Blazing New Trails

How Women Are Making Inroads into HTM

Stephanie Stephens

Although no one is saying that the field of healthcare technology management (HTM) is a “boys’ club,” the truth is that this specialized workforce is populated by more men than women. That tends to be true of most technical jobs, but the tide is slowly but steadily changing, as four powerhouse women will attest.

Business as Usual

According to Sue Schade, chief information officer at University of Michigan Hospitals and Health Centers in Ann Arbor, the personalities and leadership styles of men and women are in fact different. She cited an article appearing in The Wall Street Journal in which Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer and founder of LeanIn.org, wrote that when women get stuck, corporate America gets stuck.¹ The disadvantages that women face in the workplace, said Sandberg, result in poor organizational performance, whereas promoting diversity increases creativity, profits, and innovation, among other things.

In addition, LeanIn and McKinsey & Company just released Women in the Workplace, a comprehensive study of women in corporate America.² It found that women are still underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline and face greater barriers to advancement and a steeper path to senior leadership.

Gender aside, Schade remains passionate about developing the next generation of information technology (IT) leaders—both male and female. At her blog, www.sueschade.com, she hosts a subject category called On Women and Work.³ There, she shares this statistic: Women in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields make up just 26% of the science workforce, up only slightly from 23% in 1990.

An active speaker, Schade recently addressed the gender divide at a tech conference, where she challenged attendees to “get more women into tech.” During her presentation, she noticed two women in the audience who rolled their eyes and looked at each other. “That look seemed to say, ‘Oh boy, what are the guys here going to think?,’” said Schade.

Following Schade’s presentation, attendees, both male and female, came up to her to share their career success stories, including one man who “was very proud of his daughter,” she recalled.

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Andrea Brainard, CBET, group manager of biomedical engineering and medical device infrastructure at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas, TX, knew that breaking into the male-dominated field of HTM would be a challenge, but it was one she readily accepted. She went to college to become a biomedical technician and said that “it was hard at first.”

“I felt like I had to prove myself, and I’ve had to move up through the ranks,” said Brainard. “I’ve proven myself—not so much for everybody else—but to myself that I can do this job at a high level. Now I can’t imagine myself doing anything else. In my role I can lead by example, and that’s rewarding in itself.”

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Stay Strong and Seek Support

When younger women ask her about how she got where she is, Schade tells them it’s really important to find role models and mentors. Schade’s advice: “First, you need to figure out who they are and observe, listen, and learn.” Her guidance also includes:

• Listen to your heart and find your passion
• Don’t be discouraged by difficulty and setbacks
• Explore your options
• Plan your path but always be open to the possibilities—just think about the jobs today that didn’t exist 10 years ago
• Surround yourself with people who support your dream
• You are the captain of “team you”—enlist people who can support, coach, and mentor you along the way

“My team and I try to speak or present at career days two or three times a year to deliver the message to everyone,” said Carol L. Wyatt, MPA, CHTM, certified biomedical equipment technician manager in HTM at Baylor Scott & White Health in Houston, TX.

When she speaks at college clubs, she typically addresses an audience of half men, half women. “I wonder where they all end up, but I assume they graduate,” said Wyatt. “Then, when I have openings and receive applications, I wonder, ‘Where are the women going?’”

For many women, not focusing on differences between men and women in healthcare technology is the easiest way to focus on being great at it. “I think it’s the same as being a leader in any field,” said Wyatt. “I don’t feel different and I have never said, ‘If I were a man...’ I don’t feel like one of the boys. I’m not one of the boys.”

Wyatt looks at women and HTM in a different way: “I think there are more men in higher positions because there are more men in the field generally. Why we can’t attract women to the field who are capable of doing quality work is a better question. I wish I knew the answer, but I don’t think it’s any one thing.”

With 25 years’ experience, Wyatt doesn’t look back but focuses on what’s yet to come. “All HTM professionals have the knowledge, skills, and power to make a difference. Like any great career, this does require some sacrifice, but the rewards are worth it. But it’s no more sacrifice than a nurse or other healthcare professional might give,” she said.

It’s Not the Same

Clearly, the times are changing, according to Donna Swenson, president and CEO of Sterile Processing Quality Services, Inc., in Stickney, IL. When comparing who’s doing what in the healthcare and industrial sides of her business, “more men are involved in healthcare and more women are becoming involved in the industrial side,” she said.

Swenson seems to be doing what comes naturally to her, with degrees in business administration and medical economics, a minor in microbiology, and additional courses in quality systems. That’s in spite of a directive she received in high school, when she wanted to load her coursework with even more academics. “I was told I had to take a sewing class,” she recalled.

But Swenson abandoned needle and thread for more intellectual pursuits, which she
eventually mastered. “I did come into this with a great deal of confidence, and I’ve never been really concerned about ‘the guys,’” she said. “I don’t say, ‘You can do that but we [women] can’t.’ If you’re hiring a sterile scientist, you’re hiring a sterile scientist.”

Stereotypes about women in healthcare also are limiting, Swenson said. “A lot of women can contribute to and improve patient care by looking at the technical side of things. That means making sure we’re actually developing products that can be effectively cleaned and sterilized.”

Her niche fits neatly between that of surgeons, who are primarily men, and operating room nurses, who are primarily women. “Then, you’ve got sterile processing people, and that’s primarily female dominated—they’re the ones who actually know how the devices get used. I’m a much better sterile scientist than I would have been a nurse,” added Swenson.

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References