

Additional cases

Gender Differences in Knowledge-intensive Firms

Relevant to: Chapter 5 (knowledge intensive workers and knowledge intensive firms)

Truss et al (2012) present the results of a survey of workers within knowledge-intensive firms into gender differences within their organizations. This represents a relatively neglected topic, with very few studies into issues of gender within knowledge-intensive firms being undertaken. On the basis of a review of literature on gender differences in related industries it is suggested that women in knowledge-intensive firms are likely to experience a number of disadvantages compared to their male colleagues.

Thus, in relation to the basic features of their employment they hypothesize that compared to men women are likely to work fewer hours, have a worse work-life balance, and have less job security. They also hypothesize that women will have inferior access to training than men and have worse career opportunities. In relation to their jobs they hypothesize that compared to men women will have less job variety, lower levels of autonomy and lower levels of task inter-dependence. Finally, in relation to their engagement in knowledge processes they hypothesize that women will have lower levels of involvement than men in processes of knowledge exchange and combination and are less likely to demonstrate innovative work behaviours (such as generating and implementing new ideas).

To test these hypotheses a survey was distributed among knowledge workers working in 14 firms in the IT and pharmaceuticals sector in the UK and Ireland. Knowledge workers were defined as people who had a university degree and were employed in technical or professional roles. Of the 1600 surveys that were distributed just under 500 usable responses were analyzed.

Initial analysis of the survey data revealed that compared to men, women were over-represented in lower and middle income and under-represented in higher incomes roles, which suggests that women are typically less likely than men to occupy senior management roles in these organizations.

In relation to the basis features of their employment they found that while women's perception of work-life balance was no worse than that of their male colleagues, they did work fewer hours, and had lower perceived levels of job security. Further, while women had similar levels of access to training as their male colleagues they perceived that their career development opportunities were worse. This suggests that within knowledge-intensive firms, women are likely to be clustered in relatively low status roles that provide poor career opportunities.

In relation to their jobs, it was also found that women's experiences were generally more negative. Thus, women typically had lower levels of both task variety and autonomy than men, but had similar levels of task inter-dependence. Finally, in relation to their involvement in knowledge and innovation process it was found that while women had a similar level of involvement in processes of knowledge exchange and combination to men they were less likely to be involved in innovative work practices such as generating and implementing new ideas. Various explanations are suggested for women's lack of involvement in innovative work behaviours; including that their typically low-level roles

preclude them from being involved in them, or that that they lack the confidence to demonstrate these type of innovative behaviours.

Overall, therefore, these results suggest that women in knowledge-intensive firms have comparatively more negative experiences of work than their male colleagues.

Questions:

1. What are the negative consequences for knowledge-intensive firms of the gender differences identified?
2. What can management within knowledge-intensive firms do to address the typically disadvantaged position that women find themselves in within this type of organization?

Source: Truss, C, Conway, E, d'Amato, A, Kelly, G, Monks, K, Hannon, E, Flood, P. (2012). 'Knowledge Work: Gender-blind or Gender Biased?' *Work, Employment and Society*, 26/5: 735-754.