**Male office management learners in a non-traditional male environment – a comparison**

Ms Sumei van Antwerpen, Tshwane University of Technology

Tshwane University of Technology, Private Bag X680, Pretoria, 0001

Tel: +27 12 382 5620

Email: vanantwerpens@tut.ac.za

Dr Edmund Ferreira, Department of Business Management, Unisa

PO Box 13451, Hatfield, 0028, Pretoria, South Africa

Tel: +27 12 429 3331

Email: eferreir@unisa.ac.za

Keywords: Office Management and Technology (OMT) Learners, Historically disadvantaged, Career Guidance, a-typical, Barriers, South Africa (SA)

Stream 7: Inclusion in Higher Education

Presentation Type: 20 minute Paper Presentation in English (10 minutes for questions and discussions)

Paper Title: Male office management learners in a non-traditional male environment – a comparison

Paper Classification: Research Paper

**ABSTRACT**

In the early 20th century, typewriting and shorthand were introduced into the public school environment shortly after they were introduced into the office scenario. Commercial subjects were expanded and separated from the academic mainstream to constitute a distinct vocational programme. Vocationalism pervades some business courses more fully than it does others, and the ratios of male to female learners in the courses reflect the relative vocational emphasis. Courses that prepare OM for the SA corporate arena, portray specific and job-related skills and are overwhelmingly attended and dominated by female learners. Guidance at secondary education level can play a key role in fostering efficiency in the allocation and use of human resources and in fostering social equality in terms of access to educational and vocational opportunities. Career guidance has an important function in reconciling traditional male/female roles with values attached, in democratic societies, to the rights of individuals to make free choices about their future.

**Design/methodology/approach**

This study encompassed a literature review and an empirical survey focusing on perceptions to determine the profile of male Office Management (OMT) learners. This study reviews a quantitative analysis and outlines specific key factors regarding: (1) the level of career guidance at historically disadvantaged secondary schools; (2) to establish what motivates the male learner to pursue a traditionally accepted a-typical male profession such as OMT and, (3) to determine possible of extrinsic as well as intrinsic barriers. The results from 2010 will establish if the profile initially determined in 2002, remained unchanged over the past eight years.

**Male office management learners in a non-traditional male environment – a comparison**

**BACKGROUND**

Men dominated the secretarial field until the late 1880’s. With the invention of the “writing machine” in 1867 (the first typewriter), many women entered the office workforce in various clerical roles. By the 1930’s, the number of men with the title “secretary” dwindled, and women began to dominate the office workforce (Anon, 2002b:2).

During the last decade and even today, males are still under-represented in the office management environment. In 1995 only 1.5% of the 3 361 000 secretaries in the USA were males and the Professional Secretaries International, an association for office professionals, had 27 000 members of whom fewer than 1% were males (Anon 1996:Internet). In February 2010, the Association for Office Professionals of South Africa had a membership of just under 30 000, of whom fewer than 5% were males. According to Brown (2010:Interview), this percentage is slowly increasing, and most of these males are from the governmental sector with few from the private sector.

For the purpose of this paper, office management personnel will include secretaries, personal assistants, executive assistants, office managers and office coordinators in all types of businesses, doing a variety of tasks such as clerical work, telephone reception work, stenography, computer programming, document compilation and the management of information and information systems.

The role of office management personnel is interesting, challenging and undergoing many changes, which makes this profession more appealing, even to males. The new tools of this trade, the enhanced electronic means of transmission and access to information position these workers on the cutting edge of information flow (Van Antwerpen & Ferreira, 2010).

Duties expected of male secretaries are no different from their female counterparts, but males experience many gender-related challenges (Pringle, 1993:131). Men in these jobs are often referred to, inter alia, as gay and unambitious (Rudolph 2008:6) and these perceptions may form career barriers that prevent such men from achieving their goals.

Although the role of office management personnel is changing, careers tend to be stereotyped according to a single gender, which results in the practice that certain careers are reserved for a particular gender. The fallacy exists that men tend to choose a conventional “male” career due to a lack of adequate career guidance in schools. However, through educational experience and daily interaction, male learners do enter higher educational institutes (HEIs) to follow an office management career that is typically dominated by females. Yet it is found that male office management learners experience emotional barriers, both intrinsic as well as extrinsic, while in their training period, and they experience insecurities about the career choice they have made as a result of a lack of experience in the corporate world. Anon (2002a:1-3) portrays the emotions of a male secretary/office manager as follows: “There I was with a Dictaphone headset stuck to my ears, with Tipp-ex all over my fingers … The indictments against my masculinity seemed irrefutable; felonious emasculation …”.

Explanations related to labour demand focus on why employers generally prefer to hire women or men for particular positions and why women and men have different opportunities for promotion and career development within firms. Whether an individual chooses to accept work in a particular occupation or an employer chooses to employ either men or women primarily, these decisions are influenced by learned cultural and social values that often discriminate against women or men, and stereotype occupations as being male or female orientated. In other words, the above-mentioned preference is largely determined by learned, gender-related factors (International Labour Review, 1997:6).

According to Heppner & Heppner (2009:63) and males in the office management environment may still face obstacles such as discrimination and suspicion in relation to their motives as well as potential harassment because of societal biases.

This South African-based study was replicated to determine whether any changes have taken place over the past eight years regarding the the profile of male learners in a non-traditional male study field. While males, especially male office employees, are still crossing over to a traditionally female-dominated occupational environment, the main aim of this study was firstly to determine whether male office management learners in higher education who pursue a career in office management still experience discrimination during their time of training and secondly to determine the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that they currently experience in their study period. If so, has the level of career guidance given in secondary schools and the motivation of learners to choose an office management career changed during his time?

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

In order to determine the profile of male learners in a non-traditional male study field, the following concepts need clarification:

* Extrinsic barriers
* Intrinsic barriers
* Males in non-traditional male occupations
* Career guidance at secondary school level

**Career barriers**

Career barriers (extrinsic and intrinsic) can prevent an individual from attaining or succeeding in a goal. It can furthermore be regarded as a rule, law or policy that makes it difficult or impossible for something to happen or to be achieved. Career barriers can be devastating in many respects, to the extent that they arouse strong emotions. London (1998: xvii) emphasises that people react differently to career barriers, which include the following:

* thoughts, emotions and their interaction
* the effects of one’s resilience and toughness in reaction to stress
* thought processes
* strategies for coping with stress
* developing insights about themselves, others and the situation
* career motivation – patterns of personality characteristics, needs and interests that comprise career resilience, career insight and career identity

**Extrinsic barriers**

Males in non-traditional occupations face career barriers that prompt them to process information carefully and objectively. They are able to move beyond their disappointment, anger, frustration and a host of other emotions. The conclusions that male office managers reach about the barriers that may affect them determine how they will manage a particular situation. Recognising the reasons for the barrier and the extent to which it can be controlled, reversed, ignored or overcome, will help an office manager to devise coping strategies (London 1998: xxi).

The word “extrinsic” can be defined as not contained or included within, extraneous, originating or acting from outside and external (*Collins cobuild* 1999:389). Extrinsic incentives, such as remuneration, working conditions, recognition or promotion, are defined as incentives provided by the organisation or other external sources. Extrinsic rewards are furthermore additive, complementary or reciprocal.

Yuracko (2009:71-72) investigated a number of legal issues concerning gender and race in the workplace and found that these two factors are viewed differently. Although both issues are treated as biologically and physiological based and as having some recognisable external manifestations, race is merely associated with skin tone and not associated with meaningful differences. Gender behaviour seems natural and immutable and receives protection from workplace discipline. However, employees are more likely to find their workplace expressions of gender identity protected than their expressions of racial identity. Regarding the race issue, different obligations are not imposed on different race groups, as seems to be the case with gender differences.

Masculine and feminine qualities are not inherent in men and women respectively – they are the product of social beliefs. Men can do the work that is usually assigned to women and there is no reason why men should be better at leading and women better at caring. The problem, however, is to persuade men to do the work alongside women without fear or derision. In many instances, there is little connection between the jobs nurses do (and probably also administrative support staff) and the society’s current construction of femininity. To be labelled a homosexual seems to be the main problem when men do not measure up to masculine expectations (Entwistle 2004:47).

The following perceptions on the skills and competence of workers also exist (Medved 2009:Internet):

* “Both sexes attribute more value to work performed by men than by women.”
* Workplace and care-giving skills associated with femininity, more often than masculinity, are assumed to be unskilled.
* Men are rational because they are better decision makers, while women are more emotional because they are better caregivers.

**Intrinsic barriers**

According to *Collins’ cobuild* (1999:584), the term “intrinsic” means: belonging naturally, inherent or essential. As far as research is concerned, the term “intrinsic” can be seen as those values that cannot physically be touched, seen or isolated. These values come from within. Intrinsic, internal or personal obstacles/barriers are commonly recognised as shortcomings that may have a negative influence of employees.

Regardless of their sexual orientation, men in non-traditional male occupations, experience anxiety around the powerful stigmas associated with the homosexual status and face suspicions that they are gay (Simpson 2004:365; Skuratowics & Hunter 2004:3).

Research on male secretaries by Medved (2009:Internet) indicates that to overcome the barriers and stigmas relating to traditional female jobs, male secretaries occasionally describe their jobs and tasks in gender-neutral terms such as being an “administrative assistant” or “bookkeeper.” They also say what they do in relation to the computer environment, mentioning the programmes they work with instead of using the term “secretary”. Some even lie about what they do.

On a positive note, men can feel comfortable with ’female’ discourses of service and care while drawing on resources from other, more privileged discourses to overcome any disadvantage associated with their minority status (Simpson 2004:366). Men in female-dominated occupations receive promotions more quickly than their female co-workers (Skuratowics & Hunter 2004:35).

**Males in non-traditional male occupations**

Golombok and Fivush (1994: 202-204) assert that male occupations are accorded more prestige than traditionally female occupations and therefore propound that people in non-traditional careers are accorded less prestige than those pursuing traditional career goals.

Three reasons are advanced for men crossing over to a female-dominated career. Firstly, there is the presence or absence of the lure of economic rewards, either in terms of promising career prospects or the lack of alternative opportunities. The second key issue is the problem of damaged masculinity, which may result from entering a woman’s career, and the development of new masculinities that may encourage men to disregard stereotypes. Their location in a feminised occupation requires the performance of emphasised femininity, including deference and care-taking behaviours. Men themselves play an active role in making choices and changing the patterns of segregation. Thirdly, technological change as an external factor often produces the context for degendering or regendering tasks (Henson & Rodgers 2001:219).

Earlier research indicated that men go into non-traditional jobs for the following reasons: a desire for a less stressful and aggressive lifestyle, greater ability to pursue interests and talents not available in male-type jobs, increased stability of the positions and the frequency of being able to interact with females on the job (Chusmir 1990 & Hayes 1989, in Heppner & Heppner, 2009:53). Some studies also indicate that men in these non-traditional career fields were viewed in negative or distrustful ways by others. Men entering these positions may face obstacles such as discrimination and suspicion in relation to their motives as well as potential harassment because of societal biases (Heppner & Heppner 2009:63).

According to Palmius and Torsten (1997:Internet), men may choose to take up women’s work for various personal reasons, such as

* interests
* talents
* the lack of alternative opportunities (especially in a period of high unemployment)
* the distaste for stereotypically macho environments
* the desire to work jointly with a partner
* the need to remain in a particular neighbourhood.

In the office management profession, men seem to have no particular interest in either changing the content or status of the career or forcing women out. They may simply be happy working in a predominantly female environment.

Male secretaries are acceptable, do well, and are on the increase and women welcome men in the office. Males tend to use more computer packages, take more risks and are flexible in their approach (McGlaughlin, in Cambridge 2002:Internet).

A survey conducted in Australia revealed that the majority of employees believe that there should be more male secretaries in the workplace. With more female managers, this seems to be the way to go. Male office professionals are becoming more commonplace. Calder (2010:Internet) also remarks that the role of secretaries has changed dramatically over the last five years and that men are equally capable of doing the job.

In a staff working paper published in March 2005 by the Council of the European Union (Brussels, 2009:10) career guidance was defined as ”services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. Such services may be found in schools, universities and colleges, in training institutions, in public employment services, in the workplace, in the voluntary or community sector and in the private sector.” According to the paper the activities include career information provision, assessment and self-assessment tools, counseling interviews, career education programs (to help individuals develop their self awareness, opportunity awareness, and career management skills), taster programs (to sample options before choosing them), work search programs, and transition services.

**Career guidance at secondary school level**

Over the past century, there has been a steady movement in many countries from the ascription of status by birth to the achievement of status through education. As a result, the educational process has ceased to be concerned simply with the transmission of skills and values. It has increasingly taken on the functions of allocating and preparing individuals for their adult roles. Advanced educational qualifications are prerequisites for entry to the majority of well-rewarded occupations (Watts, 1996:1).

Vocationalism pervades some business courses more fully than it does others, and the ratios of male to female learners in the courses reflect the relative vocational emphasis. Courses that prepare clerical and secretarial workers portray specific and job-related skills and are overwhelmingly attended by female learners (Gaskel 1992:94).

Due to the pace of change of technology and globalization, many organizations are exposed to continuous change and individual employees who want to maintain their employability have to be willing to continuously learn new skills and be flexible in their roles and tasks (Walters, Watts, & Flederman, 2009:565-566). Surely this situation includes the gender issue; meaning that if there is a traditional female job opportunity available, then it should not be a major issue for a male to accept such a position. Available jobs should be accessible to all, irrespective of gender. According to Walters et.al. (2009:566), the task of policy-makers, working with career guidance practitioners, is to help make it so. Only if this is addressed will it be possible to reconcile labour-market flexibility with a just society. Career counselling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain relevant to postmodern society (Maree, 2009:430).

Due to major socio-political and socio-economic change in South Africa, higher education is also going through a transformation process to meet the needs of society. However, regarding student counsel and development services, there has been much talk but less evidence of practical transformation (Watson & McMahon, 2009:478-479). This is also the case in Europe where a gap exists between how career guidance services are delivered and the goals of public policy (Brussels, 2005:6).

Regarding the gender issue, Stead, Els and Fouad (2004) in Perry (2009:490-491) found that the majority of both black and white high school students did not perceive gender discrimination a barrier in choosing a career. The most problematic issue especially amongst white students was racial discrimination. The reason for this might be that they have no related experience in the working environment.

In a study done in Europe, Sultana & Watts (2006:46) identified the need for “personalised employment services and career guidance services” not only for those who are already employed but especially for those who are still in formal education.

**PROBLEM AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The problem examined in this study pertains to the discriminatory tendencies against men in the traditionally female administrative support staff environment. The main aim of this study is to to establish whether the profile of male learners in a non-traditional male study field has changed over a period of eight years.

The question arises whether the profile of male learners has changed since the previous study done in 2002. In order to determine if this had happened, the following objectives, as in the previous study were identified:

* to determine the profile of male learners in a non-traditional male study field
* to identify perceptions of various intrinsic and extrinsic barriers experienced by these males
* to determine the learners’ perspective on their career choice
* to determine the guidance received in entering this field

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study encompassed a literature review and an empirical survey that focused on perceptions listed to determine the profile of male learners in a non-traditional male occupation. The initial empirical survey was conducted by means of structured questionnaires, which consisted of two sections: Section A with demographic data, Section B with stated perceptions using a five-point Likert-type scale and consisting of open-end questions. Quantitative research methods were used on male learners (2002, *n*=58 and 2010, *n*=63) registered for a national qualification designed for personal and executive assistants, office managers and office coordinators, in the Gauteng area in South Africa. The population included male learners from study levels (NQF levels) 1 to 4. The research method was designed for measuring behavioural attitudes and determining a profile on male office management learners and identifying intrinsic and extrinsic factors that may influence the role of males in the above-mentioned profession. The repetitive survey was conducted to determine whether the profile compiled in 2002 remained the same or if there had been any significant differences.

**EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

The results will be analysed according to the two sections as stipulated above, and will finally supply a summary of open-ended questions with its perceptions as indicated. The results will be displayed and the follow-up findings will be revealed where significant differences occur.

**Section A: Demographic information**

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of age categories of the male office management learners enrolled at the tertiary institutions as specified in the research methodology:

**TABLE 1 - Age distribution of learners**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** | **2002** | | **2010** | |
| **Frequency** | **%** | **Frequency** | **%** |
| 18-20 years  21-23 years  24-26 years  27-30 years  30 years + | 20  29  7  1  1 | 34.48  50.00  12.07  1.72  1.72 | 32  22  7  1  1 | 50.79  34.92  11.11  1.59  1.59 |
| **TOTAL** | **58** | **100.00** | **63** | **100.00** |

Figure : Age Distribution

A significant increase of 16.31 per cent is manifest in the total enrolments captured for the 2010 period, compared with the results for 2002. The majority of respondents ranged between the groups 18 – 20 years of age, which represents a relatively young population. It is furthermore interesting to note that during 2010, the number of enrolments decreased with 15.08 per cent from those registered in 2002. The remaining three categories (24-26, 27-30 and 30 + years of age) remained unchanged between the two groups.

The respondents of the different ethnic groups in the sample represent racial groupings as follows:

2002: Asian – 1 (1.72 per cent) and Black – 57 (98.28 per cent). The majority of the learners are Black, which no White and Coloured respondents.

2010: Black – 62 (98.41) and Coloured – 1 (1.59) with no White and Asian respondents.

From the above-mentioned statistics, one can ask the question “Where do all the white students go for further studies?” Tshwane University of Technology was mainly an institution with a majority of White students, but for the past 10 years, the total enrolments for White students decreased drastically. Possible reasons might be that White students take a “gap year” after completing their final examinations in secondary schools, by working for a period abroad to gain some experience before enrolling for tertiary studies. Another reason might be that they do not know what to study, and thus go abroad to broaden their horizons as well as to save funds to be able to enrol for further studies.

Table 2 illustrates the level of training that the respondents are currently engaged in.

**TABLE 2 - Level of training**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level of training** | **2002** | | **2010** | |
| **Frequency** | **%** | **Frequency** | **%** |
| 1  2  3  4 | 28  13  16  1 | 48.28  22.41  27.59  1.72 | 32  11  14  6 | 50.79  17.46  22.22  9.52 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **63** | **100.00** |

The majority of respondents (2002: 48.28 per cent and 2010: 50.79 per cent) are currently in their first academic year of training. Their level of experience, expectations and opinions might differ from students from the second to fourth level of training. It is interesting to note that the number of fourth year (B.Tech degree) enrolments for 2010 is 7.80 per cent higher, which might be due to the fact that they are satisfied with their career choice and pursue a future in Office Management as a profession. Possible other reasons may be due to the fact that they do not find a vacant position in industry or on the other hand that the industry is more acceptable to males as Office Managers which is a positive reality for the Office Management industry.

**Section B: Perceptions and Open Ended questions**

Male office management learners were requested to complete Section B by selecting suitable opinions from the scales listed on the questionnaire. The aim was to determine their views, opinions and outcomes and to draw evident conclusions from the results by comparing their unique profile with perceptions as identified in various literature sources. Female learners were not included in the study.

**Expectations regarding fellow students being mostly female**

The majority (2002: 48.28 per cent and 2010: 53.97 per cent) of the samples replied that they were well aware of the fact that the career choice they have made is currently regarded as a female-dominated profession. It is furthermore evident that 46.55 per cent (2002) of the respondents did not know that they were entering a female-dominated environment, which can related directly to the level of career guidance in secondary schools. A decrease of 11.63 per cent in the results for 2010 indicated that they were not aware of the fact that the majority of the registered learners are females. This may reflect on the level of career guidance in secondary schools, or due to the fact that they have prior knowledge regarding the environment which is currently still gender-orientated. By comparing the outcomes of the above-mentioned perception, approximately half of the male learners (2002: 47.37 per cent and 2010: 50.00 per cent) indicated that they have “neutral” feelings about the fact that most of their fellow students are females (see Figure 2 below). It can therefore be accepted that the majority of male learners does not feel intimidated by the opposite gender in their academic environment.

Figure : Expectations regarding the gender of their fellow learners

**Pride in choice to follow a career in Office Management & Technology**

This question aimed at determining the learners’ perspective on their career choice. There is a decrease of 8.94 per cent in the results obtained if compared the results of 2002 (61.40 percent) and 2010 (52.46 per cent). The number of respondents indicating that they feel unsure about the question pertain their pride in their career choice remained the same for the indicated periods. A significant difference (2002: 8 respondents and 2010: 14 respondents) resulted from the number of respondents indicating that they are not proud at their selected career choice of 8.91 per cent. Figure 3 display the various results obtained:

Figure : Pride in their career choice

**TABLE 3 - Level of Learners indicating their perception regarding pride in their career choice**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level of training** | **Yes %** | | **Unsure %** | | **No %** | |
| **2002**  **(*n*=58)** | **2010**  **(*n*=63)** | **2002**  **(*n*=58)** | **2010**  **(*n*=63)** | **2002**  **(*n*=58)** | **2010**  **(*n*=63)** |
| 1 | 51.85 | 50.00 | 22.22 | 21.88 | 25.93 | 28.13 |
| 2 | 46.15 | 55.56 | 46.15 | 33.33 | 7.69 | 11.11 |
| 3 | 87.50 | 50.00 | 12.50 | 28.57 | 0.00 | 21.43 |
| 4 | 100.00 | 66.67 | 0.00 | 16.69 | 0.00 | 16.67 |

Half of the first level learners (2002: 51.85 per cent and 2010: 50.00 per cent) indicated that they are proud of their choice of occupation. It must be kept in mind that their expectations of their future careers may be very high, due to ignorance or as a result of poor career guidance offered in their secondary school educational period. Equal numbers of respondents (46.15 per cent) of second level learners are either proud or “unsure” or about their feelings and the significant majority of third year level learners (87.50 per cent) replied that they are proud of their career choice (refer to Table 3). These learners may be regarded as more mature and more convinced that they have made the best occupational choice. Although 100.00 per cent of the respondents indicated that they are proud of their career choice, is it important to note that during 2002, only one student was registered for the B.Tech degree. During 2010, the total registered students increased to 6 students. The third level respondents indicated with 87.50 per cent in 2002 that they are proud of their career choice, whereas a significant decrease of 37.50 per cent (2010: 50.00 per cent) were sure about their level of pride for their career choice. This may be the as a result of several external factors, for example a more mature type of student, peer pressure from friends studying other more challenging courses, or the influence of more advanced technology which they had prior knowledge of due to ever-changing devices (e.g. mobile telephones, iPods, Sony™ Play stations, Internet). In comparison to the level of technology available, the student of today, have much more exposure than those of eight years ago.

An increase of 21.43 per cent of the third level and 16.67 per cent of the fourth level students are not proud of their career choice. The same reasons as mentioned above might be applicable.

It can be concluded that a relative half of the 2002 as well as the 2010 respondents from all four levels are proud of their career choice and this is further supported by the fact that the majority has never considered pursuing another career.

**What influenced respondents to follow a career as office manager**

The respondents had to indicate from the list of indicators, what motivated them pursuing a career as an office manager. They had the option to select more than one from the selection. Table 4 supplies the results of the above-mentioned question:

**TABLE 4 - Factors influencing learners to pursue a career as an office manager**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **2002** | | **2010** | |
| **Frequency** | **%** | **Frequency** | **%** |
| Television, radio or magazine advertisements | 12 | 100 | 6 | 100 |
| Friend/s following this career path | 6 | 100 | 11 | 100 |
| Older brother/sister completed/busy completing this career path | 4 | 100 | 5 | 100 |
| Only course at the University of Technology that you could follow with your Grade 12 results | 9 | 100 | 15 | 100 |
| Good career opportunities | 19 | 100 | 23 | 100 |
| Always wanted to be an office manager | 19 | 100 | 7 | 100 |
| Good money | 3 | 100 | 3 | 100 |
| Other | 17 | 100 | 16 | 100 |

The above-mentioned results indicate that 19 respondents have chosen this career because of perceived good career opportunities and 19 respondents indicated that they have always wanted to be an office manager (both from the results obtained in 2002). The second highest ranking by focusing on the data from 2002 is the “other” option. It is in relation the same number of respondents who marked the “other” option from the respondents completing the questionnaire in 2010. The two main reasons why respondents selected this option were (a) all the other courses offered at the tertiary institution were full and (b) inadequate career guidance offered by the career advisors of the institute for higher education (as indicated by the respondents who have selected the “other” option). The majority of comments received is summarised above. The number of respondents who marked the first option relating to the media in different forms, decreased by 50 per cent, and could probably indicate directly that the career choice for Office Managers is not advertised as it should have been, as multimedia can form a handy tool to convey messages to the masses. Five more respondents indicated in the 2010 results, that friends, who followed this particular career path, influenced them on making a career choice in the Office Management environment.

Another significant difference (2002: 9 and 2010: 15) is noticeable in the question relating to the fact that it was the only course at this institution that they could follow with their Grade 12 results as well as the fact that they have not passed Grade 12 with university exemption. A possible reason might be that they have again not received the level of career guidance needed to make decisions with regard to the subjects to select for certain career choices before entering Grade 10.

The question which asked the reason for their decision why they chose Office Management as a career, as a result of being in contact with friends following this particular career path, increased by 5 respondents (2002: 6 and 2010: 11). It may possibly indicate that through success stories of friends, their lives are also positively influenced.

Respondents in 2002 (*n=19*) indicated that they have always wanted to be an office manager. Interesting to note that in 2010, only 7 of the respondents indicated that this particular career choice is what they have always wanted to achieve. It can probably result to the fact that this profession has lost some of its credibility during the past eight years. Refer to the open ended questions at the end of this article in the open ended section for possible reasons identified.

**Respondents indicating that they would choose the office management profession again**

Figure 4 below, display the stated variables with their results. The following significant differences will be highlighted individually.

Figure : Respondents who would choose the same career choice again if having the choice to do so

A positive conclusion can be made from the number of respondents indicating that lecturers only make use of the female indicators such as “she” and “hers”, which decreased by 50 per cent from 2002 (35.09 per cent) until 2010 (16.10 per cent). This may be as a result of lecturers adapting to the fact that males are entering a non-traditional male career choice.

**Awareness of pictures/illustrations of male office managers in literature**

Figure 5 below displays the results from the questionnaires as obtained in 2002 as well as in 2010. The respondents had to indicate in whether they have seen pictures and illustrations of males performing office related duties by either selecting the “Often”, “Sometimes”, “Never” or “Unsure” option. The respondents for the period 2002, have mainly indicated that they have never (51.72 per cent) seen pictures or illustrations of males performing the Office Managerial duties in books, textbooks or other media before. The results for 2010, changed slightly, with 38.71 per cent of the respondents replied that they have seen pictures at one stage or the other. A total of 30.65 per cent of the 2010 respondents chose the “Never” statement. In both the periods from which the questionnaires were distributed, one can clearly see that the “Often” option very low is, with the exception of “Unsure” option from 2002 (10.35). This concludes to the fact that there are not enough pictures with the male Office Manager as representative of this profession in literature sources. There is much to do to balance the inequality that is still reflected in literature.

Figure : Pictures of male Office Managers in literature

**Level of career guidance received at secondary school level**

Respondents had the option to mark more that one applicable variable. Table 5 indicates the distribution of opinions experienced:

**TABLE 5 - Level of career guidance at secondary school level**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Results: 2002** | | **Results: 2010** | |
| **Frequency** | **%** | **Frequency** | **%** |
| No career guidance  Inadequate information received  Most of the learners received the same information  Career guidance was no priority to the teachers  Received valuable career guidance  Other | 9  23  20  6  18  6 | 100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00 | 14  18  22  15  10  3 | 100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00  100.00 |

It is evident from the table above that career guidance at secondary school level is not a priority to educators. Only 18 respondents (from 2002) indicated that the level of career guidance that they have received was valuable to their future. Surprisingly, the number of respondents decreased to only 10 in 2010 indicated that they have received valuable guidance. One should expect that the level of career guidance offered in secondary schools should improve with the years, as more and more teachers become skilled and improved their qualifications in the South African environment. People typically make their first career-related decisions during adolescence. Such decisions may have lifelong consequences for the individual’s vocational future, psychological wellbeing, health and social acceptance (Gati & Saka, 2001:331). Guidance at secondary education level can play a key role in fostering efficiency in the allocation and use of human resources and in fostering social equality in terms of access to educational and vocational opportunities. It is furthermore evident that the possibility exist that educators in secondary schools teaching learners (98.28 per cent of the respondents) from historically disadvantaged schools, do not have the necessary skills or sufficient knowledge to offer career guidance. The number of respondents indicated that they have not received any career guidance has increased from 9 (in 2002) to 14 (in 2010). This prove the statement made earlier with regard to the offering of career guidance in secondary schools.

The majority of the South African youth leave school with only a vague knowledge of employment opportunities and with little insight as to the most appropriate career direction for their abilities, interests and personality.

A large number of school-leavers receive no training at all beyond secondary schools’ exit levels and become virtually unemployable. And yet, if pointed in the correct direction, could have become assets to the South African economy and workforce. Those school-leavers who believe that their only chance of future employment, with current unemployment at around 40%, is gaining some qualification, undertake tertiary education, irrespective of their suitability for the subjects chosen. This is evident from the number of respondents indicating that they have only enrolled for the National Diploma or Degree in Office Management and Technology, because they had the wrong subjects for various specialised courses offered, or they were rejected at the other courses, because they were already fully booked. It is thus, not surprising that our current drop-out rate for first year tertiary students stands at 35 per cent. It is at this point that the first of the wasted costs are incurred, especially by companies giving bursaries to these students to uphold the promise by the government that everybody is entitled to education.

**Usage of only female identifications (“she” or “hers”) in lecture rooms**

Figure 5 below indicates the results of the respondents who are of the opinion that lecturers do refer to all the students during the contact time as being all female.

Figure : Only using female indicators in lecture rooms

Results obtained from the data in 2002, indicated that 21.05 per cent of the students have indicated that lecturers involved in their training, very often refer to the students as all being female. This result dropped drastically in 2010, which is only 6.31 per cent. This provides evidence that lecturers are also noticing and respecting the fact that more male Office Management learners are entering the Office Management arena. On the other hand, did the results obtained for the “sometimes” category, drastically improved from 2002 (17.54 per cent) and 2010 (36.07 per cent), which is the opposite from the results described above. It is furthermore positive to note that in 2002, 47.37 per cent indicated that lecturers never uses only the female gender indicator, whereas in 2010, only 21.56 per cent marked this particular selection, which result to the statement that lecturers are adapting to the changing environment and profile of the students that they lecture.

**Open-ended questions**

Male learners from the sample (2002: *n*=58 and 2010: *n*=63) were requested to firstly provide reasons if they have considered changing the career course they are currently occupied in and secondly, to indicate where they visualise themselves in ten years’ time. A summary of opinions (used as direct quotes) listed by the majority of respondents are indicated below were taken directly from both 2002 as well as 2010:

***Possible reasons for having considered career changes***

* “Learners indicate that they have considered making a change because of the inclusion of Legal Practice I and II as compulsory subjects”. (This concern was raised in 2002, but is not the case anymore, because the fact that it was not an optional/choice subject anymore. Students can now choose between Mercantile Law, Personnel Management, Financial Accounting and Legal Practice).
* “This course does not correlate with my high school subject choices”.
* “I was forced by the system to study this – I absolutely hate every moment of it”.
* “Males are being discriminated to [sic] in this occupation mainly because it is female-dominated and there are only a few male office managers operating in trade and industry”.
* “The name of the instructional programme, “Office Management and Technology” is misleading”.
* I always feel inferior when I have a social where there is students (males) studying other courses which is more masculine. I constantly feel as if I am being compared by the other males”.
* “Office Management and Technology was the only instructional programme admissible with grade 12 subjects and the concomitant results obtained”.
* “This instructional programme is not challenging”.
* “After completing this instructional programme, it will be a struggle to find work because it is mostly considered for women”.
* “This instructional programme is not meant for male learners”.
* “Changing to a different instructional programme is often a consideration because it does not comply with a male personality and results in uncomfortable feelings”.
* “It leads to feelings of intimidation because of the minority of males finding themselves in a female dominated instructional programme”.
* “Most managers are male and they employ prefer to employ females. A female manager will not employ male office managers”.
* “I will rather study “something” than sitting at home”.
* “Both my parents have hot positions of authority in their working environments. I feel ashamed of my choice”.

*Where respondents visualise themselves regarding their professions in ten years’ time*

* “Managing Director and founder of a very successful company”.
* “A leader in a company making decisions”.
* “Owning my own business”.
* “Executive secretary or professional assistant”.
* “Any position higher than a secretary taking orders from someone else”.
* “Owner of a company with a personal secretary”.
* “Being an office manager in a big company”.
* “Studying another instructional programme because there is no future for males in this profession”.
* “Following my dream”.

In conclusion, male learners were very honest in supplying possible reasons for considering a change in the instructional programme they are studying. It is evident from the above-mentioned reasons that there is a measure of despondency on their side and that they still experience office management as a female-dominated environment, although they have no experience in the corporate arena. They experience female domination in the lecture rooms and they feel threatened by being the minority. When considering their expectations of the future, it is positive to indicate that those who are convinced that they have made the best career selection do visualise a prosperous future in this profession, although they do not have any experience in the corporate environment. It is important to notice that the list containing reasons for having considered a career change (negative statements), exceed the section, which reflect where the respondents see themselves in ten years’ time (positive statements).

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to this study initially done in 2002, and repeated again in 2010, gender discrimination definitely had an effect on the various intrinsic as well as extrinsic barriers experienced by male office management learners in higher education, pursuing a profession in a non-traditional male occupational environment. On the basis of the study, is it proposed that the fallacies that exist concerning the preferred gender for the office management profession, be replaced by fair and equal opportunities in the higher educational arena.

One could argue that each individual has God-given unique personalities, talents, abilities and characteristics. If males consider careers in a traditionally female-dominated occupation, other individuals in the working environment should ideally not stereotype them without awarding fair opportunities of substantiation. Although one may tend to stereotype careers according to a single gender, managers, colleagues and clients need to accept a positive paradigm shift towards males following an occupation in a non-traditional profession. The perception, according to which we classify occupations into either male or female careers, should rather be substituted with a contemporary stance that any gender is suited for any career, regardless of the type of career.

A diploma or degree in Office Management & Technology should not be an exclusively female domain. Selecting female learners only would amount to discrimination. Males cannot be discouraged to pursue a career once regarded as a profession suitable for females exclusively. There is a need for males in the administrative environment, considering the opinions and views of female office managers as well as managers, as discussed in the open-ended question section.

Male office management learners in higher education experience great difficulties as they represent a minority. Their views are mostly negative, with only a few positive opinions. Males in this field experience discrimination purely because they are in the minority (Pringle, 1993:138). One must bear in mind that a significant majority of respondents indicated that they decided upon a career as an office manager, mainly because all the other instructional programmes were filled and secondly, because they received inadequate career guidance at that particular HEI (Higher Educational Institutions). Learners also experience a lack of career guidance in secondary schools. The ideal situation would be to see a marked improvement regarding career guidance that is offered in secondary schools over the period of eight years. They indicated that periods are indeed allocated on their timetable for career guidance, but that the information they have received was inadequate. When prospective learners approach the HEI of their choice, they find it very difficult to select a career, due to their restricted frame of reference regarding occupational choices. Another obstacle that male learners experience is their choice of Grade 12 subjects. They are limited to a smaller variety of occupational choices, because they did not study Mathematics, Accounting and Physical Science as secondary school subjects prior to the period of 2009. Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy is now a compulsory subject for all learners from Grade 10 to Grade 12. It is still too early to see exactly what the effect will be on the wider variety of careers that can be selected from. It is possible that either they did not have teachers teaching the above-mentioned subjects, or they have selected subjects viewed by them as “easier”. The results of making Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy compulsory will only be available after approximately 5 years when the Department of Education will be able to reflect scientifically if there is a positive or a negative output.

It is a well-known fact obtained from literature as well as from the questionnaires regarding career guidance that within South African public educational systems, there is presently inadequate provision for vocational guidance or assessment of individual learners. The majority of the your adolescents in the current South African structure, leave school with only a vague knowledge of employment opportunities and with little or no insight as to the most appropriate career directions for their individual abilities, personalities as well as interests.

Training of male office management learners

Emphasis needs to be placed on the value of adequate career guidance at secondary school level. This can be enhanced by implementing the following:

* Prospective students must be screened towards the end of their Grade 9 year, with regard to subject choices, their personal profile must be determined, what they have an interest in, possible individual traits as well as their working characteristics. A comprehensive guide or booklet must be supplied to each individual in order to do proper research about various kinds of careers available. This process needs to be repeated at the beginning of their Grade 12 year, in order to streamline possible career options that they can select from. Tested students must then have the responsibility to research various kinds of careers that they are interested in, as well as have an aptitude for. Finally, their broad choices have to be narrowed to what they would succeed in.
* The media should focus on outlining different career possibilities and choices to learners who do not receive any level of career guidance, by means of infomercials and advertisements compiled in a very user-friendly manner.
* Bearing in mind that certain secondary schools are situated in remote areas in South Africa where there are no teachers to supply career guidance, brochures on different careers should be distributed to all secondary schools in the country. To enable learners to enter the HEI environment based on prior knowledge of what they can study with their Grade 12 subjects, teachers should explain those brochures to the learners. This will also guide learners when they have to select subjects in Grade 10.
* The Department of Education should train a set of dynamic, rotating teachers to supply career guidance to all secondary school learners. All the learners will then receive the same quality of information from highly skilled teachers who will be able to assist the learner to make the best occupational choice. Their aim should also be to broaden the learners’ horizons regarding different professional career choices.
* When providing career guidance at secondary school level, it needs to be emphasised that occupations are no longer classified as being best suited to either males or females. Male and female learners will then grow up with the perception that occupations are not gender-specific, but rather personal choices, bearing in mind each individual’s abilities and interests. By the time secondary learners enrol for a diploma or degree in HE, male and female learners will then not discriminate against an individual enrolling for a career in a so-called non-traditionally gender specific occupation.
* Female office management learners should be made aware of the fact that their views should not be discriminatory towards the male learners in administrative field.
* Learners should be in a position to make a selection between two major instructional offerings. Learners find it difficult to master Legal Practice I and II, which is a compulsory instructional offering for the National Diploma: Office Management and Technology. It should be recommended that Legal Practice be regarded as an optional instructional offering and a compulsory instructional programme at certain higher institutions (for example Tshwane University of Technology). A bridging course could be implemented regarding Legal Practice in order to address this problem. This is now a problem of the past, as the above-mentioned subject is now part of a list of choice subjects.
* Individuals should have the opportunity to decide upon the profession of their choice, without being influenced by perceptions of what is appropriate for a specific gender.
* Furthermore, HEIs will have to compile their prospectuses and learning material in such a way that male learners do not experience discrimination from reading information regarding the career in which they are interested.
* It is of the utmost importance that HEIs be made aware of the negative attitude of industry concerning the appointment of male learners in Office Management & Technology and that steps be taken to rectify the situation well in advance.

**REFERENCES**

**Anon.** 1996. Male secretaries: a minority but no longer a novelty*.* [Available on Internet: <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n10_v51/ai_18544357/> downloaded on 2010-02-03.]

**Anon.** 2002a. *Interview with the male secretary.* [Available on Internet:] <http://www.artandleisure.com/leisure/sanches/secretary/male.html> [Date of access: 16 September 2002].

**Anon.** 2002b. *Non-traditional students & non-traditional careers.* [Available on Internet:] http://www.cv.cc.va.us/Brochures/BrochureNonTrad.htm [Date of access: 30 September 2002].

**Brown, S.** 2010. Award convener of the Association for Office Professional of South Africa. Statement to the authors, 3 February. Pretoria.

**Brussels.** 2005. Commission staff working paper: Career guidance: A handbook for policy makers. Council of the European Union, 6872/05, EDUC 37, SOC 98, 1 March 2005.

**Calder, R.** 2010. Male secretaries the new status symbol*.* [Internet: <http://www.girl.com.au/male-secretaries.htm> downloaded on 2010-01-28.]

**Cambridge, D**. 2002. Male secretaries*.* [Internet: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2002/jul/29/careers.jobsadvice7> downloaded on 2010-01-28.]

***Collins’ cobuild*** 1999. *Learners’ dictionary*. London: HarperCollins.

**Entwistle, M.** 2004. Women only? An exploration of the place of men within nursing. Master of Arts (Applied), Victoria University, Wellington.

**Gaskel, J.** 1992. *Gender matters from school to work*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

**Golombok, S. & Fivush, R.** 1994. *Gender development.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Henson, K.D. & Rogers, J.K.** 2001. “Why Marcia you’ve changed!” Male clerical temporary workers doing masculinity in feminised occupations. *Gender & Society* 15(2):218-238, April.

**Heppner, MJ & Heppner, PP.** 2009. On men and work: taking the road less travelled. *Journal of Career Development* 36 (1):49-67.

**London, M.** 1998. C*areer barriers: how people experience, overcome, and avoid failure.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

**Maree, J.C.** 2009. Negotiating 21st century challenges in career counselling at South African institutions of higher education: Can this be done and, if so, how? *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23 (3):429–435.

**Medved, C.** 2009. Gender crossing, work-family configurations and career outcomes. [Internet: <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=15464&area=All> downloaded on 2010-01-18.]

**Palmius, W & Torsten, Y.** 1997. Miss Sture and other masters. [Internet: <http://web.telia.com/~u85824595/froken_sture.pdf> downloaded on 2010-01-27.]

**Perry, J.C.** 2009. Career counselling with secondary school-aged youth: Directions for theory, research, and practice. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23 (3):482–504.

**Pringle, R.** 1993. Male Secretaries. *In* Williams, C.L., *ed*. *Doing “women’s work”: Men in non-traditional occupations*. Newbury Park: Sage, pp. 128-167.

**Rudolph, MA.** 2008. Librarians in film: a changing stereotype. Master’s Paper, University of North Carolina, North Carolina.

**Simpson, R.** 2004. Masculinity at work: the experiences of men in female dominated occupations. *Work, Employment and Society* 18(2):349-368.

**Skuratowics, E & Hunter, LW.** 2004. Where do women’s jobs come from? Job segregation in an American Bank. *Work and Occupations* 31(1):73-110.

**Sultana, R.G. & Watts, A.G.** 2006. Career Guidance in Public Employment Services across Europe. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* 6: 29–46.

**Van Antwerpen, S. & Ferreira, E.J.** 2010. Males in predominantly female-dominated positions: a South African perspective. Paper delivered at The Winelands Conference (12: 2010: Stellenbosch).

**Walters, S., Watts, A.G. & Flederman, P.** 2009. Navigating the National Qualifications Framework (NQF): The role of career guidance. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23 (3):561–574.

**Watson, M. & McMahon, M.** 2009. Career counselling in South African higher education: Moving forward systemically and qualitatively. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23 (3):470–481.

**Watts, A.G**. 1996. The changing place of career guidance in schools. *European Education* 28(2):21-29, Summer.

**Yuracko, KA.** 2009. The antidiscrimination paradox: why sex before race? North-Western University School of Law, Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Paper No. 09-09. Chicago.