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2009 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

E-Leadership: How are Women Using Communication Technologies as a Means of Influencing Audiences?

PROFESSOR: Jeanine Warisse Turner, Associate Professor, Georgetown University;

Lamar Reinsch, Full Professor, Georgetown University

EXECUTIVE SPONSOR: Suzanne Clark, President National Journal Group

STUDENTS: Lauren Alfrey and Gillian Brooks

OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM/ISSUE

New communication technologies are transforming our opportunities for interaction within the workplace. Email, texting, Twitter, Facebook, Linked In, instant messaging, and blogging are just a few of the mediated opportunities for communication. Early days of online communication research suggested that email could be a great equalizer so that individuals at lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy could get a boost from a medium with fewer cues. Later linguistic research found that many of the same conversational patterns found in offline communication, also occurred in mediated forms (email, text, and instant messaging). Specifically, males often dominated the conversation in lists and discussion groups and used more “informative” communication, while women tended to use more “social” or “involved” communication. So, while early research promised an equalizing effect, later research found a duplication of traditional communication in the online environment.

However, while linguistically women seem to be communicating in a similar way online as they do offline, the question we pose is could that communication have a different effect? Could it be that the language is similar but the context itself changes everything? A recent study of e-leadership among undergraduates found that women report using computer-mediated communication more than men as a means to lead constituents. We decided to explore whether this finding would hold true after graduation. Do women and men communicate differently when making communication choices about leadership?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Using survey monkey, we distributed a similar survey that was used by the undergraduates in college leadership study. We collected surveys from 133 respondents, 81 women and 52 men, ranging in age from 20-61+ years of age. We asked the respondents to identify a leader from their work or community. We then asked a series of questions about the way that person communicated. What percentage of messages did they receive from the identified leader?

FINDINGS

We found that women tended to identify leaders of both sexes, while men tended to identify mostly male leaders. Female leaders were reported to send 34% of their messages by way of individually-addressed email while male leaders were reported to only send 18% of their messages through the same channel. Therefore women identified as leaders (as compared to men identified as leaders) are perceived to make relatively greater use of email. Along with leader gender, we also tested simultaneously for the effects of respondent gender and age. The only significant effect was for leader gender, indicating that the effect occurred in communication with “followers” of both genders and for all ages.

IMPLICATIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

This research underlines that women and men are communicating differently in mediated environments and that female leaders are making greater use of email. Not only is this happening among a younger generation of women but we see it with career women in the workplace as well. Our research raises some interesting questions about why this difference is happening. Why do female leaders use email more? Do they understand email differently than men so that more messages are appropriate for that channel? Are they using it to create a different dynamic in the public sphere? Or are they recognizing a potential power located in a context that does not make gender so explicit?