

E-Mentoring: Examining the Feasibility of Electronic, Online, or Distance Mentoring

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Mentoring has been studied extensively and found to provide many benefits to protégés, organizations, and mentors. One new aspect that has received increasing scholarly attention is E-Mentoring, or mentoring which takes place primarily through electronic means. The purpose of this paper is to examine the promise of electronic mentoring as an online-learning tool. First, I briefly review the established research findings on traditional mentoring. Next I review the current state of research on E-mentoring. Then I summarize and discuss the potential benefits and challenges of online versus face-to-face mentoring. Finally, I discuss the implications for both research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring in the workplace has been studied extensively over the past thirty years and many positive benefits have been identified for protégés and organizations as well as for the mentors themselves (see Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008 for a comprehensive review). One new aspect of mentoring that is receiving increasing scholarly attention is E-Mentoring (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011). Ensher and Murphy (2007:300) defined e-mentoring as “a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé, which provides new learning as well as career and emotional support, primarily through e-mail and other electronic means (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking spaces, etc.).”

The purpose of this paper is to examine the promise of electronic mentoring as an online-learning tool. First, I will briefly review the established research findings on traditional mentoring. Next, I will review the current state of research on E-mentoring. Then I will summarize and discuss the potential benefits and challenges of online versus face-to-face mentoring. Finally, I will discuss the implications of E-Mentoring for both academicians and practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Mentoring

Mentoring in the workplace traditionally involves an intense interpersonal exchange between a more senior member of the organization, the mentor, and a less experienced member, the protégé, in which the mentor provides career guidance and support to the protégé (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985, Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). Scholars have utilized many different definitions of mentoring in their research, but when Haggard and colleagues (2011) reviewed the various mentoring definitions in the

literature, they concluded that mentoring involves three core-attributes: reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction over some period of time.

There are typically two broad categories of mentoring: Career and psychosocial (Kram, 1985). Career related mentoring involves sponsorship, exposure and visibility, protection, coaching, and challenging work assignments, while psychosocial mentoring involves role-modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Research shows that both aspects of mentoring lead to many positive outcomes for protégés (Allen et al., 2004) and that certain personality traits and demographic variables were associated with the initiation of mentoring (Aryee, Lo, & Kang, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1992).

Kram (1983, 1985) pointed out that the mentoring relationship typically consists of four phases. The first phase is initiation, a period of six months to a year during which time the relationship gets started and begins to have importance for both managers. The second phase is cultivation, a period of two to five years during which time the range of career and psychosocial functions provided expand to a maximum. The third phase is separation, a period of six months to two years after the relationship is substantially altered by structural changes in the organizational context and/or by psychosocial changes within one or both individuals. The fourth and final stage is called redefinition, an indefinite period after the separation phase, during which time the relationship is either ended badly or it takes on significantly different characteristics, making it a more peer like friendship.

Research in the mentoring literature has supported many positive outcomes for protégés in terms of both objective and subjective measures of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; Dougherty, Dreher, Arunachalam, & Wilbanks, 2013). While most research in the field of mentoring for the past twenty years has focused on positive outcomes for protégés, there has been a recent increase in the number of articles examining potential harmful impacts of negative mentoring experiences (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004; Eby & McManus, 2004; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1998; Simon & Eby, 2003). This has led to the development of the theory that mentoring relationships fall along a continuum ranging from high quality to marginal to dysfunctional (Noe et al. 2002; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1998). While most of the research on negative mentoring has focused on the behavior of the mentor, some have begun to examine the protégé's role in negative relationships (Eby & McManus, 2004).

According to the framework of Eby and McManus (2004), the benefits related to mentoring occur mostly in high quality mentoring relationships, where the protégés have learned from the mentors and achieved the career success desired. Marginally effective relationships do not create serious problems, but result in lower quality career outcomes for the protégé. Ineffective mentoring relationships involve interpersonal difficulties, such as conflicts and disagreements within the dyad, which can arise even when both parties have good intentions. Finally, highly dysfunctional mentoring relationships involve sabotage, malevolent deception, exploitation, or egocentric behaviors and are generally caused by negative intentions (Eby & McManus, 2004).

E-Mentoring

Electronic or e-mentoring involves the use of online or distance tools to facilitate a mentoring relationship. Ensher and Murphy (2007) reviewed the definitions of E-mentoring in the young academic literature and synthesized what they believe to be the most accurate compilation. They defined e-mentoring as, "a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé, which provides new learning as well as career and emotional support, primarily through e-mail and other electronic means (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking spaces, etc.)" (p. 300).

Ensher, Heun, and Blanchard (2003) proposed that e-mentoring falls along a continuum based upon the degree of computer mediated communication (CMC) ranging from relationships in which parties communicate exclusively through electronic means (CMC-only), communicate primarily through electronic means with occasional face-to-face interaction (CMC-primary), or use electronic methods of communication to supplement regular face-to-face mentoring (CMC-supplemental). In the current day and age, it would be relatively unusual to find a mentoring relationship that is not at least CMC-

supplemental as most members of the same office still conduct some communication through e-mail, even if it is only to schedule a face-to-face meeting.

Scholars have identified advantages and disadvantages to e-mentoring as compared to traditional face-to-face mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Haggard, et al., 2011; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig: 2005). One of the most obvious advantages of e-mentoring is access to a greater number of mentors as a result of removing geographic barriers. For example, SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives, information available at www.score.org) is a non-profit association and resource partner with the Small Business Administration which has been providing mentoring to small business owners since 1964. For over a decade now they have been taking advantage of online communication to expand their ability to match mentors with protégées and currently have over 13,000 volunteers who offer their mentoring services to small business owners at no charge. E-mentoring also seems especially well suited to help those individuals who may not be as likely to have access to traditional mentoring. For example, Ensher and Murphy (2007) noted that MentorNet was founded in 1997 by Carroll Muller in order to help female students to succeed in higher education science disciplines. They went on to list several other examples of e-mentoring programs designed specifically to provide mentoring to individuals with different demographic characteristics which may make obtaining a mentor more difficult. E-mentoring also has the potential to provide the advantage of impartiality over traditional face-to-face mentoring relationships due to the fact that individuals in e-mentoring programs are more likely to be matched with mentors who are not their supervisors or above them in the chain of command of their organization (Single & Single, 2005).

While there are many advantages to CMC-primary and CMC-only e-mentoring relationships, there are also areas in which they do not measure up to CMC-supplemental or traditional face-to-face mentoring relationships. The primary disadvantage is an increased likelihood of miscommunication as a result of lower media richness (Ensher, et al., 2003; Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Haggard, et al., 2011). This problem will likely be greater for those who are unaccustomed to online communication, and diminish within the population at large over time as more individuals grow up with e-communication. Additionally, scholars have identified slower development of relationships, variability in written communication skills, and discomfort with technology as potential drawbacks to e-mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Haggard, et al., 2011; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Researchers should always consider the continuum of CMC when studying e-mentoring. It makes intuitive sense that the supplementation of traditional mentoring with electronic media would likely be beneficial. One classic example is the traditional mentoring relationship between dissertation advisor and PhD candidate. While a great deal of the mentoring may take place face-to-face, at the very least several trees can be saved by the use of e-mail attachments for the many iterations of the voluminous dissertation drafts that will be sent back and forth. While this would still fall within the continuum of e-mentoring as proposed by Ensher and her colleagues (2003) under the designation of CMC-supplemental, it is clearly different than the example of a female science discipline graduate student assigned an online mentor through MentorNet which would be designated as CMC-pure.

As with face-to-face mentoring relationships, these distance mentoring dyads will fall along the mentoring quality continuum from effective, through marginally effective, to ineffective relationships. E-mentoring relationships designated as CMC pure and primary have the potential to more easily fall within the marginally effective range of the mentoring relationship quality continuum if steps are not taken to ensure otherwise. Like any good mentoring relationship, regardless of the extent of CMC, the three core attributes identified by Haggard and colleagues (2011) of reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction over some period of time, must be in effect. It may be easier to forget about the needs of an online protégé as time demands build up than it is to forget about someone you see in person on a regular basis. Also, some of the social interaction of traditional mentoring relationships may be hard to simulate online. For example, Robert and Wilbanks (2012) proposed that the use of humor can

lead to improved mentoring relationship quality. While humor can be used through electronic media, it can prove to be more difficult. Sarcasm for example, is quite difficult to pick up on without being able to hear the tone of voice. This author will grant however that the elimination of the use of sarcasm might be considered by some to be an advantage of online communication. As is the case with most online vs. face-to-face communication, it is necessary to understand the difference in media richness and to modify communication style accordingly in order to be most effective.

In conclusion, the current state of technology, and society's increasing comfort with electronic and virtual communication, along with the increasing popularity of social media, lead to the conclusion that most mentoring relationships will be at least supplemented and supported by electronic means (CMC-supplemental), and an increasing number will be primarily (CMC-primary) or purely online (CMC-pure). This provides many opportunities for those individuals who would not otherwise receive mentoring.

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