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Structure and trends of women's employment in the UK

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Abstract

Women form 44% of the working population in the UK, and the proportion is rising, with lower unemployment for women than for men. Manufacturing only represents 14% of the labour market and already contains a high proportion of women in many industry sectors, and their entry is welcomed at all levels. These are no barriers to entry: general communication, interpersonal group working and problem solving skills are increasingly seen as the key skills of the future, not technical skills.

Sources

The primary sources for employment data in the UK are the UK *National Accounts*¹, which present a ten year historic record, *Social Trends*², which augments this with some longer term statistics and projections, and which gives a more thorough analysis of gender and ethnic differences, and the *Britain's Flexible Labour Market: What Next?*³, a 1997 Department of Education and Employment Study analysing current trends and in particular analysing future skill needs.

Statistics

In the decade 1985-1995 manufacturing employment has declined from 5 million to 3.9 million and is continuing to decline, whilst all other major employment sectors have increased: wholesale and retail, repairs, hotels and restaurants - 4.4 million to 4.9 million; financial intermediation, real estate, renting and business activities - 2.8 million to 3.6 million, and education, health and social work - 3.7 million to 4.4 million. For a working population of 28 million people, manufacturing now only represent 14% of employment, and more than half of that is in the offices, not employment on the factory floor. Equally striking are the figures for agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing which together at 314 thousand represent just over 1% of the working population and declining. Mining of coal and nuclear fuel, which from 1985 to 1995 has dropped from 216 thousand to 15 thousand - i.e. has almost disappeared - and is still falling. These figures simply emphasise the extent to which Britain is now a service economy.

Looking at gender differences, women now constitute 44% of the labour market and this is increasing. 1.3 million of the probable 1.5 million new entrants into the labour market between 1993 and 2006 are expected to be women, but already 83% of the women employed are employed in the service industries (figure 1). Also in the 25 - 54 age group in mid 1997 fe-

¹ HUMPHRIES, S. (ed.) *United Kingdom National Accounts*. (HMSO,1996)

² CHURCH, J. (ed.) *Social Trends 27*. (HSMO,1997)

³ RATAJAN,A., VAN EUPEN, P. & JASPERS, A., *Britain's Flexible Labour Market: What next?* (CREATE,1997)

male unemployment was only 3.3% as against 8.5% male unemployment. To further put this in perspective, while in 1995 white unemployment was approximately 8%, unemployment amongst black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani members of the labour market was over 25%.

Figure 1

Women in the Labour Force: Key Trends

- 1) Increased proportion of the workforce - From 37% in 1971 to 44% in 1994. Expected to be 46% of the labour force in 2006.
- 2) High proportion of new entrant - Women are expected to make up 1.3 million of the 1.5 million new entrants to the labour force over the period 1993 to 2006.
- 3) Increased activity rates - For women aged 16 and over from 50% in 1986 to 55% in 2001. For 35 to 44 year olds increase from 76% in 1991 to 81% in 2001.
- 4) Faster return to work - In 1979, of all women who worked during pregnancy, 24% were in work and 14% were looking for work within 8 to 9 months of the birth. By 1988 the figures were 45% in work and 20% looking for work.
- 5) Later childbirth - 36% of births to women aged 25 to 29.
- 6) More part-time work - In 1971 14% of the workforce worked part-time (compared to only 6% of male employment).
- 7) Occupational segregation - 83% of women in the Service industries compared to 56% of men.
- 8) Increased self-employment - Number of women up from 693,000 in 1984 to 800,000 in 1993 (a rise from 24% to 26% of all self-employed people).
- 9) Older workforce - By 2001 34% of workforce over 45. Rise of 2.4 million in workforce aged 35 to 54 over period 1993 to 2006 and decline of 1.6 million in workforce under 35 over this period.

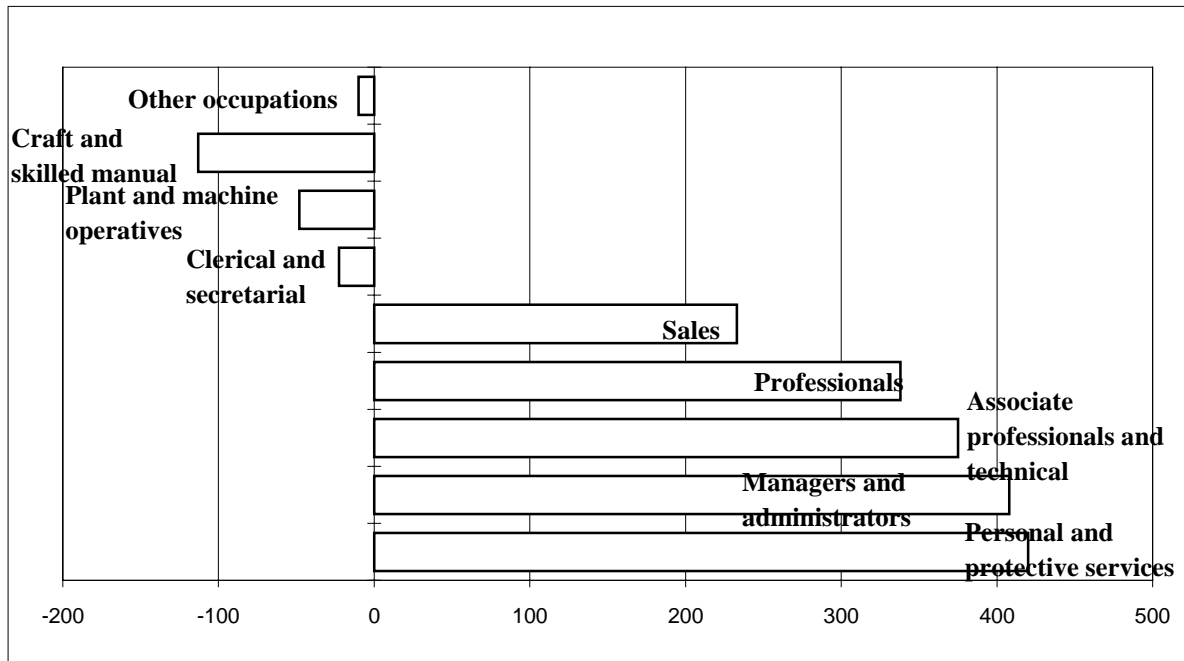
Source: GHN (1995)

Also the trends favour women. Consistent with the high percentage of female employment in the services sector and within the offices in the manufacturing sector, a breakdown of employment into different trades shows 32% of men employed as plant and machinery operatives or in craft or related trades, whilst only 7% of women are so employed. These trades are expected to see a decline of approximately 200 thousand jobs in the decade 1996 - 2006, compared to vastly expanding job opportunities elsewhere (figure 2), for which females already have a higher proportion of the necessary non-manual skills than males.

Figure 2

Changes in employment: by occupation, 1996 to 2006

United Kingdom
Thousands



1 - 1996-based projections

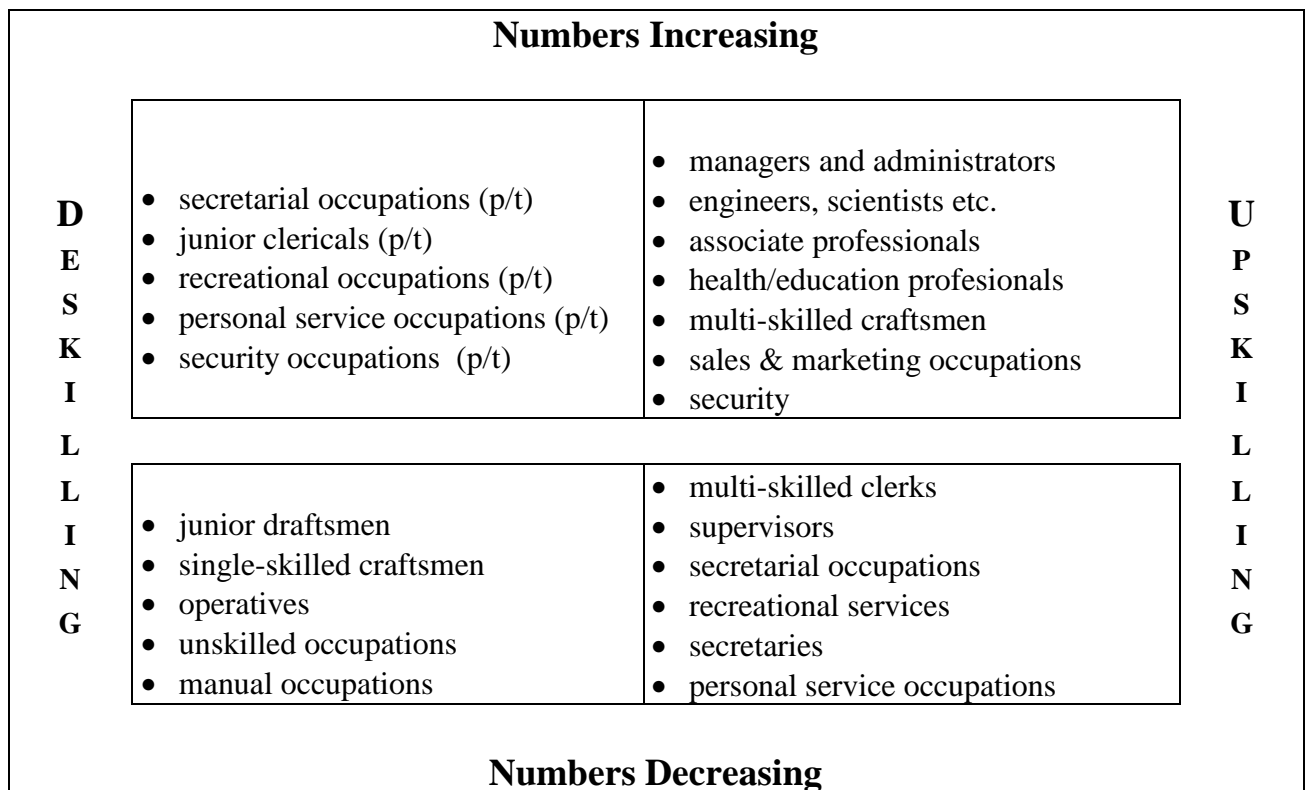
Source: Business Strategies Limited

Skills

These trends can be summed into areas of increase and decrease both on industries and occupation, which generates a map of changes in broad occupation groups (figure 3). These changes translate into a focus on the development of communication, inter-personal group working, learning and problem solving skills in which general numeracy, and also familiarity with using computers to handle and distribute information, play a supportive role, but are not of high priority. General personal skills are seen as of much higher importance and indeed of twelve skills seen as core skills for graduates, IT ranks last. The list dominated by the 'soft' personal attributes that give the flexibility required by today's changing organisations.

Figure 3

Changes in Broad Occupational Groups



Source: Rajan (1992)

The change in the nature of organisations to being open, communicative networks rather than formal hierarchies entirely depends on these soft skills (figure4), and whilst these are aided by information technology, the improvements in information technology itself steadily move it towards easy use-ability. Features such as the presentation of forms on screens, and the generation of shared record within a computer system, can be identified as the supportive aspects of IT. But these do not have to be learnt in any formal way in advance and indeed cannot be learnt in any formal way in advance, because they only develop slowly, being inseparable from the wider development of teams, developing shared approaches to doing to things in

which the appropriate information system gets developed as a tool. Anybody who has the focus on the technology has got the focus wrong. Company specific of industry specific training may be given in particular techniques, along with the developing a broader educational awareness of the products and processes a company is involved in, all underpinned by the coaching-style development of personal competence in the softer skills that enable the company to be responsive, dynamic and interactive with its market. These skills are seen as the core skills whatever type of company is involved, because manufacturing itself is increasingly being viewed as offering a service to its customers just like any other service, with technical competence obviously being necessary but with attentiveness and responsiveness being paramount.

Figure 4

Impact of IT on Structures, Practices and Ethos

	Closed Hierarchy		Open Networked Organisation
Structure	hierarchical	⇒	horizontal
Scope	internal/closed	⇒	external/open
Resource focus	capital	⇒	human, information
State	static, stable	⇒	dynamic, changing
Personnel focus	managers	⇒	professionals
Work location	factory, office	⇒	mobile workstation
Key drivers	reward and punishment	⇒	commitment
Direction	management commands	⇒	self-management
Basis of action	control	⇒	empowerment to act
Individual motivation	satisfy superiors	⇒	achieve goals
Learning	specific skills	⇒	broader competencies
Basis for compensation	position in hierarchy	⇒	competence, performance
Relationships	competitive	⇒	co-operative
Employee attitude	detachment	⇒	identification
Dominant requirements	sound management	⇒	leadership

Source: Adapted from Tapscott and Caston (1993)

Attitude

None of these trends work against women's employment prospects. In manufacturing, women have had high levels of employment in clothing production, in food and fast moving consumer goods, in electronics, in white and brown goods and in light industry generally, but women's employment is increasing in all manufacturing sectors. There has been encouragement for women to enter engineering and industry for decades, with many young women doing so. All industry sectors now have women in positions of significant responsibility. For any company, and for any professional sector, their first female entrant has been a matter of excitement and enthusiasm and considerable quiet pride in how well she is doing, combined with appreciative stories of her perceiving things differently and causing them to perceive things differently. There is professional equality and the change is considered a valuable learning experience.

Literature

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