



Women's Alternative and Informal Learning Pathways to Jobs in the IT Sector

January 25, 2005

Update 3

Coming to the Halfway Point: A Progress Update

Earlier in 2004, our study passed its half-way point. In June, we participated in a conference of studies participating in the Work and Lifelong Learning Network. That was followed by a September review with the other studies and our funder, the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. In this third update, we'd like to share the highlights of our conference report with you.

We began by reiterating the key questions of this study: What kinds of IT work are women doing? If, as studies have shown, they are not taking a traditional educational route to IT jobs, how do they acquire knowledge and skills? Are skills and knowledge acquired through alternative routes recognized and rewarded? A literature review, summarized in our second update (available online at www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/IT/) outlined issues and findings about gender, learning and work in the IT field.

At the time of our report, we had spoken with about 45 women in To-

ronto and Vancouver. Participants' ethnic and cultural background varied. In Toronto, a focus group was held at an agency which provides an IT-related training program for immigrant women. For the most part, though, few of the participants in BC were women of colour.

Participants ranged in age from their early 20s to 60. Relatively few participants had children. Still, participants reflected on family-work life balance. One third of the women in the Toronto IT training program had children and several thought that employers' expectations of long work hours were not family-friendly. Other participants who were still fairly young wondered how they would continue their IT work if they had children down the road.

We also recognized some of our oversights. Participants reminded us of the possible presence of invisible disabilities, and we have begun to raise this topic in interviews. Many participants described a professional

or middle class background. For immigrant women, barriers to transferring international learning and work into the Canadian IT labour market often disrupted this status.

While most participants worked in the private sector, we spoke to some who worked in the public or voluntary sector. Those who reported working in a unionized setting were in public institutions or government offices. A few described themselves as self-employed consultants or contractors, although they often took part-time jobs as employees to earn a living wage.

From programmer to librarian, software engineer to secretary, business analyst to marketing manager, professor to director of operations, job titles sometimes reflected and sometimes hid participants' IT work. Most women who had acquired formal IT credentials after high school began their careers in the IT field and stayed there, moving into higher paying, more responsible positions.



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More often, career pathways looked like a game of “snakes and ladders” with moves sideways and upward, and downward slides occurring during downturns in the IT sector.

In our preliminary analysis, we noted several themes:

1. Mixed approach: Learning pathways have typically involved a complex blend of formal (i.e., degree or diploma programs), informal (i.e., short certificate programs), non-formal (e.g., workshops, seminars, networking), on-the-job and independent learning.
2. Quality of IT training: Participants had mixed reviews of IT training programs. Several described their learning needs as unpredictable and programs to meet their immediate needs were not always available. Some participants mentioned their dislike for the rigid, formulaic approach taken in the more formal training programs.
3. Collaborative learning: Many participants emphasized the importance of team learning and problem-solving, because nobody can have all the necessary knowledge and skill in a sector which changes and grows as rapidly as IT. Some participants described employers’ attempts to foster such learning: “lunch and learn” sessions or

buddy systems, for example. Many also commented on the importance of so-called “soft skills,” such as listening, watching, questioning, interpreting and intuiting, to pull information from colleagues.

4. Relating to IT: Several participants spoke of how they “clicked” with computers. Some enjoyed playing around, figuring out how things worked. Others described a combination of excitement and anxiety at being “thrown into the deep end” in the workplace, having to learn without formal training or, sometimes, much support.
5. Understanding “self”: Working in a male-dominated field taught many participants about themselves: how to be more assertive and fight for recognition and participation in decision-making. Sometimes this learning was problematic, as social backlash was experienced. Several participants noted how good it felt to look back and realize how knowledgeable and skilled they were.
6. Learning/teaching: Many participants commented that they share what they learn with others. This helps them cement their learning. Those who were involved in IT training, team leadership or writing IT learning materials often

described themselves as “translators” or as a “bridge” between those who develop code and the so-called IT end users.

7. Lifelong learning: Participants agreed on the constant need to upgrade their skills. Most found this exhilarating, but for some it was also frustrating and tiring. Some participants dealt with this by specializing and limiting their skill sets. When asked who should be responsible for their learning, most of the participants indicated they felt responsible, with a few referring to their employers.
8. Barriers to learning: Lack of time was the most common barrier to learning. The cost of training was also a barrier for some participants, as was social isolation. For self-employed women, every day taken for a training session was a day of lost income.

As we complete the interview phase and undertake a more complete analysis, we will be able to more fully answer our questions. In the meantime, this summary offers a glimpse of our findings.

Welcome Melanie Knight!

Melanie has joined our team as a research assistant and will work with ACTEW in Toronto over the next few months.

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