Microsoft Croatia:

Empowering girls to choose ICT @DigiGirlz

Croatia 2013- ongoing

Supporting work–life balance and addressing women's underrepresentation in the labour market: approaches and good practices in the ICT sector

Summary

DigiGirlz is one of Microsoft's 'community' programmes. It aims to invest in STEM education for young women and generate a crop of future employees who are ready for the challenges of the global economy. It aims to dispel tech industry stereotypes and motivate girls to choose a career in ICT.

One of the programme´s activities is Microsoft's *DigiGirlz Day*, a one-day event designed to improve understanding among high-school girls of what a career in technology entails, and of the opportunities available in the high-tech industry.

Throughout the DigiGirlz Day event, diverse activities are organised for high-school girls from all over of Croatia. In 2016, for example, 90 high-school girls from Varaždin, Koprivnica and Zagreb spent a day at Microsoft, where they attended lectures and workshops organised by Microsoft employees and their partner companies. In 2017, 80 high-school girls from Nova Gradiška, Novska, Ogulin and Karlovac had the same opportunity.

1. Country information — policy in context

According to EU data, the ICT sector in Croatia contributed 4.1% of the country's GDP in 2014 (Eurostat database, *Percentage of the ICT sector on GDP*, 2017). A recent analysis of the sector showed that it is growing more quickly than the Croatian economy in general.

In March 2016, there were 34,385 employees in Croatia's ICT sector, 12,803 of whom (37.2%) were women. The proportion of women has actually fallen compared with 2008, when 40.9% of the ICT workforce were women — 12,884 out of a total of 31,513 employees. While the share of women in telecommunications is close to average (38.6%) for Croatia, it remains lower in computer programing, consultancy and related activities (27.8%). Most people working in ICT are highly educated (50% of women has a university degree), and aged below 35 years (52% of women) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, 2017). Research findings from 2010 showed that in ICT the share of women in managerial positions is 28%, which is higher than share of women in managerial positions in all other sectors in Croatia, which is 15% (Ipsos Marketing, 2010).

Although growing numbers of women are enrolling in and graduating from institutions of higher education, they remain underrepresented in STEM. For example, the total number of graduates from institutions of higher education rose from 19,566 in 2006 to 33,741 in 2014, with a stable share of women — 59,3 and 59,9% respectively. At the same time, however, the share of women graduates in computing has remained largely stable — 20,9% in 2006 and 19,5% in 2014; while it increased slowly in engineering — from 13,3 to 18,7% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, 2015). In 2015, 57,3% of Croatia's 3,157 doctoral students were women; in engineering, women comprised just 32,8% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a). The data show that traditional gender stereotypes continue to have a major influence on the educational choices made by Croatian girls and boys, with

gender-stereotyped views held by parents also playing an important role (Jugović *et al*, 2016). In addition, girls' achievements in maths are negatively associated with an interaction between two factors: lower economic status and persisting stereotypes within the family — indicating that girls from disadvantaged families represent the group that is most in need of stereotype-reduction programmes (Baranović & Matić, 2014).

A 2010 survey of CEOs and owners of 200 ICT companies in Croatia showed that men and women were perceived differently in terms of their skills. While the executives perceived women as better skilled in areas such as communication, responsibility at work, organisation, customer relations, analysis, focus and creativity, they also perceived women as less flexible and less competent than men, and as slower at solving problems. And they listed among the main obstacles faced by women in ICT: a perception of the sector as male territory (24%), the preference among male employers for male 'experts' (21%); the misconception that results achieved in maths and IT by men are on average better than those of women (21%), and that women cannot devote as much time to paid work outside the family as men (6%). Interestingly, only 5% reported believing that women have low interest in ICT. Moreover, many said that a larger proportion of women in ICT would be beneficial to the sector, and that further actions are needed to increase the number of women in ICT (59%) (Ipsos Marketing, 2010).

The *Strategy for the development of women's entrepreneurship in Croatia 2014–2020*[1] aims to support women entrepreneurs. It identified a lack of supportive measures in the field of work–life balance as obstacles to women's employment — especially the lack of childcare and care for older family members — and raised the issue of the underrepresentation of women in the ICT sector, especially in leadership positions. It stressed the need to develop new family care services and models of education and training for women in business management, including in ICT.

2. Boosting the number of women in ICT: good practice

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Since the programme's launch in the USA in 2000, DigiGirlz events have gradually spread and are now held at Microsoft locations worldwide. Microsoft Croatia has been organising DigiGirlz Day since 2013. The programme's core aims in Croatia are multiple: to attract more women to STEM studies and raise the number of women working in ICT, and to break the gender-based stereotype that high-tech industries are for men only. Throughout the DigiGirlz Day event, diverse activities are organised for high-school girls from all over of Croatia. In 2016, for example, 90 high-school girls from Varaždin, Koprivnica and Zagreb spent a day at Microsoft, where they attended lectures and workshops organised by Microsoft employees and their partner companies. In 2017, 80 high-school girls from Nova Gradiška, Novska, Ogulin and Karlovac had the same opportunity.

It was Microsoft's experience with the programme that while gender-biased perceptions about male and female roles remain entrenched in Croatian society, some young girls experienced a kind of 'awakening' during these events.

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[1] http://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/resources/croatia/strategy-women-entrepreneurship-development-republic-croatia-2014-2020

Following the 2016 great DigiGirlz experience, the local team organized on April 11th 2017 a similar event in the Microsoft premises in Zagreb, attracting more than 80 girls from secondary schools from underdeveloped areas in Croatia. During a 7-hour program students familiarized themselves with modern technology, software and technology solutions and learned from successful IT managers from Microsoft and other companies about their career paths. The main messages from the event were to believe in yourself, and to aim to change the current situation and if you want a challenge, then choose a career in ICT.

Microsoft *YouthSpark* programme also aims to break stereotypes around the tech industry and give girls the opportunity to understand and experience how it feels to develop cutting-edge technology, as well as to motivate more girls to choose a career in ICT. It gives high-school girls a chance to learn about careers in technology, connect with Microsoft employees and participate in hands-on computer and technology workshops. One of the motivations behind Microsoft's involvement in this programme is concern over a future lack of ICT experts; the company sees an important potential role for women in this regard. Moreover, findings from a recent Microsoft survey involving 11,500 girls and young women aged 11 to 30 years underline the importance of the programme: most girls tended to be interested in STEM courses when they were aged 11, but their interest fell away from the age of 15.

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