

IT sisters doing it for themselves

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AMBITIOUS men usually find a mentor to help advance their careers, but women often lack the confidence or opportunity to do so, according to the founder of a new mentoring program for women.

"Generally you talk to career-driven men and they will talk about mentors - you don't get that from senior women," says Vanessa Giannos, a committee member of Females in Information Technology and Telecommunications (FITT), and one of the architects of the mentoring program.

"You find there is a lack of confidence and they do not know who to go to."

Karen Davis, who works for an insurance company in Sydney, was one of the first young female information technology professionals to sign up to the program. She says she wants to use it to improve her personal skills and self-confidence.

"I think it will be beneficial to get together with other women in the industry and hear their perspectives," Ms Davis says. "Experience counts for a lot. I am hoping to develop my personal skills, not so much my technical skills."

Ms Davis, 25, has a bachelor of science in information systems development under her belt, and two years' experience as a software developer. But she feels she now needs to expand her repertoire of soft skills and business nous to progress her career. She also hopes to find a "sounding board" mentor to bounce ideas off.

According to FITT, only 20 per cent of Australia's ICT workforce is female - and those statistics could get worse unless women are encouraged to develop and extend their careers in ICT.

Maggie Alexander, a founding member of FITT, says the new program recognises that encouraging more female participation in ICT is not just about attracting new employees also but retaining existing ones. "A lot of women get to the 40 mark and say, 'what am I doing?'," she says, adding that the mentoring program should help reveal how women can develop career paths in.

When FITT surveyed its membership to attempt to understand the sorts of programs women ICT workers would benefit most from, 38 per cent of respondents said that they felt less equipped to manage and negotiate their careers than their male peers.

Such is the enthusiasm for the initiative that the trial mentoring program, due to start in July, is already oversubscribed, but Ms Giannos admits that "the biggest problem we have is finding mentors".

According to Ms Giannos, who is also in charge of people development and culture at start-up IT services business Gizmo, FITT is ideally seeking mentors with a technical bent, although it is also keen to hear from "senior women in finance or marketing with five years or more experience. Ideally we'd like senior women mentors, but they could be men," she adds.

Aware that mentoring programs can fail if not properly scoped, Ms Giannos says that an important part of the FITT initiative is that "the mentor and mentee have a mentoring contract", which would set out the minimum expectations. These include a face-to-face meeting at least once a month.

Besides establishing what the pair would discuss, and issues of importance to the mentee, it would set out clearly what wasn't up for discussion - for example, personal issues.

"This is so that everyone understands exactly what we are achieving," Ms Giannossays.

Initially the FITT mentoring contracts are expected to last for six months but could be extended if both mentor and mentee were keen.

Prior to the mentoring program, FITT will run a one-day workshop intended to help fast-track the benefits.

This will involve some "self-analysis" designed to help mentees identify what they want to achieve through the mentoring program.