



Corporate Retention of Women Engineers

White paper discussing why women engineers leave their places of employment and steps corporations can take to retain them

***Mega Issue Focus Interest Group
External Issue***

Introduction

Competition in our knowledge-based global economy demands a growing, talented, technical workforce, but statistics show that the technical workforce is shrinking, or at best, remaining steady. One quarter of the current science and engineering workforce is over 50 years old. This significant fraction of employees will retire taking with them a wealth of technical knowledge and no one to pass that knowledge on to. The number of women in the workforce is growing and the percentage of women in the technical workforce is also growing, but women are leaving corporate America at twice the rate of men. To remain competitive, to grow, and to maintain a strong position in the global marketplace, companies cannot afford to lose the talented technical women they have.

Advantages of a Diverse Workforce

The advantages of a diverse workplace have been well documented. Fortune 500 companies with the best records of promoting women to high positions report 18 to 69 percent higher profits than their competitors who have not been as successful in promoting women. Companies benefit from greater creativity, innovation and organizational flexibility due to the increased levels of divergent thinking when women's talents are recognized and highly valued. Decision making is improved when the perspectives of all people are involved. Women possess unique skills that seem tailor-made for the management ranks. Market shares are increased when women are allowed to provide their insights into the diverse domestic and global markets. After all, women are responsible for 83% of all consumer and corporate purchases, accounting for over half of the US gross national product.

Why Do Women Leave?

In today's corporate society, women have choices and may be more likely to exercise their prerogative than their male counterparts. Women frequently report that they enjoy their line of work and their jobs, but they leave their places of employment due to workplace obstacles in their path that prevent them from working up to their fullest potential. Because they feel more empowered and confident in their abilities, women are now less hesitant to move out of an unrewarding and unfulfilling work environment. In a study by Catalyst, the reasons cited most frequently by women for leaving their places of employment were: Lack of flexibility - 51%; the "glass ceiling" - 29%; unhappiness in the work environment - 28% and

feeling unchallenged in their job - 22%. A more comprehensive list of reasons is found in Appendix A.

Women want and need autonomy and flexibility in their jobs so they can stay on track with their career objectives and still maintain a healthy family life. Women desire access to the work assignments and responsibilities that will improve their visibility within the company, broaden their knowledge of the company, expand their work and management skills and put them on an equal footing with their male co-workers for promotion and pay increases. Women still face inhospitable corporate cultures; cultures that do not recognize their contributions, opinions or working style. They feel isolated, unappreciated, underutilized and undervalued. Women want challenging and rewarding work experiences. If excluded from field work, line work or “difficult” projects, how can they be expected to grow and contribute more to their organizations?

Where Do Women Go?

When technical women leave their places of employment, they tend to disperse in three directions. Most often, they leave to work for another company, frequently a competitor. A significant fraction leave to start their own business and by doing so may even become a new competitor to their former employer. And women, more than men, are apt to leave the technical workforce altogether in search of opportunities outside the technical marketplace.

Why Should Companies be Concerned?

When women leave their places of employment, for whatever reason, the result is a loss for their employers. Employers lose valuable institutional, technical and corporate knowledge. They also risk losing proprietary knowledge to a competitor. If a woman starts her own business, she may take valuable customers with her, resulting in a loss of business revenue for her former employer. When any employee resigns companies are faced with the additional costs and frustrations associated with recruiting, hiring and training replacements. Furthermore, the loss of good people precipitates low morale and uncertainty among those employees who stay. Others may choose to follow in the woman’s footsteps and leave the company too.

What can Corporations do to Retain Their Women Engineers?

The loss of talented technical women can be avoided by implementing low cost and innovative programs to change the corporate culture and workplace.

Companies should provide scheduling flexibility that allows for part-time work, shared work or telecommuting, thereby allowing women to maintain their commitments to both their careers and their families. Employers need to remember that the key objective is to get the work done and to evaluate employees on outcomes; their performance is the issue, not the amount of face time.

To break the “glass ceiling”, companies should provide or improve mentoring opportunities and encourage women to take risks. By proactively identifying high potential women and supporting their upward career movement, companies will insure their continued contributions and loyalty. Encouraging women to participate on important committees will improve their visibility within the company, allow for significant (and necessary) networking opportunities, and provide the additional corporate knowledge needed to improve their chances for promotion and advancement. Information detailing transfers, promotions, how/who job positions were filled should be posted for all to see and job searches should include qualified women candidates.

Companies need to embrace diversity starting with top management and provide diversity training to all managers. Managers need to be educated in the differences between how men and women work and communicate. Sexual harassment and discrimination should never be tolerated under any circumstances. The creation of women's networks or corporate communities will provide women greater networking opportunities, provide an environment in which they can share their successes and reduce their feelings of isolation and differentness. Women's contributions, inputs and ideas should be taken seriously and recognized on their own merits. Women should be provided with training opportunities and be encouraged to use them to further their career.

Companies should open up all work positions to women, even those that require travel, long hours and physical strength. To assume that women do not want these positions or are not capable of handling these positions assumes that women are something "less " than their male counterparts. Managers should not expect more or less from their women employees than they do their male employees. Women should be provided opportunities for more hands-on experience (work on production floor or on construction sites). New positions should be promoted from within first, allowing women to accept new assignments and challenges before opening the positions to outsiders. Women should be encouraged to take on challenging assignments or projects and accept new risks.

Conclusion

Corporations must retain their talented technical women if they desire to retain their corporate advantage in the ever-expanding global marketplace. The valuable skills and assets of technical women should not be overlooked, underrated or ignored. Women, at all levels, should be encouraged to reach their full potential and be provided with the job assignments needed to make that possible. Women should be recognized as contributing individuals and not as diversity necessities. Those companies that can embrace diversity at all levels, support and promote their technical women and recognize their achievements will better position themselves for business success.

REFERENCES:

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APPENDIX A

Why Women Leave Corporate America – A list provided by SWE members

Lack of Flexibility:

- Work/life balance
 - Lack of part-time, work sharing, or work from home opportunities
 - Desire to spend more time raising children
 - Time required to care for elderly or sick parent or child
- Inability to match career with interests
- Desire to pursue educational goals not supported by employer
- Inability to change jobs within company

The “Glass Ceiling”:

- Absence of female role models
- Exclusion from formal or informal networks
- Lack of mentoring
- Lack of management training
- Managers who are intimidated by women with better credentials
- Stereotypes of women and women’s roles in the workplace
- The failure of management to recognize and embrace a diverse workplace
- Lack of career planning or development
- Exclusion from career ladders
- Career sabotage
- Management doubts of women being able to handle both work and family responsibilities
- Not being able to accept promotions or assignments due to family obligations

Unhappiness in the Work Environment:

- Feelings of isolation
- Lack of understanding of the male/female differences in style and work habits
- Poor managers
- Lack of leadership in company
- Lack of direction in company
- Good ole boys’ networks
- Discrimination
- Goals and aspirations not taken seriously
- Different standards of performance
- Sexual harassment
- Inability to get performance feedback
- Loss of faith in corporate decision making and decision makers
- Strong work ethics and attention to detail undervalued and/or criticized (often good traits for one who is self-employed)
- Lack of recognition
- Boring work environment (no encouragement to have fun at work)

Lack of Challenge:

- Risk-averse supervisors
- Paternal discrimination
- Lack of equal access to assignments that provide key career experiences
- Lack of equal access to assignments that provide visibility and interaction with senior managers
- Lack of field and/or line experience
- Not encouraged to work “out of the box”