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Nathan R. Vann

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, nvann1@vols.utk.edu

Mitsunori Misawa

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, mmisawa@utk.edu

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Conceptualizing Mentorship in Contemporary Professional Settings

Nathan R. Vann¹ and Mitsunori Misawa¹

¹The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Abstract

Although there are many mentorship-related scholarships, there is still a lack of understanding of how mentorship is implemented effectively in professional settings. This paper explores mentorship strategies in workplaces.

Keywords: mentorship, workforce development, professional adults

Mentorships have the potential to provide employees with a means to become more confident in their roles and responsibilities resulting in empowerment. Organizations play a critical role in employees' ability to be mentored and achieve this confidence and empowerment in the workplace. There are different types of mentorships available to employees including formal and informal mentorships, peer-mentorships, and intergenerational mentorships. This paper will explore the types of mentorships and how they provide unique sets of positive attributes for both the mentor and mentee.

The purpose of this paper is to explore various types of mentorship styles in professional settings to conceptualize optimal mentorship styles for adults. Some concepts like mentorships, apprenticeships, and coaching will be addressed. This paper will be guided by the following questions: 1) What types of mentorships exist in professional settings?; 2) How do mentorships present themselves in professional settings?; and 3) What benefits do mentors and mentees receive from mentoring relationships? This paper has four components. First, this paper will provide some relevant literature on mentorships such as definitions, workforce development, and mentorship in workplace settings. Next, this paper will present the major findings of this study including importance of mentorship, and the duality of mentoring relationships. Lastly, implications for practices and future research will be provided.

Literature Review

Mentoring and mentorship relations are not new to education and training for adults in professional settings. In fact, mentoring has been used in various contexts in society to foster and educate novices to become competent in their fields as professionals. However, each field or each scholar and professional uses a slightly different term and meaning when they discuss mentorship. So, this section will introduce some definitions of contemporary mentorship and workplace mentoring.

Defining Mentorship

Mentorship can manifest in a variety of formats and programs. For example, from a traditional perspective of mentorship, Laiho and Brandt (2012) define mentoring as "individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and career support to their proteges" and "the process by which an older more experienced member of an organisation counsels a younger colleague on the unwritten facts of life in that organisation" (p. 437). The first definition provides an explanation of the prerequisite of the mentor through their knowledge and experiences and the expectation of the mentee, while also examining the implication of workforce development in the mentorship process. The second

definition identifies the roles of both the mentor and the mentee, while acknowledging the role of the organization in the mentorship process.

Another type of mentorship program is peer mentorship. Nicholson et al. (2018) define peer mentorship as “a voluntary relationship between individuals who are in a similar situation (i.e., peers) and is based on a reciprocal sharing of experiences for the collective purpose of enhancing personal growth and professional development” (p.424). Although this definition emphasizes the voluntary nature of the peer mentorship relationship, it elaborates on the purpose of the relationship being for the sake of personal growth and professional development, concepts also present in traditional mentorship programs. Despite peer mentoring relationships being typically voluntary, this does not discount an organization’s ability to provide peer mentorship programs within departments/units as well as through incorporation of other departments depending on the structure of the organization.

A third concept, contrasting the traditional model of mentorship, incorporates reversing the typical demographic for the roles of mentor and mentee. While traditional mentorship requires a more experienced and typically older employee for the role of mentor and the younger, more inexperienced employee as the role of the mentee; the reverse mentoring (or intergenerational mentorship) swaps the traditional roles, employing the younger employee as the mentor, and the older employee as the mentee (Satterly et al., 2018). According to Satterly et al. (2018), the intergenerational mentoring model typically consists of a mentor from the Millennial generation and a mentee from the Baby Boomer generation; furthermore, the model’s approach takes a less structured approach than the traditional model, in that “everyone leads, and everyone learns” (p. 446). This alternative model from traditional mentorship requires restricted application as most knowledge, skills, and abilities are not regressively transferrable; however, the ideal application of intergenerational mentorship would be in the sharing of knowledge and skills associated with newer technology as well as the restructuring of organizations to meet intergenerational needs.

Workforce Development Programs

Organizations utilize workforce development to improve employees’ confidence in addition to their skills and knowledge, subsequently empowering the employee in various aspects of both their professional and personal lives. Establishing mentorship programs as part of an organization’s workforce development repertoire can help ensure employees are not only engaged in development of their knowledge and skills but can also enable employees to feel they are being engaged as adult learners, which empowers employees.

Mentorship in the workplace for the purpose of workforce development is a practice organizations have utilized extensively for the development of new employee skills and knowledge and leadership skills in supervisory employees (Ivey & Dupre, 2020). This claim is congruent with Alston and Hansman’s (2021) claim that organizations typically create formal mentorship systems for their employees to provide organizational and career development for their employees. Additionally, Laiho and Brandt (2012) suggest mentorship programs implemented by organizations for the purpose of workforce development, typically yield greater and more positive results than independent mentorship programs.

Effective mentorship programs must be adaptable, including mentors’ ability to be flexible in the relationship according to Hall and Liva (2021). As many workplaces have transitioned to incorporate virtual and remote workspaces, mentorship programs must also attempt to incorporate a virtual component to meet the needs of mentors and mentees. Bradley and Mead (2022) identify that virtual formatting of mentorship programs can provide many

benefits, especially as businesses have begun incorporating virtual spaces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Bradley and Mead (2022) also identified some members of the study preferred some mixture of virtual and face-to-face in lieu of completely virtual mentoring formats. So, being flexible can be a key to contemporary mentoring programs at work.

Mentorship in the Workplace

Mentorships are valuable resources organizations can use in workforce development programs as there are a variety of applications for mentoring among employees. Each type of mentorship program possesses its own unique benefits enabling organizations to customize the application of mentorships to fit the organization's workforce developmental goals. One application of mentorships in the workplace is utilization of a traditional mentorship for the retention of seasoned and more experienced workers. Heisler and Bandow (2018) identify the challenge employers face as the more experienced employees in the workforce are nearing retirement age, the organizations are at risk of losing valuable knowledge, skills, and abilities. Organizations can capitalize on this valuation by adults in the aging workforce by engaging them with younger and less experienced workers through mentorship programs.

Another application of mentorships in the workplace for the retention of older workers, is the utilization of the intergenerational mentorship model. Older employees may not believe they are contributing as much as they feel they need to due to a lack of understanding of technological advancements and usage in the workplace. By applying the intergenerational mentorship model, newer employees could teach older employees how to utilize the latest technology, enabling them to continue contributing in ways valuable to them (Satterly et al., 2018). Additionally, Elias and Merriam (2005) identify the importance of lifelong learning in adult learners, which may be facilitated by older workers learning from younger workers thereby fulfilling their need to continue learning and resulting in their successful retention.

Finally, the relationships established as a result of mentorship programs are valuable to organizations not only for retention of employees or various age groups, but also as a means to increase knowledge, skills, and abilities of all employees as well as foster a cohesive and cooperative work environment. A study conducted by Smith and Ingersoll (2004) of first-year teachers indicated the more exposure the teacher had to mentorship-type programs, the lower the turnover rate. Not only can mentorship programs increase the likelihood of older worker retention, but it can also help retain new workers as well. Additionally, Dutton et al. (2018) highlights the significance of the relation between mentors and mentees stating relationships are the key influence in driving mentee growth and development.

Findings

Importance of Mentorships

When organizations utilize mentorship programs appropriately, not only do organizations gain valuable results, but both mentors and mentees alike benefit. Both formal and informal mentorship programs offer a substantial opportunity to empower adult learners by providing meaning making and applicable experiences to both mentors, and mentees. One study conducted by Lee et al. (2021) showed job satisfaction was significantly improved through mentorship programs as well as participants reported an improvement in self-esteem. Another area mentorship programs empower mentors and mentees, is the basic needs of both parties. Mentorships provide opportunities for both mentors and mentees to experience existence in their organization through recognition, relatedness is established through the relationship between the

mentor and mentee, and the primary outcome of any mentorship is growth; not only should the mentee grow, but the mentor should also experience growth.

Organizations must give mentors the time and resources necessary to enable them to appropriately meet the needs of the mentee. The Lee et al. (2021) study substantiates this claim by identifying the need for a proper institutional support system. Not only must organizations ensure sufficient time and resources are allocated for mentorship programs, but they are also responsible for ensuring the relationship between the mentor and mentee is a healthy relationship. When relationships are not managed appropriately resulting in a lack of trust and respect in the mentorship relationship, the relationship can become toxic. Regardless of the level of toxicity in an inappropriate mentorship relationship, the effects are damaging to both parties, the organization, and the process. This can result in fewer employees' willingness to engage in future mentorship programs, ultimately hurting all parties involved.

Duality of Mentoring Relationships

Mentorship programs are not only beneficial for mentees, but mentors are also expected to experience empowerment through mentorship programs. This is especially true regarding near retirement employees in organizations. It is important for all employees to feel needed and contributory, especially near-retirement age employees who may find it more difficult to fulfill this need (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). Mentorship programs provide opportunities for these employees in the form of serving as mentors to newer and younger employees. This enables near-retirement age employees to fulfill their contributory and relevance needs.

Additionally, mentor employees may experience increased performance, greater leadership skills, increased satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and feeling respected by others (Ivey & Dupre, 2020). Furthermore, mentoring relationships can influence other aspects of a mentor or mentee's life not relative to the professional aspects of the relationship (Ferguson & Ellis, 2022). Ferguson and Ellis (2022) further identify mentors benefitted from the mentorship relationship through building upon their career, while mentees were able to view themselves in a more professional light. Another type of mentorship program, reverse or intergenerational mentorship, provides additional opportunities for mentors and mentees to become empowered. The premise behind intergenerational mentorships is a horizontal mentorship with the younger employee assigned as the mentor and is designed to allow for shared learning experiences from both parties while also valuing the experience of younger employees.

Implications and Discussion

As identified in previous sections, mentorship programs provide opportunities for organizations to engage employees as well as the potential for employees to attain empowerment through the process. Further evaluation revealed although these relationships provide a variety of benefits, there exist several possible barriers to mentorship programs with the potential to prevent or nullify these gains. Additional research indicates organizational mentorship programs can benefit organizations by "[reducing] costs for organizations associated with recruiting, selection, and training and, at least in the case of experienced mentors and proteges, maintenance of corporate knowledge" (Ivey & Dupre, 2020, p. 3). To attain these benefits; however, requires the support and commitment of the organization and management teams.

Although mentors and mentees both experience empowerment from mentorship programs, they each experience unique benefits from the relationship. Mentees are generally provided with experiences designed to help them grow in their careers and professional

development (Raelin, 2008); however, there are often other benefits obtained by mentees through mentorships such as: psychological and emotional support (Satterly et al., 2018); increased job satisfaction and improved work performance (Laiho & Brandt, 2012); and career goal clarity (Wanberg et al., 2006). Despite mentorship programs being generally designed to benefit the mentee, well designed mentorship programs should produce a mutually beneficial relationship (Laiho & Brandt, 2012). Adults desire to contribute meaningfully (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) as well as needing to feel useful and needed (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). These goals can be achieved through mentorships in the role of mentor as identified in a study conducted by Wanberg et al. (2006) with mentor respondents reflecting on their experience stating, “Serving as a mentor has been one of the most positive experiences of my career” (p. 416).

One concept affecting the efficacy of mentorship programs, are social contexts of mentors and mentees. Cervero and Wilson (2001) identify the importance of power and positionality in the learning process and how failure to empower learners results in depreciation of the learning process. The nature of the relationship between the mentor and mentee facilitates a need for both parties to be as closely representative as possible of similar social contexts. Dutton et al. (2018) highlights the importance of relative social contexts by identifying the way dependency in a relationship is negatively characterized in American society, but highly valued in Jewish society (p. 404). A misalignment in core components of establishing the mentorship relationship can result in a lack of trust and respect between the mentor and mentee, resulting in a less effective mentorship program. Negative mentoring relationships “can reduce [a] protégé’s self-esteem, job satisfaction, and their likelihood to act as mentors in the future” (Ivey & Dupre, 2020, p. 4).

Conclusion

Mentorships are excellent examples of programs organizations can utilize to empower employees in mentor and mentee roles as well as reduce turnover, resulting in fewer knowledge, skill, and ability gaps. Organizations also gain improved productivity, job satisfaction from employees, and employee well-being from well managed and supported mentorship programs. Successful mentorship programs encourage and empower near retirement age employees who may lack meaningful ways to validate their usefulness and contribution to the organization. Mentees are empowered by gaining knowledge, skills, and abilities helping them achieve professional and personal goals. Both mentors and mentees are empowered by establishing meaningful relationships rooted in trust and mutual respect.

There still exist areas where organizations can improve mentorship programs. Specifically, organizations can provide access to a variety of formal mentorship programs such as traditional, peer mentorships, and intergenerational or reverse mentorships. Additionally, organizations must provide greater access to mentorship programs, especially for women and non-White employees. In order to provide these opportunities, organizations will need to provide access to a variety of programs as mentioned above as well as encourage and support healthy informal mentoring relationships occurring organically within or outside of the organization.

Finally, formal mentorship programs are only as successful as the relationships between mentor and mentee and the continuous support of the organization. All parties involved in mentorship programs must clearly understand the purpose of the relationship as well as what characteristics and resources are necessary for the program to be beneficial to the empowerment of the employees.

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