

Factors affecting the upward mobility of women in public accounting

Introduction

A substantial number of women have entered the public accounting profession in the past 15 years or so. However, less than 4% of the partners in the big eight accounting firms are women, indicating a lack of upward mobility for women in the accounting profession. Against the backdrop of the fact that the women students perform significantly better during their academic training than their male counterparts, it is unfortunate that their intellectual ability and knowledge remain underutilized during their professional careers. The recent costly litigation and discrimination suits filed make it imperative for us to study the factors that affect the upward mobility of women and examine how the situation can be rectified.

A brief literature review

Studies of male and female accounting majors indicate that the percentage of women accounting students has increased severalfold since 1977 (Kurian, 1998). Based on the analysis of longitudinal data collected over a 15-year period, Mulcher, Turner and Williams (2000) found that female students' grades in senior accounting courses were significantly higher than those of the male students. This higher level of academic performance has been theorized as being due to the higher need and desire that women have to achieve and overcome stereotypes (Messing, 2000), having higher career aspirations (Tinsley *et al.*, 1999), or having a higher aptitude for accounting (Jones and Alexander, 2001; Riley, 2001). Empirical studies by Fraser, Lytle and Stolle (1998), and Johnson and Meyer (1999), however, found no significant differences in personality predispositions or behavioral traits among male and female accounting majors.

Several surveys of women accountants in the country pinpoint three major factors that hinder women's career progress in the public accounting field (see, for instance, Kaufman, 1986; Larson, 1999; Walkup and Fenman, 2001). They are (1) the long hours of work demanded by the profession (a factor that conflicts with family demands), (2) failure to be entrusted with responsible assignments, and (3) discrimination. In sum, the lack of upward mobility seems to be due to factors over which the organization has some control.

Research question

Do long work hours, failure to be handed greater responsibilities, and discrimination account for the lack of upward mobility of women in public accounting?

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Theoretical framework

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The variance in the dependent variable, upward mobility, can be explained by the three independent variables: long hours of work, not handling greater responsibilities, and discrimination. As women are expected to, and do indeed, take on responsibility for household work and childrearing, they are not able to work beyond regular work hours at the workplace. This creates the wrong impression among higher-ups in the organization that women are less committed to their work. Because of this perception, they are not entrusted with significant responsibilities. This further hinders their progress

as they are not afforded exposure to the intricacies of accounting practices as much as men. Hence, women are overlooked at the time of promotion.

Deliberate discriminatory practices due to sex-role stereotypes, as evidenced in the well-known case of Hopkins vs. Price Waterhouse & Co., also arrest women's progress. If women are not valued for their potential and are expected to conform to sex-typed behavior (which confines them to inconspicuous roles), their chances of moving up the career ladder are significantly reduced.

Thus, the three independent variables considered here would significantly explain the variance in the upward mobility of women in public accounting. The impracticability of putting in long hours of work, lack of opportunities to handle greater responsibilities, and sex-role stereotyping all negatively impact upward mobility.

Hypotheses

If women spend more hours on the job after regular work hours, they will be given greater responsibilities.

If women are entrusted with higher levels of responsibility, they will have more opportunities to move up in the organization.

If women are not expected to conform to stereotypical behavior, their chances for upward mobility will increase.

All three independent variables will significantly explain the variance in women CPAs' upward mobility.

Method section

Study design

In this cross-sectional correlational field study, data on the three independent variables and the dependent variable were collected from women CPAs in several public accounting organizations in the country through mail questionnaires.

Population and sample

The population for the study comprised all women CPAs in the country. A systematic sampling procedure was first used to select 30 cities from the various regions of the country, from which a

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procedure was first used to select 30 cities from the various regions of the country, from which a sample of accounting firms would be drawn. Then, through a simple random sampling procedure, five CPA firms from each of the cities were chosen for the study. Data were collected from all the women in each of the firms so chosen. The total sample size was 300 and responses were received from 264 women CPAs, for an 88% response rate for the mail questionnaires, which is pretty good. The unit of analysis was the individuals who responded to the survey.

All respondents had, as expected, the CPA degree. Their ages ranged from 28 to 66. About 60% of the women were over 45 years of age. The average number of children in the house below the age of 13 was two. The average number of years of work in the organization was 15, and the average number of organizations worked for was two. The average number of hours spent daily at home on office-related matters was 1.4.

Variables and measures

All demographic variables such as age, number of years in the organization, number of other organizations in which the individual had worked, number of hours spent at home on office-related matters, and number of children in the house and their ages, were tapped by direct single questions.

Upward mobility. This dependent variable indicates the extent to which individuals are expected to progress in their career during the succeeding three to ten years. Hall (1986) developed four items to measure this variable, a sample item being: I see myself being promoted to the next level quite easily. The measure is reported to have convergent and discriminant validity, and Cronbach's alpha for the four items for this sample was 0.86.

Sex-role stereotyping. This independent variable was measured using Hall and Humphreys' (1972) eight-item measure. An example item is: Men in this organization do not consider women's place to be primarily in the home. Cronbach's alpha for the measure for this sample was 0.82.

Responsibilities assigned. This was tapped by three items from Sonnenfeld and McGrath (1983), which asked respondents to indicate their levels of assigned responsibility to (a) make important decisions, (b) handle large accounts, and (c) account for the annual profits of the firm. Cronbach's alpha for the three items was 0.71 for this sample.

Data collection method

Questionnaires were mailed to 300 women CPAs in the United States. After two reminders, 264 completed questionnaires were received within a period of six weeks. The high return rate of 88% can be attributed to the shortness of the questionnaire and perhaps the motivation of the women CPAs to respond to a topic close to their heart.

Questionnaires were not electronically administered for various reasons, including the advantage it afforded to the busy respondents to reply without switching on the computer.

Data analysis and results

After determining the reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for the measures for this sample, frequency distributions for the demographic variables were obtained. These may be seen in Exhibit 1. Then a Pearson correlation matrix was obtained for the four independent and dependent variables. This may be seen in Exhibit 2. It is to be noted that no correlation exceeded 0.6.

Each hypothesis was then tested. The correlation matrix provided the answer to the first three hypotheses. The first hypothesis stated that the number of hours put in beyond work hours on office-related matters would be positively correlated to the responsibilities assigned. The correlation of 0.56 ($p < 0.001$) between the number of hours spent on office work beyond regular work hours and the entrusted responsibilities substantiates this hypothesis.

The second hypothesis stated that if women were given higher responsibilities, their upward mobility would improve. The positive correlation of 0.59 ($p < 0.001$) between the two variables substantiates this hypothesis. That is, the greater the entrusted responsibilities, the higher are the perceived chances of being promoted.

The third hypothesis indicated that sex-role stereotyping would be negatively correlated to upward mobility. The correlation of -0.54 ($p < 0.001$) substantiates this hypothesis as well. That is, the greater the expected conformity to stereotyped behavior, the less the chances of upward mobility.

To test the fourth hypothesis that the number of hours spent beyond regular work hours on job-related matters, assignment of higher responsibilities, and expectations of conformity with stereotyped behavior will significantly explain the variance in perceived upward mobility, the three independent variables were regressed against the dependent variable. The results, which are shown in Exhibit 3, indicate that this hypothesis is also substantiated. That is, the R^2 value of 0.43 at a significance level of $p < 0.001$, with $df(3,238)$, confirms that 43% of the variance in upward mobility is significantly explained by the three independent variables.

Discussion of results

The results of this study confirm that the variables considered in the theoretical framework are important. By focusing solely on the number of hours worked, ignoring the quality of work done, the organization is perhaps not harnessing the full potential and encouraging the development of the talents of the women CPAs adequately. It seems worthwhile to remedy this situation.

It would be useful if the top executive were to assign progressively higher levels of responsibility to women. This would utilize their abilities fully and, in turn, enhance the effectiveness of the firm. If executives are helped to modify their mental attitudes and sex-role expectations, they should tend to expect less stereotypical behavior and encourage the upward mobility of women CPAs.

Knowing women bring a different kind of perspective to organizational matters (Smith, 1999;

Vernon, 2001), it is quite possible that having them as partners of the firm will enhance the organizational effectiveness as well.

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Recommendations

It is recommended that a system be set up to assess the value of the contributions of each individual in discharging his or her duties, and use that, rather than the number of hours of work put in, as a yardstick for promotion.

Second, women CPAs should be given progressively more responsibility after they have served three to five years in the system. Assigning a mentor to train them will facilitate smooth functioning of the firm.

Third, a short seminar should be organized for executives to sensitize them to the adverse effects of sex-role stereotyping at the workplace. This will help them to beneficially utilize the talents of women CPAs. If viewed as professionals with career goals and aspirations, rather than in stereotyped ways, women CPAs will be enabled to handle more responsibilities and advance in the system. The organization also stands to benefit from their contributions.

In conclusion, it would be worthwhile for public accounting firms to modify their mental orientations toward, and expectations of, women CPAs. It is a national waste if their potential is not fully tapped and utilized.