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Changing technologies

Women in IT find opportunities for advancement

*Prospects are bright as more women take jobs in the field
Schools and organizations work to break stereotypes*

By Jon Boroshok
Contributing Editor

Experts agree: as more women move up in IT, more doors will open for women trying to enter the field.

MentorNet (www.mentornet.org), the e-mentoring network for diversity in engineering and science, sees companies making an effort to recruit more women as part of a diverse workforce. "Companies are showing up at career fairs of major women's and diversity organizations in engineering and science," says Carol Muller, founder, president and CEO of MentorNet. "They are also advertising in the publications of women-serving and minority-serving professional organizations.

"The over-simplified



Alison Miller interned at UBS Investment Bank, and then joined the company full time as a business analyst. "There's never a boring day," she says.

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notion that 'all those IT jobs have been outsourced to India and China' is still quite prevalent in the popular culture and affects the way parents and teachers encourage future directions for their children and students," says Muller. On the contrary, IT is an exciting field with lots of opportunities in the U.S., she notes, and it is attracting more women every day.

Exposing the versatility of IT

Girlstart (www.girlstart.org) is an

Austin, TX nonprofit organization that aims to interest more girls in math, science and technology. "We believe that companies are ready for smart, capable women with the skills and knowledge to work in IT. Many of our programs for girls are taught by professional women working in IT and other math- and science-intensive fields," says Zakiyyah Kareem, project manager for Girlstart. "We think IT is incredibly attractive for women."

Perhaps the message is reaching young people. The School of Information Studies at Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY) has seen more women enrolling in its programs in recent years. The graduating class of 2006 was 25 percent female, but the graduating class of 2007 is 34 percent female. And the class of 2010, which entered school in the fall of 2006, is 41 percent female.

"Many women believe this field is just about writing code, and are initially turned off. There is still a stereotypical image of a guy sitting at a computer all day," says Syracuse's Debra Eischen, director of career services and experiential learning. "However, as young people are exposed to technology at a much earlier stage in their lives, I think we will see a change in this outlook. And as female high-school students and young women pursuing college degrees come to understand the versatility of an IT degree in the workplace, we will see more of them in our programs."

The women interviewed for this article are recent college graduates who work in IT. Some have followed a more traditional path than others, but they all represent the changing face of the industry.

Alison Miller: business-tech liaison at UBS

Alison Miller is a 2006 BS graduate of Fairfield University (Fairfield, CT). She was a double major in finance and information systems, with



Allison Porterfield works on IT initiatives and upgrades at CDW.





Alison Miller.

a minor in accounting.

During college Miller did a successful internship at UBS Investment Bank (Stamford, CT). Today she's a business analyst in the fixed income derivatives IT organization.

She's the liaison between the business and technology teams of a derivatives trade capture platform. Her job is to prioritize the investment bank's business requirements for the IT department's development team.

Miller works with counterparts in London, which means that she must often compensate for the five-hour time difference. She commutes to Stamford from New York City, a reverse of the typical suburb-to-city route.

She enjoys her fast-paced job, because it allows her to explore both finance and information systems. "There's never a boring day," says Miller.

As a recent graduate and new employee Miller says the greatest challenges of her job have been "learning the ropes, and trying to learn as much as I can about the business and technologies we support." She's proud when she sees the results of her work and the satisfaction of her colleagues.

Miller notes that while there still aren't many women in technology, more are coming into the field. As an intern she joined UBS' women's network, which provides networking and mentoring opportunities for UBS women at all levels. She's still involved with the group. She volunteers and does community outreach through UBS. She participated in the Race to Deliver, a New York City fund-raising event to provide meals for men, women and children living with HIV/AIDS, cancer and other serious illnesses. UBS encourages community involvement, she notes.

Miller says that a career in IT for financial services offers great opportunities for people who like challenges and a fast pace. "It's not typical IT."

CDW's Allison Porterfield: improving communication through IT



Allison Porterfield.

Allison Porterfield followed a nontraditional path into IT. Porterfield is now supervisor of PeopleSoft Financials development for CDW (Vernon Hills, IL), a provider of technology products and services for business, government and education, but she started out in 1992 as a freelance harpist. Her bachelors from Northwestern University (Evanston, IL) is in harp performance.

It took her a while to figure out her true career direction. She tried banking, focusing on training and operations, and then took a job at a small Chicago consulting firm. She was assigned to a helpdesk position at Kraft Foods (Northfield, IL) that put her between the business side and the IT department. She found that she enjoyed being a liaison between IT and the end user.

That experience encouraged her to do thirty weeks of accelerated study in computer programming and system design at DePaul University (Chicago, IL) in 1998. She emerged with a certificate in mainframe programming.

Porterfield became a consultant at the Chicagoland office of financial services firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which took her to the IT departments of a variety of local companies. She got her MBA from the Krannert Graduate School of Management of Purdue University (West Lafayette, IN) in 2002. She was a project lead in supply chain management at mega-printer RR Donnelley, then a senior business analyst for MusicNow.com (now part of AOL). She joined CDW in February 2005.

Porterfield says she sought out CDW because she liked what she read in the company's annual reports. The company, she says, sees IT as much more than a cost center. "People don't always realize how important IT is," she remarks. "This is a company that gets it." And CDW is routinely named one of *Fortune* magazine's best companies to work for; that didn't hurt either.

At CDW, Porterfield has worked on projects like PeopleSoft upgrades and a realignment of the sales force to a geographical structure. She manages teams that include CDW co-workers and external consultants, and is involved with IT initiatives to improve communication and collaboration.

Porterfield appreciates her exposure to different areas and lots of new information. She also enjoys the many challenges of her job, like balancing business needs with development department processes.

Porterfield says she's happily settled at CDW, and hopes to keep moving up in the organization. She plans to stay with IT and wants to continue to help out with other parts of the business, to "share the value of IT with others."

Professional and volunteer organizations play a big role in Porterfield's life. She volunteers with Junior Achievement and Chicago Cares, a community service organization. She's a member of Women in Technology (www.womenintechnology.org), the Association of Information Technology Professionals (www.aitp.org), and the Chicagoland Project Management Institute (www.pmi-chicagoland.org).

Brandy Bourgoyne works on EFT capabilities at State Farm



Brandy Bourgoyne.

Brandy Bourgoyne grew up near Baton Rouge and graduated from Northwestern State University (Natchitoches, LA) in 2005 with a BS in computer information systems and business administration. She did a summer internship with State Farm (Bloomington, IL) during school, and was offered a permanent job with her internship unit. She's now a systems analyst.

After graduation Bourgoyne had other offers, but chose

to stay at State Farm because she saw opportunity, challenges and room for growth. "I didn't feel there were as many opportunities with the other companies," she says.

Bourgoyne is on a team that supports a mainframe-based software application for enterprise-wide electronic funds transfer (EFT) capabilities. "We provide business consulting and technical support. The system is used to process EFT transactions for our insurance and business banking needs," she says.

Bourgoyne's team also provides payment consulting on current and future uses of the product, makes adjustments for new EFT processes, and handles migration of existing legacy systems. Her proudest moment so far was when she helped create a new tech strategy for future developments.

Bourgoyne enjoys meeting the challenges of the learning curve. She says she is trying to absorb as much as possible. Senior analysts have been very helpful and nurturing, she says. They accept her input, so she feels valued.

Because Bloomington was new to her, she quickly got involved with State Farm's social activities planning group for interns and staff. Bourgoyne says the social events helped her network with other employees and become familiar with the area.

She helps State Farm recruit at Northwestern, which offers two semesters of Cobol, important for State Farm's legacy applications. She meets with current students to offer advice, and emphasizes the value of internships. She also suggests certain classes, including Java and Cobol. She explains that systems analysts are expected to be proficient in one or more of the development languages used at State Farm: Cobol, PL/1 and Assembler, in a mainframe or distributed computing environment. Systems analysts also need skills in object-oriented languages, plus familiarity with .net or WebSphere application development.

Bourgoyne plans to take insurance education classes to build her understanding of the business. She hopes for exposure to more areas of the company, so she can continue to grow as a leader and a mentor.

Jenny Murrill does cost analysis for Northrop Grumman



Jenny Murrill.

Jenny Murrill is an operations researcher/cost analyst at the Chantilly, VA site of Northrop Grumman Information Technology (McLean, VA). She was recruited at an on-campus career fair hosted by the School of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Virginia (UVa, Charlottesville, VA), where she earned her BS in systems and information engineering in May 2003.

Murrill works in the intelligence group of Northrop Grumman IT. She applies mathematical equations and statistical methods to analyze engineering data and to predict the cost of complex systems development, production, operations and support. She is involved in cost research, data collections, data normalization, independent cost

estimates and methods development for space systems in the intelligence community. Murrill's cost estimates often become part of the Congressional budget.

Murrill travels to contractor sites, and her job is much more than number crunching. "You must also understand how technology is built and how it works," she says.

She's held briefings with senior government officials. "I feel very honored to be able to do that," Murrill says. She also represents the government at various defense-contractor conferences, and is knowledgeable in contractor design and development processes and cost accounting systems.

Her department, she notes, is evenly divided between male and female, with most people in their late twenties.

In addition to her demanding job, she's a full-time grad student. She drives two hours each way to UVA to earn her masters in systems and information engineering. A compressed academic program helps with time management, and her managers have been supportive. Northrop Grumman is paying for her education.

She's been mentored by two of her managers, and has now gotten involved in the recruitment process so that she can serve as a mentor to others. She plans to stay at Northrop Grumman, and hopes to move into management eventually.

Maritess Pak: project manager at Raytheon



Maritess Pak.

Maritess Pak graduated from the University of Maryland (U MD, College Park, MD) in 2002 with a BS in decision and information technology. The degree is actually from the university's school of business, so she took many business courses as part of her program.

As she interviewed for her first job, she was impressed by the Leadership Development Program (LDP) at Raytheon (Waltham, MA). Each assignment in the rotation program is a challenging short-term project. Pak was one of only five new graduates selected for the program in 2002, and was the only BS grad.

She did four six-month rotations, all in IT. "With each rotation you learn about the work environment and the business," says Pak. "If you don't know what you want to do in IT coming out of school, this is a great opportunity to find out."

Pak, who grew up in Silver Spring, MD, found the constant moves of the rotation program somewhat challenging. She worked in Garland, TX with Raytheon's IT strategic planning group, in Aurora, CO with the information systems account management group, and in Reston, VA with the Raytheon Technical Services Company (RTSC). RTSC provides technology solutions for defense, federal and commercial customers worldwide. It specializes in product and systems support, customized engineering and onsite engineering solutions. That's where Pak chose to stay.

In June 2004 Pak moved up to business process analyst at RTSC, and in 2006 she advanced to project manager, handling both internal and external projects. She manages schedules, resources and costs, and does IT communications, among other duties.

Pak is proud of her success, and attributes much of it to completing the LDP, which she says took her "way outside of her comfort zone." She hopes to take advantage of Raytheon's education reimbursement benefits and pursue an MBA. Eventually she'd like to move into business leadership and have a closer relationship with external customers.

Pak recruits for LDP candidates at her alma matter. She stays in touch by working with U MD students in the school's quality enhancement systems and teams (QUEST) business and engineering program. "It's a way to give back some of what I got there," she notes.

Natasha Braz oversees MGM Mirage's technology delivery



Natasha Braz is a senior program manager overseeing technology delivery for business and new property development initiatives at MGM Mirage. She makes sure that technology implementations go according to plan for everything from casino and marketing systems to security and finance applications.

Natasha Braz.

She's enjoying the challenge of working in a new industry. Braz had five years of experience as a facilitator between business processes and technology at media giant NBC Universal (Burbank, CA) when MGM Mirage (Las Vegas, NV) offered her a job near the end of 2006. She learned afterward that the former NBC CIO, now at MGM Mirage, had recommended her. She's Six Sigma certified, and plans to use that expertise to help MGM Mirage streamline processes and improve efficiency.

Braz got her BS in management sciences and IS from Pennsylvania State University (State College, PA) in 2000, and started at NBC in New York City in 2001. A year later she relocated to Los Angeles, CA, where she completed GE's Information Management Leadership Program (IMLP) in 2003. GE is NBC's parent company. Through the IMLP she participated in corporate strategic planning and budgeting, along with support service processes, disaster recovery, Sarbanes-Oxley compliance and other projects.

Work/life balance was a challenge at Braz's previous job, but she's seen a big improvement now that she's at MGM Mirage. She's considering a return to school for her MBA, most likely with a concentration in finance.

Staples' Niloufer Rodrigues: providing tech leadership

Niloufer Rodrigues started at Staples (Framingham, MA) in February 2004, just as she entered her last semester of graduate school at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI, Worcester, MA). She received her MSCS in May 2004 after three years of night classes. Her 2000 bachelors in computer engineering is from the University of Mumbai



Niloufer Rodrigues.

(India).

Rodrigues connected with Staples recruiters on the WPI campus and joined the company as a programmer analyst, supporting merchandising areas like store planning and retail product placement. In 2005 she became a team lead. She was promoted again in 2006, and is now a principal programmer analyst and a domain lead. She interprets Staples' business needs for programmers, and provides tech leadership for projects. She works closely with the Staples brand group, helping automate processes and get products to market.

She's adjusting to life in the U.S. "There is a very different way of working and studying here," Rodrigues says. She likes the Staples culture, and is enjoying the work she's doing and learning a lot. Rodrigues says she actively socializes with her co-workers. "It's easier to work with people if you know them better," she says.

She wants to learn more about the retail side of Staples, and plans to pursue an MBA soon. "My goal is to become a vice president!" she declares.

Rodrigues says that too many women fear IT and think it's a man's world. They need to overcome that fear and be confident, she says. "Research many companies and choose the job and culture that's right for you."

Onyi Odumosu is a software systems architect for Verizon



Onyi Odumosu.

Onyi Odumosu, who is from Nigeria, has been a software systems architect for Verizon Data Services (Waltham, MA) since June 2005. She connected with the manager of Verizon's Software Systems Architect Development Program (SSADP) at a NSBE conference, and started out as an SSADP participant. The SSADP includes several six-month rotations through different areas of the company.

Odumosu earned her BSCS at the University of Lagos (Nigeria) in 2002. She worked in development for Shell Oil for a year, then came to the U.S. in September 2003 to start graduate school at Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, NY). She finished her masters in IT in 2005 and started at Verizon. She worked in three different areas of the organization during her first eighteen months.

On each six-month rotation she had to get used to different people and work styles. Everyone at Verizon was very supportive, and the development program was a great way to make the transition from school to the corporate world, she notes. "Completing the program was a big milestone," she says.

She's now where she wants to stay, working on VoiceWing, Verizon's VoIP product. "I 'connect the dots' between the various systems and teams involved in the project," says Odumosu. "I coordinate calls to discuss ongoing design changes and their impact on each system." She also sets schedules for code development to ensure that

deadlines are met, and troubleshoots errors. "I am always challenged here. I love working with people, resolving problems and adapting to new ways of thinking," says Odumosu.

Odumosu is not sure how much longer she wants to be a programmer. "Some day I would like to be a leader of a team," she says. Odumosu belongs to Women's Association of Verizon Employees (WAVE), which provides members with professional and personal development opportunities. It's also a resource for Verizon, offering counsel and support on issues that affect women employees.

Odumosu has not faced any specific challenges because she's female, but she does stand out in her male-dominated IT department. She advises women considering a career in IT to "get to know how your male colleagues think, and learn to work with them. Consider the fact that you're a woman as an advantage, but make sure it's your work people see first and not just your gender."

Samanthie Epps: Mayo intern to full-time employee



Samanthie Epps.

Samanthie Epps is a senior analyst/programmer and IT team lead for the Mayo Clinic (Rochester, MN). Her team, which includes three programmers, two analysts, two clinical liaisons and three others, converts medical records to electronic format so care providers no longer have to wait for paper charts. She helped design and manages the Lastword flowsheet module, which is where patient assessment information is entered.

Epps and her team make it easier for doctors and nurses to take care of patients. "I love the fact that I'm actually helping somebody," says Epps. "I know I am making a difference, and doing something good."

Epps is originally from Sri Lanka, and attended Winona State University (WSU, Winona, MN). There she took a programming class and wound up with one of the five passing grades in a class of thirty-five. Her instructor convinced her to take more programming classes. She did, and earned her BS in business administration and management information systems from WSU in 2000.

As a student she interned at Mayo Clinic. She thought of returning to Sri Lanka after graduation, but as she got more involved with her work her plans changed. She joined Mayo Clinic as an analyst/programmer in February 2001.

Her job can be quite challenging. She works with doctors, nurses, physical therapists and other healthcare professionals, all with their own priorities. "They want things immediately when taking care of patients, but many processes can take a lot of time, and there are many regulations that must be taken into account," says Epps. She will work 24/7 if patient safety is involved. Epps jokes that her husband claims her laptop is stuck to her hip.

She reports that her managers actively help employees balance their work and home lives. Her family is still in Sri Lanka, and the Mayo Clinic has been very accommodating about giving her time off to see them.

Epps is happy at the Mayo Clinic, and knows that she will eventually move into other IT-related positions and departments. She volunteers in the community, and supports several Sri Lankan organizations that help tsunami victims.

Shadi Vaziri: Franklin Templeton IT project manager



Shadi Vaziri.

Shadi Vaziri joined the Dublin, CA office of Franklin Templeton Investments (San Mateo, CA) just after she graduated from Santa Clara University's Leavey School of Business (Santa Clara, CA) in 2002. She's an IT project manager, responsible for a team of twenty in the middleware group. The team is introducing a new business process management product for long-running financial transactions in a global payment solution

project.

Vaziri majored in operations and management information systems (OMIS), and minored in information technology and society. Her BS is in commerce. She chose an OMIS major because she did not want to be a developer, but wanted to understand what developers do.

Communication is the key to Vaziri's job. She coordinates risk management, procurement, time management, cost containment, quality testing and scheduling. She likes the project management aspects of her job, and says it translates well into other industries. "The key to project management is being able to ask the right questions," says Vaziri.

Vaziri says that while there are far more men than women in her location, gender has not been an issue. Being the youngest member of the team, however, "does make me more aware of how I project myself. As I've gained confidence, I've been able to assert myself and command respect."

Students thinking of an IT career, Vaziri says, should realize that there is "a big difference between what you do at work and what you learn in school." She advises aspiring IT pros to do plenty of internships, and find a good mentor.

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Jon Boroshok is a freelance writer in Groton, MA.

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