

Safety in numbers: women still need support to succeed in technology

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'Women in IT' support groups are still relevant even though more women have climbed to the top.

While some women have clawed their way to the top in the male-dominated information technology sector, others continue to turn to networking and support groups for help, prompting one organisation to call for a national initiative to recruit and retain women.

From HP and IBM global chiefs Meg Whitman and Virginia Rometty to Microsoft Australia's managing director Pip Marlow and Intel's newly installed Australia and New Zealand general manager Kate Burleigh, high achieving women have demonstrated that they can run the high-tech world.

So why do 'women in IT' events and support groups, designed to help women feel at ease in a male-dominated industry, continue to spring up and flourish? Is it because, lower down the ranks in IT departments, there's still a problem?

Yes, there is, says Mary McLeod, chair of the Females in Information Technology and Telecommunications Group (FITT), a special interest chapter of the Australian Information Industries Association (AIIA).

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Not just one problem but several: "Depending upon which segment or group you look at – girls in high schools, under-graduate participation rates in tertiary courses, entry-level women in [information and communication technology] ICT, mid-career women who turn to ICT from other careers, women in ICT trying to stay in ICT – all have different problems and needs and one solution will not fit all. Hence, why there are numerous groups and programs trying to meet all these different needs."

McLeod says a national initiative to recruit and retain women in ICT is needed to underpin the work of the willing but hard-pressed batch of ad hoc support groups which have had to step into the breach thus far.

"The responsibility, apart from the educational and academic sector, who do a great job in attraction, resides with unpaid volunteers like FITT and other state-based organisations to deliver fragmented programs," she says.

"It's disparate, some of it is not sustainable nor replicable across the country so some regions get advantages over others. And often programs and groups are defined by state boundaries, which is a shame, given ICT ignores state boundaries."

Gender and sexism and work/life/family balance are the main issues that make it difficult for women to stay in the industry and lead them to seek the support of their peers in networking and mentoring groups, according to FITT research.

By anyone's reckoning, ICT is still a man's world. Women make up 52 per cent of the population but only 18 per cent of the ICT workforce, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures.

At the profession's entry level, the numbers are similarly low. Women accounted for 20 per cent of enrolments in the University of NSW's computer science and engineering undergraduate course this year; a figure which has barely changed since 1997, when it sat at 18 per cent.

Feeling like a minority group leads many women to turn to their female peers for moral support. For the first time this year, FITT is unable to meet the demand for its mentoring program which links early career professionals with senior counterparts.

Grassroots groups like **Girl Geek Coffees** say some members report feeling isolated and marginalised. This is particularly the case in highly technical areas such as coding, where women are outnumbered 19 to one.

While female programmers may not be faced with intimidating displays of masculinity in the classroom or the backroom - although some say they do -, the introverted geek culture is "passively unwelcoming" to women, **Girl Geek Coffees** founder Miriam Hochwald said.

"Women can be treated as average or below par and it's assumed they won't do as well. It can be lonely and isolating for women studying IT. Girls that survive get entrenched in the male geek culture that surrounds them."

McLeod says government investment in an organisation that "could pull all the programs around Australia together and actually deliver on the ground would go a long way to increasing the 20 per cent representation of women in IT."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/it-pro/business-it/safety-in-numbers-women-still-need-support-to-succeed-in-technology-20120501-1xwmx.html#ixzz2TWA6Bjux>