

Women in IT in Sri Lanka: Balancing work and family

A. Adikaram¹, P. Kailasapathy¹

¹Department of Human Resources Management, University of Colombo, Colombo 03

Introduction

Despite having made substantial advances in the labour market over the last few decades, women are still underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines universally. Within this context, women's participation in Information Technology (IT) industry is gaining increased interest, mainly due to the labour shortage and the augmented demand for IT professionals around the globe. The need for increase in women's participation in the field is found to not only help the demand shortage and thereby the growth of the sector, but also the additional talent and perspective that women would bring into the workforce (Balcita et al., 2002 as cited in Draus et al., 2014). Yet, a common phenomenon for IT companies around the world is the difficulty of attracting and retaining women workers (Cheryan, Plaut, Handron, & Hudson, 2013). Previous studies on women in IT has explored various issues women face in their careers such as discrimination and differential treatment, even when they have good educational degrees (Bhardwaj, 2013), difficulties women face in advancing their careers and hence their underrepresentation in higher managerial positions (Lemons & Parzinger, 2007; Michie & Nelson, 2006), stress they face (Aziz, 2004), emotional cost (Aaltio & Huang, 2007) and the resultant work-family conflicts (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Bhardwaj, 2013). In this backdrop, we explore the role of work-family in attracting and retaining professional IT women in the IT industry in Sri Lanka.

IT is also an important industry for Sri Lanka in terms of earnings, export revenue and employment. It is said to earn US\$108 million as total revenue. Further, women in Sri Lanka form approximately 51.6% of the population. Yet, out of the total workforce in the country only 34.7% are women (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). Of the ICT workforce of 82,824 in Sri Lanka, women's participation is only 24.8% in 2013, eventhough an increase in the number of women selecting IT-related training is evident (ICTA, 2013).

Methodology

The study employs qualitative research approach to understand in-depth the experiences of women IT professionals and provide rich explanation. Three focus groups (5-6 respondents each) with a total of 16 women IT professionals from three IT companies were carried out to collect information. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and a meticulous process of coding and categorising was conducted. The findings presented here are part of a larger study which looked at the experiences of women IT professionals.

Findings and Discussion

The study revealed the priority women give to work-life balance in selecting an area of specialization/jobs within the field of IT and the company to work for, retaining in the workforce and their contentment.

Importance of social support to balance work-family

Respondents specifically highlighted the support they receive from family members such as husbands, parents and in-laws. Many of the respondents stated how difficult it would be for them to balance work–family if they did not get this support. They also stated how their husbands are very understanding and supportive, citing their support when they have to travel overseas on work. Respondents also emphasised how the support of their customers, colleagues and managers help them to manage work-family.

Importance of work-life balance in selecting an area of specialization in IT

It was clearly evident through the focus group discussions how women prefer certain job roles in IT, having given consideration to work-life balance. Many women preferred Quality Assurance (QA) work because of their perceived ability to balance work-life in these jobs as against other jobs in IT.

What I feel is if you are in QA ... then you can have a balanced life all the time. (Amila, Focus group 1)

Importance of work-life balance in selecting a company to work for and retention in the company

Whether married or unmarried, women preferred companies that have family-friendly cultures and policies.

My brother was always telling me that ABC company is a really good IT company for a girl to work and I heard the same from my friends. So when I was thinking of joining a company, I thought that it would be good if I could get into ABC company. (Rupika, Focus group 3)

This is because ABC company had family-friendly policies and practices like day-care centres, flexible work arrangements, supportive work teams and cultures, and working from home.

These same practices also play a role in women’s retention in these companies. It was particularly interesting to note how women generally tended to be in one company for a long period of time as against men who change companies more often. When asked why, a respondent stated:

[Women] don’t like to come out of the comfort zone. Even if you’re not happy with it, but there are other matters like travelling, housework, leave and stuff, still they think let’s stay in this place, it’s much more convenient.

Importance of work-life balance in the contentment women feel in their jobs

It was also apparent how different work practices pose a challenge for women in their careers affecting their contentment with the job. Long or odd working hours was one such challenge respondents stated,

which is a commonly cited challenge in previous studies as well (Bharathi & Bhattacharya, 2015). Generally, working hours for these respondents were the normal working hours in the country, but also with the option of flexi-time. While working late was not a common or frequent occurrence for the respondents, depending on the customers' country (the time difference between Sri Lanka and customer country) and the stage of the project (start or end of a project or 'project releases') respondents had to work late. Though rare, working late was a concern for many respondents due to family commitments, concern of parents for their safety, and safe transport.

Conclusion

Overall it was seen how for many respondents, work-life balance played a significant role in many of their career decisions from selecting a company to work, selecting a job within IT, to remaining with one company.

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