

Gender gap hinders cybersecurity hiring boom

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Women account for over half the professional workforce, yet only 25 percent of information technology jobs are filled by females, according to the National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT).

Far from being a policy of de jure discrimination, women have largely abstained from entering the computer science field as it is a predominately a male-driven culture. As a result, many women do not feel comfortable or interested in learning about computers or programming.

Richard George, a former top official at the National Security Agency, said women have told him they feel uncomfortable being such a small minority in computer science classes.

"It wasn't like anybody was picking on them or making life hard for them, but they just felt a little bit uncomfortable in that situation," he said.

As an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University, Phyllis Schneck, the chief technology officer for public sector at McAfee, said she was one of the only females in her major and her friends would make fun of her for it.

"But when it came time to help them fix their computers because it ate their term paper, I'm the one they called," she said.

As computers have grown ubiquitous, the number of women earning undergraduate computer science degrees has actually decreased. In 1985, 37 percent of all college graduates with computer science degrees were female, but by 2009 that figure had fallen to 18 percent.

Given the shortage of individuals with computer expertise, the government and private businesses are eager to bridge this gender gap.

"The cyber issue is a huge issue. We are up against some determined countries," George said. "Today, if you look at countries like China and India they have so many more people than we do that it is going to be very, very hard for us to out-people them."

"We have to be more creative and more innovative. And you just aren't going to get there if you are not going to recruit from half your population," he said.

At a recent event, DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano said, "I would have every cybergeek in the United States who is any good at detecting hackers and intrusions come work for me."

DHS is currently looking to hire 1,000 more cybersecurity professionals, while the NSA hopes to hire 1,200 more, but despite their best efforts to hire more women, there simply are not enough in the talent pool.

To help expand the talent pool to include more women, colleges and technology companies have begun offering special programs aimed at encouraging women at an early age to become interested in technology.

For instance the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a program for female high school students to explore engineering and computer science and Microsoft has started its DigiGirlz program aimed at high school girls.

Lucinda Sanders, the co-founder of NCWIT, believes that it will take at least another decade to see a shift in the gender balance in the computer industry, but eventually she hopes to see women comprise a third of the information technology workforce.

“It’s when gender is not the conversation anymore. It’s when you see enough people in the environment where you don’t feel peculiar.”