants was that these types of changes were ‘good news for women’, making it easier for them to demonstrate the ‘soft skills’ that many employers claimed were critical. However it is questionable whether such changes are in women’s best interest longer-term (see Glover & Guerrier 2010).

Although our focus was on ‘best practice’ recruitment strategies, we argue that recruitment cannot be considered in isolation from other Human Resource Management and Diversity Management policies and practices. We identified a number of paradoxes in organizational practices. For example
flexible working, known to be a key policy lever for increasing diversity, appeared to be used more as a retention tool. We found examples of women having to negotiate flexible working arrangements once they had established a reputation for being reliable. Reputational capital was identified as a particular issue for ‘occupational returners’ (i.e. women trying to enter the IT profession after a career break); a group that we suggest represents an underutilised pool of labour. Although we found some interesting developmental practices aimed at supporting women with their career, we would argue that organizations need to more critically review the career support needs of women at different life-stages if the ‘revolving door’ syndrome is to be overcome.