Opinion: To attract more women, high-tech careers must move beyond stereotypes

By Mary Dobransky

The time has come to end the stereotypes around IT.

Take a minute to think of an industry that doesn’t involve information technology (IT). Go further: Think about an industry where IT isn’t intertwined into the core of what is being done.

Were you successful?

With technological advancements propelling unrivaled productivity, IT professionals are integral to every industry. Information technology is one of the fastest-growing U.S. industries, according to the National Center for Women in Information and Technology (NCWIT), and it is predicted that by 2018 there will be more than 1.4 million computing jobs available.

And with the common, but misguided, assumption that women don’t belong in the field, the stereotype of the workers in the IT field remains fairly static: males with an anti-social personality type and “tech-junkie” mentality. However, without women in the industry, many of these jobs will remain unfilled in the future.

We need to push the envelope against this stereotype, as the truth regarding the skills needed to excel in the industry is far from the stereotype. The IT field needs those who possess the so-called “soft skills” that are arguably just as important in IT careers as an aptitude for math or science. It is the problem solvers, the focused individuals, the collaborators and the communicators that have the skill set necessary to succeed in an ever-changing field.

This shift is because of the fact that IT is not a single type of job, but rather an encompassing profession that can best be worked by individuals, male or female, that possess diverse skills.
Where does it start?

In my opinion, we must start during early education by introducing the field as an exciting career path for both sexes — an introduction that will hopefully be carried throughout all of the learning years. While 51% of bachelor’s degree holders today are women, less than 20% of these women are getting degrees in engineering and computer science, according to the Association for Women in Science. That means that despite the fact that the number of women earning college degrees continues to increase, few are entering high-tech fields.

Typically, even as far back as middle school, our young women believe that IT is a place for the boys. For a long time, the stereotype was that technology careers were dominated by men who excel at math and science. This may or may not have been true back in the days of pocket protectors, but now that IT has grown into a profession that is intertwined with every industry, the stereotype needs to switch from science and math pros to problem solving and nurturing individuals who cultivate technology to innovate in a variety of fields.

We also need to look into why the job may not be appealing as a lifelong career.

In a recent study by the NCWIT, 74% of women in technology reported “loving their work,” yet these women leave their careers at a staggering rate. In fact, 56% of women leave at the “mid-level” point, just when the loss of their talent is most costly to companies. This is more than double the turnover rate for men.

Women leave their jobs for many reasons — from starting a family to a desire for more money. It is important that women understand that as IT expands into almost every field imaginable, the opportunity for career growth and increasing salary grows with it.

Finally, more talented women will have to work in high-tech positions in order to provide more mentors for younger people.

For this to happen, current professionals need to re-examine their own thoughts about tech-based careers and realize that task-oriented, enterprising and focused individuals can excel in any industry. Taking a meaningful problem into any industry and solving it without technology isn’t possible.

It’s time for women to embrace high-tech careers as an enjoyable and fulfilling career path to open the door for more people to enter this rapidly-expanding profession.