

All These Women

"During the war, we looked around and saw all these women in the work place and we didn't know what to do with them." That's an explanation of the origins of training once offered to me by a venerable veteran of the field.

Women, once a mystifying presence to those who had to train them in the 1940s, are again a challenging presence in the work force. Their movement into the work force is thought by some to be one of the most significant social changes since the Industrial Revolution. The big difference is that now they are there not by necessity but by choice—theirs and society's.

Women, free to head households, to postpone child bearing, and to choose where to work, now make up 43 percent of the American work force and by 1990 the absolute number of working women will more than triple. This time around, what is training going to do with them?

It seems clear that women, who occupy great numbers of low echelon jobs and have made but modest headway into the ranks of management, will require, even demand, management development and leadership training. American women are not likely to fail to sustain and increase their hard-won empowerment. Their well-known hunger for self-improvement has sustained many continuing and higher education programs and there's no reason to think that drive won't affect job training now that women are in a position to need it.

As more women have careers rather than jobs, I can imagine that mentoring and other career development programs will increase. Because nearly 60 percent of all working women are married and have working spouses, I presume that more training will be devoted to the needs of such couples.

It also seems clear, from ASTD membership statistics and other sources, that women are doing a lot more training. Women comprise 37 percent of ASTD's members, up from a measly 10 percent in 1970.

What do these women want? The ASTD Women's Network surveyed its members about their priorities and found that work and career were far more important to them than women's issues. In other words, women in training have concerns that could be common to all: being better equipped to work better.

ASTD has its eye on this rising trend of women entering the human resource profession. As the society seeks to know its market and the market's needs, women are certain to be considered, not as a demographic curiosity, but because someone must answer these questions: Why are they coming into the profession in such large numbers and what do they want from it?

Another interesting question is how will they shape it? This is an ideal time for women to make themselves part of the image of training; to create paths for themselves in the profession and make those paths known; and to increase their visible contributions to the field even if that means redefining visible contributions. It's time for women in HRD to be more than merely numerous.



Editor