Designing and debugging careers for women in the computer industry

by THELMA ESTRIN

Brain Research Institute, University of California
Los Angeles, California

Women’s pursuit of careers in the computer industry is consistent with our national commitment to equal opportunity and with our national need to utilize all available talent in support of scientific research and industrial efforts.

Computer science education and immediate employment on the first steps of the career ladder are readily available for women but after these initial steps women still face cultural, educational and institutional barriers which block them from advancement to the top. Women are finding, as men have, that superiority in technical knowledge and competence are not sufficient to guarantee advancement. In addition, women must carefully plan their careers and remain alert to those societal attitudes, the hidden “bugs”, that prevent them from successfully implementing their long-term career goals.

The concept of career planning is receiving much attention by professionals in all fields, but the rapid rate of technological and methodological innovation in the computer industry gives special urgency to the need for computer professionals to use planning techniques to combat technical obsolescence and to aid upward mobility. Career planning deals with the identification of ones goals, skills, and priorities and the designing of a career with alternative options. It involves deciding if one wants to pursue a technical or a managerial career and poses questions such as: What type of a job do I want in the next years? What is the knowledge base? What are the skills needed and at what level of competence and experience? What types of inter-personal relationships are important?

Many factors that relate to professional development apply equally to men and women but career planning is especially important to help compensate for the distinct problems women encounter with upward mobility, and for women who want to combine career advancement with family life. There are very few women at the top in any business or profession and the lack of role models serves to discourage women who might consider working towards leadership status in the computer field. Qualified women are often reluctant to move ahead because upward mobility requires significant deviation from social norms. In other cases, women may be hindered by the attitudes of men, who are their peers and supervisors. Withholding promotion of women may not be overt, but due to unconscious discrimination based on sex-role stereotyping and societal conventions.

The panelists will discuss various approaches to career planning. The opening panelist, a career development consultant, will present a model of career stages based on accepted theories of adult development. The other panelists, computer professionals in the areas of software, hardware and technical marketing, will discuss factors and strategies which they have found useful in advancing through career stages in the computer industry. They will also discuss barriers to women’s full and equal participation which should be considered in career planning.

This panel is not for women only and men are encouraged to attend. In addition to benefiting from those aspects of career planning which are of value to all professionals, men can gain insights to improve their working relations with female colleagues from an awareness of the special problems professional women encounter in pursuing non-traditional careers.