Universität Basel

Research Project

On identities, relational work and gender in Business: a linguistic case study of agile IT.

Project funded by own resources

Project title On identities, relational work and gender in Business: a linguistic case study of agile IT.
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Whilst it has been widely acknowledged in the form of policy changes and public campaigns that increasing diversity in IT through inclusion of women is an ongoing priority, recent studies of IT workplaces in Europe and the US have found recurrent themes of gender discrimination cutting across different cultural contexts including Switzerland and the UK. Conversely, agile methodologies are becoming the norm for software development and project management in IT. Indeed it has been argued that these may increase the space for diversity and reduce barriers for women; for example through their focus on non-hierarchical, collaborative and iterative ways of working in cross-functional teams. This does not concur with recent studies into prevailing barriers, and points to the fact that these phenomena are not yet sufficiently understood by academic research.

Linguistic analysis can provide the level of complexity and detail that is needed to understand and address these issues sustainably. However, the linguistic practices characterising agile methodologies remain largely under-researched. This study aims to address this gap through a case study of two Swiss and two UK IT companies. The linguistic practices that characterise and to some extent construct IT workplaces as gendered will be investigated considering both macro-level categories related to gender and culture at work, as well as micro-level discursive strategies in interaction. Combining frameworks from research into identity construction, face, and relational work in professional communication will allow for critical analysis of how gendered practices and identities are enacted in such settings. The study will draw on multiple data sources including recordings of team and one-to-one meetings and semi-structured interviews; as well as computer-mediated tools. Qualitative analysis of multiple case studies will allow exploring cross-cutting themes and making cross-case observations to further develop academic theory.

Expected results of the study include enhanced understanding of linguistic practices in collaborative, non-hierarchical work environments such as agile IT teams; including the complexities of how such workplaces may be constructed as gendered on macro-and micro-levels. The study will thus contribute to conceptualisations of gender in academic research; through deploying novel frameworks zooming in at the interface of identity construction, relational work, and face; it will allow further theorising about the intricate relationship between these theoretical concepts as applied in business interaction.

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