Movin' On Up? An Investigation of Women's Career Development in the Apparel Industry

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Abstract
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Keywords
employment, industry, textile sector, women

Disciplines
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Comments
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An Investigation of Women’s Career Development in the Apparel Industry

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Employment in the U.S. textile sector dropped sharply from 1997 to 2007, going from 1.38 million to 752,000, and representing a overall decline of 45% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). For the last several decades, the United States has witnessed a reduction in its manufacturing base across a range of industries, a reduction that, for the textile and apparel industries, is often attributed to loosening trade regulations and greater global economic integration. As a result, a great deal of attention has been given to investigating how trade blocks and other changes in trade regulations, such as the phase-out of Multi-fiber Arrangement, have affected industry health and competitiveness (Cammett, 2006; Curran, 2007). Although much of the research has focused on the macro view of the industry, including examinations of dynamics in imports, exports and production, as well as employment trends (Kilduff & Chi, 2006; Hodges & Karpova, 2006; Scott, 2006), little is known about the workers who are the industry’s lifeblood. It is often thought that the decline in textile sector employment has affected only those skilled workers who are directly involved in the manufacturing process while white-collar corporate jobs remain immune to layoffs (Kessler, 2002). Indeed, manufacturing job losses have received the most publicity, yet supervisory and administrative positions secured by college graduates may also be affected. Moreover, even though it is known that women are just as likely to be impacted by job loss within the manufacturing side of textiles and apparel as men (Hodges & Karpova, 2006), what is not known is the extent to which they are impacted by white collar employment dynamics. Four-year degree programs that prepare graduates to work in the textile and apparel industries are traditionally female-majority, yet males hold the majority of higher management positions (Daniel, 2004). To address this gap in knowledge, this research examines the early careers of female apparel industry professionals who majored in textile and apparel programs. Specific questions guiding the research are: What happens to female students once they graduate? How do they find their first job? Their second job? Are they being promoted? What challenges do they encounter in the workplace?

A qualitative research design was used as the methodological basis for the study. Depth interviews were conducted with a total of fourteen women who had been employed in professional apparel industry jobs for less than ten years. All were currently working in the textile or apparel industries at the time of the interview and held a variety of positions, including jobs in design, sourcing, planning, merchandising, and product flow analysis. All were college graduates and majored in textiles and apparel. The majority of the respondents were in their first job. One-third worked for private companies and two-thirds for public corporations. With Institutional Review Board approval from the researchers’ university, audio-taped interviews were conducted at a location selected by each participant and lasted between one and three hours.

Distinct themes emerged from the responses through a phenomenological interpretation of the data (van Manen, 1990) and include Landing the First Job, Life in the Trenches, and A Job versus a Career. These

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themes linked the women’s experiences and highlighted the similarities and differences among them. Primary issues within each theme suggest that while participants know they must work their way up the ladder to achieve success, at times they experience an alarming degree of invisibility as compared to their male counterparts, and particularly those males with degrees in business. Yet, at the same time, the participants were, for the most part, satisfied with their career paths thus far and had managed to learn to maneuver through the politics of their respective workplaces to maintain their jobs within a volatile industry and economy. Indeed, the women in this study have been able to secure and retain jobs in an industry that had been going through major changes long before the current economic downturn. Each looked forward to a time when she was promoted beyond her current job status and many hoped to move into higher level management positions at some point.

Results of this study provide insight into what it is like for women in the early stages of their apparel industry careers and sheds light on factors that they perceive as major contributors to professional success. Understanding what female textile and apparel graduates experience in the industry is necessary for creating enhanced professional development opportunities, as well as for establishing the value of gender-based professional networks. Further research, and particularly longitudinal studies that examine women’s career paths over time, would help provide a clearer understanding of the opportunities and challenges they encounter while working in this dynamic and global industry.

References