

# Hostile\_Work\_Environment.Com

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the behaviors and efforts of the male employees of one small software development company, which was born and died during the gold rush mentality<sup>11</sup> that captivated many start-ups during the Dot.Com Bubble. From evidence drawn from interviews, observations, self-reported organizational charts and time diaries, I argue that the organizational culture, created by the original and managerial employees of this company, made it nearly impossible for female employees to be hired. I also claim that once a few female employees were hired, the organizational culture made the work environment so hostile that it drove them to leave and seek alternative employment. I argue these points from both a social constructivist and an individual differences theoretical points of view. The conclusions that I draw from this case study are that the Dot Com Bubble did more to impede women from the IT workforce than to facilitate their entrance.

## General Terms

Management, Human Factors, Theory.

## Keywords

Dot Com, Gender, Management, Gold Rush, IT workplace.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss the case study of one small software development company, which was born and died during the Dot.Com Bubble. In this paper I discuss the behaviors and efforts

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<sup>11</sup> Gold Rush Mentality: A period of time in which there is rapid economic growth, individuals and corporations take risks they might now have taken, traditional business practices and social values are ignored. The average person believes they can become very wealthy without passing through traditional steps against all odds.

of the male employees of one company, which I call Hedsup.com. I examine male behavior and male efforts to gain and hold power within an organization.

Hedsup.com was a small company that was born during the Dot Com Bubble<sup>12</sup> and lived for approximately 24 months. The company was established by five white, male computer programmer friends in their mid to late twenties and housed in an unused bedroom of one of the five. None of the five had any business, managerial or marketing training or experience. Within 6 months they had become a 20-employee company. After one year of existence Hedsup.com had 80 employees, 19 of whom were female, the rest were male. After 18 months 30 employees left including 15 out of 19 women. After 23 months the company had returned to the size of 20 employees, none of which were female. After 24 months the company officially folded.

## 2. RESEARCH BASE

It is clear that woman have engaged in technical computerized fields with far less frequency and success than men. Quantifiably, it is a growing problem. Women are entering IT professional schools and the IT workforce is fewer and fewer numbers despite the growing number of jobs, educational programs and access [9] [11] [17]. There are two opposing theories as to why women have not entered the IT workplace; biological/psychological nature and culture. I reject the first, essentialist perspective in which women and men are seen as biologically and psychologically different, inferring that men and women need to be treated differently by the IT profession [10] [12].

The social construction perspective posits the development of and maintenance of a masculinized IT culture that systematically excludes women from IT work and all educational and professional steps leading up to IT work [1] [3] [12] [4] [6] [3]. This perspective, although recognizing that there are no universally male or female cultural traits, emphasizes that within the IT workplace certain, cultural characteristics are gathered together in a cultural unit that have come to be seen as "male" and the excluded cultural traits as "female." Female IT workers are faced with two choices either to masculinize themselves and 'fit in' or to challenge the cultural system and attempt to feminize the workplace [5] [3] [8] [9] [14].

In response to these three perspectives Trauth [9] has tried to find a middle ground in which individual differences between women

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<sup>12</sup> I capitalize Dot Com Bubble because I use it as if it were a distinct era. The time period that I am referring to is five years, between 1996 and 2001.

play a role in their choices and coping strategies when faced with the masculine world of the IT workforce. In this way she has given agency back to the individual women who attempt to make their way into the IT work environment. In the same light, in this paper I attempt to illustrate the individual differences and responses of the male IT workers to preserve their IT domain, social hierarchy and power structures intact.

### 3. METHODS

I selected a mixture of methods, which would result in richly detailed thick description, including short-term observation, in-depth interviews, the drawing of self-reported organizational charts and time diaries. This is a single case study of one organization and it is not intended to be generalizable. It provides a very detailed snapshot of Hedsup.com during a specific period of time. Due to the restricted length of this paper I will not be able to present any of the raw data in this venue. I will interpret the data for the reader and publish the raw data in another venue.

I conducted a year of informal observation within the working environment of Hedsup.com between January 2001 and December 2001. I conducted a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 22 employees

Along with observations and interviews all of the employees were asked to draw an organizational chart depicting position and power within the company and to fill out a time diary for one week detailing how they spent their time. Included in the analysis are the results from 32 organizational charts and 15 completed time diaries.

### 4. GENDERED RECRUITMENT: RECRUITMENT PARTY OR FRATERNITY RUSH?

Hedsup.com used two main recruitment strategies, personal references and recruitment parties. The initial growth spurt was accomplished via the first method, personal references. During that phase the company grew from 5 to 20 employees, all male. When asked, these 15 employees stated that they were friends of the original five. They had known them at college or in a past job or through a friend of a friend. The original twenty employees were very homogenous. They were all computer programmers, all male, all in their mid to late 20s and had zero drag, no competition for work time like families, pets, girlfriends or hobbies.

The initial five then developed the second method of hiring anticipating that they needed to grow fast. They developed the college tour recruitment party. I argue that the development of this recruitment party was an extension of the first effort to hire more individuals who were just like the original five but on a larger scale, without the personal ties. The first phase of the recruitment party was to send invitations to the universities MIS, CS, IS departments and computer labs on campus. The recruitment party itself was held in a college town in the ballroom of a large hotel. The ballroom was set up with several SEGA Dreamcast wall –projection video games, catered high end Asian snacks and sushi, beer and wine, music and lots of comfy chairs. The initial five would circulate among the invited candidates chatting and what they call “geeking,” discussing technical issues in a fun, lively banter, with a one-up-man-ship style seeking

which person knows the most obscure technical facts. They ate, they chatted, they drank and they played one-on-one fighting games like “Soul Caliber” against one another for hours.

No formal interviews were ever held, no formal questions about the applicants’ technical expertise were ever asked, no credentials or references were ever examined or checked, yet six new employees were hired from that party alone. All six were male and left college to travel across the country to work for Hedsup

In so many ways this list of criteria is so restrictive it limits the potential job candidates to a very small pool, which is how any company finds new employees. However, the criteria was so culturally biased that those that remained in the pool were all male, all white, all young, all in college and all very similar to the initial five. If the initial five were really trying to hire people who were just like them, then the ideal candidate for the job was already defined as male.

Eventually at the third college recruitment party, after nearly 40 male employees were hired, a few women were hired. Three female computer programmers were hired through the recruitment party and 2 more women were hired locally through personal contacts to be the receptionist and payroll-benefits specialist /bookkeeper.

### 5. COMPETITION

In all aspects of the job of a software developer at Hedsup.com lies competition. The two most visible forms of competition are the video game and Nerf tournaments. At varying times each day a developer will walk through the company asking in a loud voice “Does your Soul burn?” asking if anyone would like to play the Sega Dreamcast game “Soul Caliber” with him. The game statistics are posted electronically to everyone’s email each day and who is on the top of the list translates into real benefits within the social hierarchy within the organization. A second game is also played, “Unreal Tournament” in which the entire staff can play simultaneously via their own desktop computers. The game is also highly competitive in that each employee battles all other employees to the death. In both games the employees does virtual violence to his coworkers Avatar and receives prestige outside the game for doing well inside the game.

The other visible form of competition is via a set of 30 Nerf guns that were provided to many employees. The Nerf guns fire foam balls, discs, arrows or hooks without doing damage to persons or equipment. At any point during the day one team any “invade” another team and “kill” all the employees. In general no female employees ever play the video/computer games or play the Nerf games. They are not specifically invited, nor do they express their wish to play.

The technical employees also have systems of competition that are non-game related that are less visible. Hedsup.com developed a culture of time one-up-man-ship, in which employees challenged each other to stay for longer and longer hours. On several occasions while observing it was noted how two members of the development team were always working to get the others to work faster. They would play loud thrash music to motivate. They would yell over the din to the others to get going, to write clean code and write it fast. [7]

## 6. LANGUAGE

The leader of the system administration team needed help because he felt overworked. He said he could handle the high-level administration stuff, but really needed someone to do the routine day-to-day maintenance work on the system. One of the initial five said “Oh yeah, what you really need is a b----, a wife.” The room exploded in laughter and everyone nodded. The system administrator did eventually hire someone and that new employee was publicly referred to as the ‘b----’ or the ‘wife’ from that point forward. When asked during the interview all employees said they knew the nickname and knew how he had gotten it.

In another instance one of the initial five was out of town promoting the new software. He was in the middle of a demonstration when the software failed. He was angry and embarrassed. He called the office and got the team leaders to come into one office and listen to him scream at them via speakerphone. He was so angry he swore at them and called them names and bullied them into saying they would fix the problem no matter what the cost in time and effort. The rest of the office could hear the entire tirade and heard him call the team leaders b---es and c---s over and over again. Through this use of language it can be seen that at least the five initial employees and perhaps several others implied that to be feminized was to be a low-level servant as well as someone who made mistakes, could be screamed at and demeaned publicly.

## 7. VISUAL SYMBOLISM

Every wall is covered with erasable whiteboard material to encourage creativity. Several drawings have appeared on the boards in one technical team room, which have depicted a team member being sexually assaulted by a member of management from behind. When asked, the members of the technical teams only smirked and refused to talk about the authors or artists. Nearly all the technical team members mentioned the drawings on the whiteboards and said they were a way for the employees to let off steam when the deadline crunch times got close.

Covering each of the workstations were figurines and toys. Many of the figurines were of female characters from films, comic books and Japanese Anime. The female figurines were scantily clothed and sexually positioned with other figurines as if involved in sexual acts. At one point an employee brought in an old Barbie doll. The doll was naked and placed on an employee’s chair. The next day someone moved it to another employee’s chair. Soon after that the doll was passed to a different employee each night. They made many jokes about “passing her around” sexually. After about a month of passing the doll from person to person the doll began to get defaced. First someone cut off her hair, then she was drawn on as if she were tattooed, then someone pierced her head with a safety pin. After a few more days she was tied up using string and duct tape to resemble sexual bondage techniques. After several more passing around rounds the doll was dismembered and several employees kept a piece of the doll on their desk as a souvenir.

## 8. HIERARCHY, TECH WORK ON TOP, WOMENS’ WORK ON THE BOTTOM

I asked the Hedsup.com employees to draw an organizational chart and describe the independent pieces of the organization and

their relationship to each other. Each employee that drew a chart made something akin to a pyramid with the initial five employees at the top as owners/managers and the software development teams at the bottom. The female software developers were placed within the organizational chart at the bottom with the other software developers. However, in the case of the non-technical female employees, all of the employees either did not attempt to, or had a difficult time placing the female office manager, receptionist, payroll/bookkeeper and quality assurance person. What became clear was that there were two kinds of employees, those that fit culturally and those that didn’t, those that were part of the technical team structure and those that were not.

These female non-technical employees were treated differentially. While the majority of the technical team members were not given rigid work hours, required to wear business dress, and played games as part of their work experience, the female employees were held to a much more rigid traditional bureaucratic system of organization and control. The technical teams became the center around which the female support staff worked.

Hedsup.com’s staff is divided into four teams including the software development team, which created the end product software; the software tools group, which supplied the development team with re-useable chunks of software to make development quicker and easier; the system administration group, which created and maintained the technology within which the development took place, and the project management group which oversaw the whole process and directly interacted with the customers. In this hierarchy there were no women in the team that ranked the highest. There were 2 women in the second ranking team and the women in the third ranking team. The rest of the women fell into the lowest ranking team.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

Research on the lack of women in the IT profession is growing. Most of this research has focused on the differences between a ‘masculinized IT workplace culture’ and a ‘women’s culture.’ Several authors mentioned above [1] [2] [9] [11] have sought to find out how women can either feminize IT culture or masculinize themselves in order to fit in. In this paper, rather than looking at the women making their way into the IT profession I look at the men working to keep them out. All of the men interviewed for this study would consider themselves to be nice guys. They think of themselves as liberal, open minded and progressive. They think of themselves as above the traditional gender roles of society and believe that they treat everyone equally and with great respect. However, their self-perception and their actions do not have a lot in common. I have identified four types of organizational and individual efforts made by the male IT staff at Hedsup.com that seem to have been working toward the creation of a hostile work environment for potential female IT employees.

1. During the gold rush mentality of the Dot Com Bubble, unconventional hiring practices within this small start-up companies led to the hiring of homogeneous populations excluding women, people of color, and older professionals.
2. Heroic behavior, denial of personal needs, having no outside interests and living at work were behaviors that were routinely rewarded.

3. During the Dot Com Bubble, these technical professionals, including computer programmers, system administrators and software developers believed they were capable of starting and managing their own business with no training, no business or managerial skills and no professional human resources help. This led to unconventional business practices a lack of organizational norms and values that may have prevented the development of a hostile work environment.
4. During the Dot Com Bubble, this small start up organization was restructured so that the technical staff was placed highest in the organizational hierarchy. This led to the devaluing of non-technical staff, most of which were women. While technical staff enjoyed many freedoms, non-technical staff was held to strict bureaucratic, traditional roles.

This situation was time bounded by the fact that the Dot Com Bubble had ended by the end of 2001 and the gold rush mentality along with it. During a time when a gold rush mentality is the norm traditional values and organizational cultures become too confining and are thrown aside, In the case of Hedsup.com work was constructed to be more and more like play to attract the highly productive computer “mavericks” which could write the killer application overnight. Production became a battle against time and other companies’ ingenuity, so sacrifices were made in organizational democracy, protocol, diversity and cultural sensitivity. The Dot Com Bubble was a wildly successful time for some, but not for women.

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