En-gendering Engineering: examining the corporate world of engineers in Atlanta

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ABSTRACT

While there are still fewer women in the Engineering profession, they are now holding higher positions in corporations than previously. It seems as if women in engineering are experiencing less direct gender discrimination; however, systemic microdiscrimination remains and is being overlooked by the perpetrators and often the very women who experience it. This study explores how female engineers engender newer processes of adaptation in the workplace in order to have a more cooperative working environment. Two interviews were conducted with female engineers working at General Electric in Atlanta and participant observation took place with one lead engineer and a collaborative team. Also, an interview was conducted with a male engineer who recently graduated with his Bachelor’s degree and is working in the Atlanta area as well as in other parts of the United States. In addition, a diverse group of female and male engineers took a survey that conveys the perceptions of the engineering student and the female’s willingness to circumvent discrimination by adaptation and postponing traditional female roles in their personal lives. Currently, the remnants of the glass ceiling are alive and well. Although, women in power have employed these strategies successfully in order to navigate beyond the systematic drag on career advancement.

INTRODUCTION

Women have changed several aspects of society in the United States since they first entered the workforce during WWII. Work was one of the initial factors that allowed the environment to be suitable for change. This somewhat simple facet changed the family dynamic, social interactions, and child rearing duties among other things. Today, there are more women CEOs than ever before, more women fighting in our military, and more women holding positions in our government as well. However, there are sectors within employment that have historically been male and have not made the transformation to gender equality. So few women are employed as engineers; therefore, they are learning new ways to relate and cooperate with a majority male population. What techniques are women employing to be successful? How has the family structure for ambitious women evolved? These results show consistency of beliefs among Engineers in Atlanta: (1) the perception that women have not reached the same status as men in the field and (2) women have higher standards to achieve to prove their competency. This research does convey a unique relationship between ethnicity and gender. Ironically, 56% of Caucasian women stated they have experienced discrimination, while only 36% of non-white females concurred. 26% of the Caucasian males said that they preferred to have a boss of the same gender, while only 16% of total females polled said the same. 73% of Caucasian females and 63% of non-white females said they thought women had not achieved the same status as males. 90% of non-white females said they thought women had to be more in top of their game because there are so few, only 39% of total respondents disagreed.

METHODOLOGY

The primary step that had to be completed before initializing any research was the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules through Kennesaw State University’s IRB. I conducted one interview with a Latin American woman, and one interview with an African American woman who are both engineers employed at General Electric along with participant observation on site. One interview took place with a Caucasian male engineer who travels across the United States. In addition, a survey was conducted receiving 100 respondents from various engineering backgrounds.

RESULTS

Based on the qualitative data collected, it is evident that the field of engineering technology remains mostly male in both universities and employment. Because of this disproportion, women have adopted mechanisms and adaptations to increase productivity. One key concept that was mentioned by both female participants was the use of sports in conversation with male coworkers. They used sports to make the connection with male colleagues. Ironically, the male participants considered that sports have importance in his life and was the main motivation to do well in school. Another consistency among the data is the postponement of personal decisions of marriage and family. All three informants stated that career is or has taken precedence over personal matters. One theme that constantly arose from the qualitative data was the recommendation of the interviewees for women to “toughen up”. The male encouraged the same as he talked about the doubt of competency of female engineers to be strong enough to handle the stress and work load of this profession. The survey (n=100) showed similar mindsets:

1) 73% of non-white females stated that marriage and family decisions had been affected, while only 38% of Caucasian females agreed.
2) 56% of Caucasian women said they had felt discrimination, and 36% of non-white females concurred.
3) 26% of the Caucasian males said that they preferred to have a boss of the same gender, while only 16% of total females polled said the same.
4) 73% of Caucasian females and 63% of non-white females said they thought women had not achieved the same status as males.
5) 90% of non-white females said they thought women had to be more in top of their game because there are so few, only 39% of total respondents disagreed.

CONCLUSION

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