



POSITIONING PAPER

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The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development is an independent, not for profit research and development body which is committed to improving the policy and practice of work related education and training internationally. We work with organisations around the world – principally with policy makers, employers, practitioners and learners – to share knowledge and help to lead the debate on policy and practice, aiming to achieve our vision of a world in which all people have access to the skills they need for economic and individual prosperity. We are part of the City & Guilds Group.

GENDER AND SKILLS: A LONG WAY TO GO

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1. INTRODUCTION

A protracted history of gender and skills has shown us that women tend to fare badly in the training game, with employers tending to favour men in their skills development plans. New research from the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD)¹ shows, however, that this pattern may be changing in the UK. Despite this positive development, women continue to be recognised to a lesser extent than men for the skills that they acquire both before and during their working lives. This paper discusses these findings, the possible reasons for them and makes some suggestions as to how to improve the situation so that all employees get equal recognition for their skills and abilities.

2. MORE TRAINING AND ITS LINK WITH OCCUPATION

CSD's research shows that employers tend to give staff both a higher incidence and longer length of training when there are more women within an organisation. This contradicts previous research showing that women are less likely than men to take part in training², or that women receive a higher incidence of training whereas men receive training of a longer duration³.

It is likely that job type has at least some role to play in gender differences around training. We found, for example, that women are more likely to work in companies in which the largest occupational group consists of caring, leisure and other personal services.

¹ Gosling, M. (2009). *Who Trains? A Picture of Companies' Training Practices Across the UK*. London: City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development.

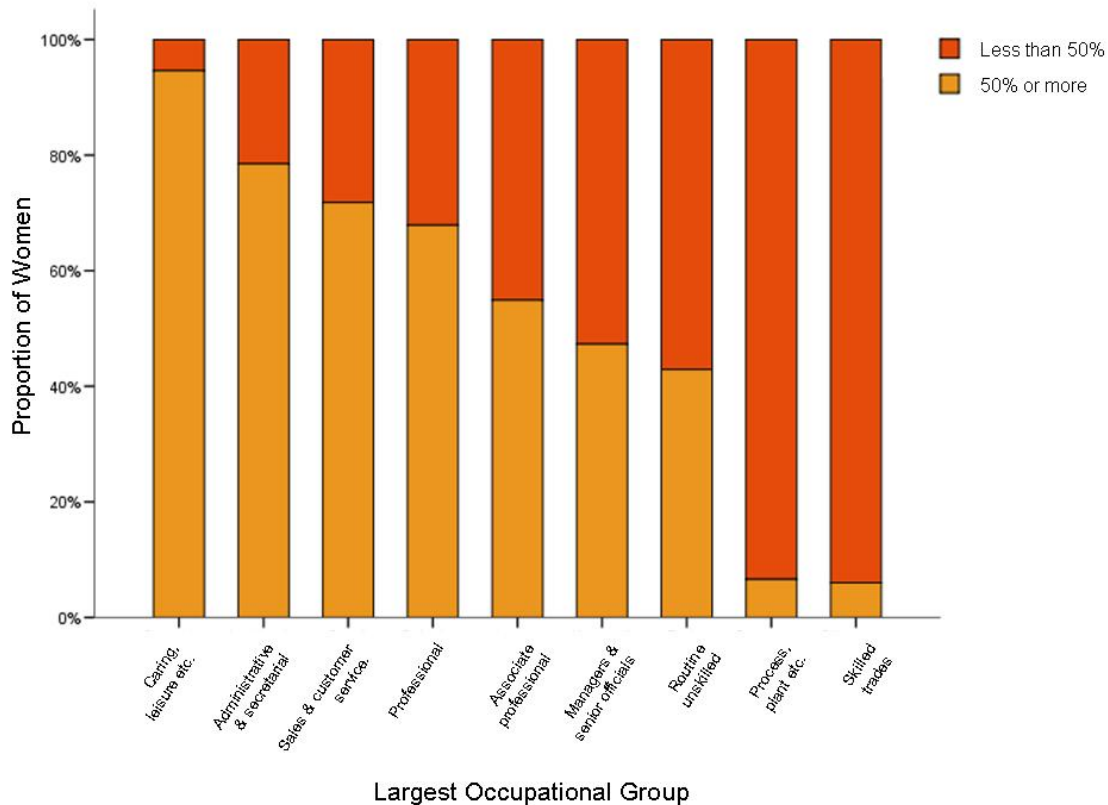
² Evertsson, M. (2004). Formal On-the-Job Training: A Gender-Typed Experience and Wage-Related Advantage? *European Sociological Review* 20(1): 79-94.

³ O'Halloran, P. (2008). Gender Differences in Formal On-the-Job Training: Incidence, Duration, and Intensity. *Review of Labour Economics & Industrial Relations* 22(4): 629-659.



People who work in this area tend to be trained to a greater extent than many others; the caring, leisure and personal services sector is third (out of nine occupational groups) in terms of the proportion which receive time off for training. It is also a sector in which there is often a statutory duty to train. Women are least likely to work in companies in which the largest occupational group is either skilled trades⁴ or process, plant and machine operatives and drivers. Only the routine unskilled receive less training than these two occupational groups. In other words, women tend to work in sectors in which more training is given.

Link between gender and largest occupational group



This link, however, does not fully explain the relationship between gender and training. As CSD's paper shows, neither is it explained by the link between gender and temporary working⁵. It would seem, therefore, that employers have improved the extent to which they train their female staff in recent years.

3. LACK OF RECOGNITION FOR SKILLS

This rosy picture darkens once we start to look beyond the immediate findings. Previous research⁶ has shown that once women do get more remunerative training, such as general training and training which increases

⁴ According to *The Workplace Employment Relations Survey 2004: Basic Workforce Data Sheet*, employees in this group perform complex physical tasks. They 'apply a body of trade-specific technical knowledge requiring initiative, manual dexterity and other practical skills'.

⁵ Temporary workers are more likely to be women, but the link between temporary working and training as defined in our study is actually explained by a third variable.

⁶ Evertsson, *ibid.*



opportunities for promotion, they are not rewarded for their new skills to the same extent as men. CSD's research lends weight to the argument that women are not getting recognised in terms of salary for the training that they have undertaken. We found that organisations which pay less tend to employ a greater proportion of women (and, following on, that organisations which pay more tend to employ a greater proportion of men).

Some of this effect is likely to come from women working in smaller organisations – which pay less – and lower-paying sectors such as caring, but the pattern emerges across all sectors. It also occurs despite other results from CSD's analysis which show that higher paid staff are more likely to be given training.

The finding that employers do not recognise women sufficiently for the training that they undertake on the job adds to the bleakness of a lack of recognition of prior education and training. The pay gap between men and women, for example, is immediate for graduates: female graduates in the UK are paid 15% less than male graduates when they begin work, and more than 30% less by the time they are in their 50s⁷. The presence of a pay gap at the beginning of people's working lives suggests that the commonly cited reason for the pay gap – women taking time off from the workplace to raise a family – is not the only cause.

Employer prejudice is another potential reason behind these findings. Madeleine Bunting wrote a column in the online Guardian newspaper in 2007⁸ which suggested that it was appalling that it may take 80 years to reach equal pay in the UK. Comments on her column were plentiful and often redolent of inherent bias both on the abilities of women, and the perceived likelihood that they would, at some point in the future, take significant amounts of time off to raise children. The following two comments were typical of many responses:

'There IS a valid reason for the gender pay gap...capitalism has been wildly successful, even for the working and middle classes, BECAUSE it allows the existence of inequality, of difference, and protects the rights of all participants to discriminate in their economic activities. The system rewards those who make finer, more accurate and perceptive distinctions in their economic activities.'

'In UK society, women much more often quit a career early to raise a family – or become unavailable out of office hours whilst doing so. Good or bad, that's the reality. Why would I risk putting the same sort of investment into a female junior member that I do into a male one? Even the twentysomething, aggressive career girl can turn all broody past 30, much as she may sincerely protest otherwise.'

It seems that the glass ceiling is present at all ages, often at the expectation that women will leave in the future rather than on their current skills and abilities. The picture, of course, is bound to be complex and involve other issues. In response to the same article, one reader commented:

'It seems highly likely the problem is partially due to the fact us women are generally worse at negotiating higher salaries for ourselves. We ask for less, and so get less. However, I don't think this justifies the pay gap, or takes the blame away from employers.'

⁷ Purcell, K. (2002). Qualifications and Careers: Equal Opportunities and Earnings Among Graduates. *EOC Working Paper Series*. London: Equal Opportunities Commission.

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/sep/06/comment.economy>



4. NEXT STEPS

The key policy question to emerge from these findings is that of how to get employers to recognise how women's training should be rewarded. This is likely to be a long-term challenge; it is a matter of changing deeply-rooted, and in some cases not consciously recognised, attitudes and values.

The National Skills Forum has recently made a number of recommendations⁹ which may help towards this long-term ambition. Its report was aimed more at closing a perceived gender skills gap than it was at changing attitudes towards improving the recognition of women's skills, but some of the recommendations are still highly relevant:

- **Non-transferable paid paternity leave for fathers.** This would ensure that parents share both the benefits and drawbacks of childcare, including changing expectations from employers that it is the mother who takes time off.
- **A high profile campaign challenging gendered attitudes to careers.** A media campaign of this type could have an impact on career decisions.
- **More help with childcare costs.** Financial assistance towards childcare, particularly for women on lower pay, would help them to stay in work and develop on-the-job skills.

Changing companies' compulsory reporting practices so that they have to disclose the pay of male and female employees would be another route towards addressing the gap in wages. It does have the drawback of compulsion rather than changing attitudes, but the outcome – better pay and progression opportunities for women – would, in all probability, be the same.

Long-term attitudinal shifts are difficult to achieve. Perhaps recent developments in gender changes, such as the greater proportions of young women going to university, will help to change attitudes over the long term. Incorporating some of the policies outlined above may help to achieve this, but it is also worth remembering that gender equality in terms of pay and progression has been a hard-fought battle over many decades – and it remains a problem today.

Policy makers will need to work hard to ensure that the rhetoric of equal opportunities becomes a reality, especially in the current economic climate. Gender issues have often been required to take a back seat at times of economic difficulty. It is argued that the first priority is for companies to recover, and pressures on social outcomes such as gender equality should not be priorities for either policy makers or employers. This approach misses the point; very often, equity is a prerequisite for recovery. The inequalities of unrestricted markets contributed to the global financial crisis; equity, as a building block of post-crisis recovery, should not be neglected. The risk of omitting such considerations is that we return to the old world order in which history, to paraphrase Santayana, is bound to repeat itself.

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⁹ National Skills Forum (2009). *Closing the Gender Skills Gap: A National Skills Forum Report on Women, Skills and Productivity*. London: Policy Connect.