

Professionalization, risk transfer, and the effect on gender gap in project management

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Abstract

In this paper, we demonstrate that Project Management (PM) in Information Technologies (IT) sector, despite the claims of autonomy and self-determination at work of creative experts, sets up fairly tight controls through management and the rhetoric of professionalism. The client's position of strength overrides the employer's direct control, transferring a major share of the risk inherent in PM to the IT experts themselves. Ensuing long hours of unplanned and unpaid overtime are the most important obstacle facing women in IT's workforce. This paper is based on a qualitative research conducted on 7 Canadian companies acting in multimedia, information technology (IT) business services and optics–photonics. We have interviewed 88 IT experts, women and men, who talk about their working conditions.

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1. Introduction

In North America, as in Europe, women are significantly underrepresented among Information Technologies (IT) experts in knowledge intensive business-to-business technological services (B2BTS) firms, in contrast to highly skilled professionals in general (Chasserio and Legault, 2005, 2010). Many scholars have stressed that new organizational forms and managerial practices, particularly project management (PM), have arisen in knowledge-intensive firms (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Child and Gunther McGrath, 2001; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Robertson and O'Malley Hammersley, 2000; Robertson and Swan, 2003), and some point out that they may account for gender bias in the workforce (Cartwright and Gale, 1995; Gale and Cartwright, 1995; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Perrons, 2003).

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Why should this be so? From many viewpoints, these are good jobs. These highly skilled people earn between 50% and 100% more than people in the traditional economy with same education. Their jobs also enjoy a certain prestige, not merely by virtue of being essential to the economy, but because of their inherent autonomy. These experts are very independent when making the chief decisions incumbent upon them and autonomy is actually the most important quality required of them (Chasserio and Legault, 2009, 2010).

Our study aims to explain the low proportion of women in this IT sector, which was greatly lamented at the time we launched the study, due to the coexistence of a labor shortage. In 2001, not just in Canada, but in the U.S. and the European Community alike, women accounted for no more than 20% of the workforce in the sector (Chasserio and Legault, 2010). In the visited organizations, the situation was similar, and women never numbered more than a quarter of all employees.

Things did not look like improving afterwards. Recruiting highly skilled workers is harder in those fields than in others (Arrache, 2007a). Women are still minority in corresponding

training programs (Arrache, 2007b), but this cannot account for all, as any employer fails to retaining those who were hired.

According to a North American study by the Center for Work-Life Policy, 74% of women in technology report “loving their work,” yet these women leave their careers at a staggering rate: 56% of technical women leave at the “mid-level” point just when the loss of their talent is most costly to companies (Ashcraft and Blithe, 2009:11).

The study of work-life balance in this segment of the labor market sheds light on the wider canvas of human resource (HR) management practices in this part of the so-called new economy and helps explain this social phenomenon.

Our paper demonstrates that PM in the IT sector, despite the claims of creative autonomy at work for skilled workers, actually sets up fairly tight controls, not just through management, but through the rhetoric of professionalism. These means render the experts’ autonomy merely operational. The client’s position of strength overrides the employer’s direct control of working hours, transferring a major share of the risk inherent in PM to the IT experts themselves. As a consequence of this transfer, experts are held responsible of the projects’ success while having no control on the constraints of the “iron triangle”; yet, these constraints are usually negotiated very tightly in a highly competitive context. Experts are thus subjected to high pressure to work very long hours, as this remains the only locus of flexibility. Long hours are the most important obstacle facing women in IT’s workforce and can account for their scarcity (noted both in social sciences literature and among our research sites); worst, women as an end result are seen as unable to meet the so-defined “professional” standards of PM.

2. Methods

We investigated seven Montreal companies that employ highly skilled people. The core sample consists of five small, loosely structured Business to Business technology services firms (B2BTS) in the areas of multimedia, information technology (IT) business services, and optics–photonics. Two big bureaucracies (a corporate real-estate management company and an insurance firm) in which we interviewed professionals from the IT department serve as the comparative sample.

88 extensive individual interviews were conducted between January 2001 and April 2002 with women and men in the same positions: managers, computer analysts, programmer-analysts, project managers, systems analysts, systems architects, testing engineers, software designers, optical engineers, process engineers, operating engineers, optics–photonics researchers, and IT engineers. To make things simple, we refer to them all as IT experts.

In each company, we interviewed the HR manager, one or two project managers, and ten to twelve IT experts, virtually equal numbers of women (45) and men (43). The average age for men and women was around 35 years old. 60% of our respondents had a university degree and 26% had a technical college diploma.

Our respondents were chosen randomly from the lists of IT experts provided by the HR manager. The in-depth semi structured interviews lasted 1 1/2 to 2 h. Everyone was asked certain standard questions, so simple descriptive statistics can be summed

up, though the study was qualitative. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), the process of codification has been iterative. Content analysis used a two step process of coding interviews first to identify discourse categories, and second theoretical categories, leading to unfold a grounded theory. A sample of specimen interviews was first coded by three researchers until reaching a strong internal consistency in coding categories; we then used these categories for a larger sample of interviews until establishing a thorough list of categories to account for all the nuances of respondents’ discourse (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3. Project management as a blossoming form of work organization

The five small companies in our sample dealt with numerous external clients, while the two bureaucracies’ IT departments served in-house clients. All seven organizations used PM, an organizational model very common in the IT sector, which can be briefly described as follows: each project is governed by a binding contract under which the supplier organization provides the client firm with a deliverable—either a product (software, for instance) and/or a service (technical support, maintenance). To produce the deliverable, a multifunctional, relatively autonomous, temporary team is constituted by design around a project manager. At the end of each project, the IT experts are freed up and drafted into other teams to work on new projects or leave for other employers.

3.1. Tension between autonomy and control of IT experts

The production of customized services or products, the handling of constantly changing orders, the satisfaction of clients with fast-changing needs, and the supervision of a highly skilled workforce require a totally different sort of management than the mass production of goods or provision of standardized services; a bureaucratic organization lends itself poorly to creativity and innovation. There is a huge amount of uncertainty about producing these goods and services, because where innovation is concerned, the process is unpredictable. The financial risk is therefore high, because it is hard to predict the amount of time, the methods, and the resources that will be needed. Among IT experts, as elsewhere, autonomy is needed for innovation but leads to tension with control over work (Appay, 2005; Guérin et al., 1996), a control made even more necessary by the fact that the production of deliverables is often constrained by a limited budget and a tight timetable (Sydow et al., 2004).

Our studied IT experts are hired by organizations that have a stake in a post-Fordist, liberalized economy and are characterized by greater competition for smaller markets, a system of capital accumulation that demands great flexibility on the part of employees, the tenuousness of the employment relationship, and thus, by the high mobility of skilled professionals. Such an economic context is conducive to rationalization on the part of management: decentralization, delayering, accountability, control, and so forth. Yet bureaucratic mechanisms effective in controlling less skilled work are too rigid for a process that does not lend itself to detailed operational planning and demands a great

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