a subjective reflection

THE WOMAN PROGRAMMER

by VALERIE ROCKMAEL, News Editor

As the demand for qualified programmers draws wider public attention, an increasing number of women are directing their résumés at the data processing community. Their motivation for a programming career stems from the belief that this is one industry in which women may enjoy complete equality and an above average salary.

The fact that prejudice exists against women in business is generally evident but whether it has been overcome in the programming profession or simply underplayed because of current needs is a matter for conjecture.

As a rule, employment practice in edp places greater emphasis on education and experience rather than on the applicant's sex, and while some companies are still hesitant at hiring women programmers, a few have expressed a preference for the distaff side. They have found that women are less aggressive and more content to remain in one position. Many women choose not to advance in position and feel that even if they were offered a promotion to a supervisory capacity, they would refuse the job because it is not as important for them to have higher salaries and the prestige of an impressive title. Many women prefer "less strain" and would rather not "stand off" from their fellow workers.

Others feel that promotion is a threat to their femininity and that as supervisors they will manifest certain traits which are characterized as masculine. Men, of course, readily concur with this position.

Women also consider fringe benefits of more importance than their male peers and are more prone to remain on a job if they are reasonably content, regardless of a lack of advancement. They also tend to maintain their original geographic roots and are less willing to travel or change job locations, particularly if they are married or engaged. For these reasons there is a considerably lower turnover rate in women programmers and as a result, the initial investment in training pays a greater dividend for their employees.

Intuitive generalizations made by some personnel managers are that women have greater patience than men and are better at details, two prerequisites for the allegedly successful programmer. On the subject of whether women possess logical, analytical minds the controversy becomes more intense.

It is also felt that women have a humanizing influence, make working conditions more pleasant, and even add to the decor of an office. The notion that female programmers are dull, drab, lipstickless creatures is grossly erroneous.

As to recruitment of female programmers, present tactics and dissemination of literature about the field leaves much to be desired. Of the many companies distributing career brochures about this field only a few have prepared special literature directed at women.

Newspaper and magazine ads are generally oriented toward men, although women applicants are frequently accepted. In the majority of cases however, there is no statement in the advertisement indicating this fact.

If prejudice against women programmers may be pinpointed in the development of a career it is most likely to occur in the consideration of a promotion. It is felt that a great many men as well as women resent supervision by a woman. In some cases, a woman might be chosen over a man of equal ability to advance to an assistant supervisor's job since it is often felt that the woman will be less of a threat to the male supervisor's position.

The paradox of prejudice against the woman programmer is apparent in her general acceptance as an instructor of programming since the female has now been widely accepted in the posture of a teacher. In other cases, a woman who is exceptional as a programmer will appear more prominently in the evaluations of her supervisors simply by virtue of her position as one of a small minority.

It is generally felt that the most undesirable category of programmers is in the female about 21 years old and unmarried. One supervisor claimed that he had a girl in this category who wrote bug-free programs early in the week but during the latter part of the week her error rate increased substantially. In the course of an interview, she stated that when she would start thinking about her social commitments for the weekend, her work suffered proportionately.