

## **What does research tell us about the effectiveness of mentoring in organisations?**

There is a substantial body of research from the early 1980s onwards on the effectiveness of mentoring in organizations, judged by perceived outcomes for protégé, mentor and organization. Comparisons between outcomes for non-mentored and mentored protégés for informal versus formal mentoring or correlations between mentor functions and protégé outcomes are made (Allen et al, 2004). In this article, I will consider mentoring in organizations, how it is defined and what happens in the mentoring process. I discuss the antecedents and moderators of mentoring to discover what are the conditions under which mentoring is most successful and therefore most effective. I will look at the range of outcomes for protégés, mentors and organizations, as shown in the research and at the effectiveness of mentoring as reported in the research. We should be aware that mentoring in organisations is both formal (organizationally controlled) and informal (individually controlled). Further, I question whether we can really judge the extent of mentoring effectiveness.

The concept of the mentor dates back to ancient history. According to Homer's *Odyssey*, Mentor was given the role of acting as a wise advisor and confidante to Telemachus, the son of King Odysseus, whilst the latter was away. Closer to our own times, apprentices were placed under the care of a master, who taught them a trade and how to live in the world. The principle of the wiser and more experienced individual helping, guiding and promoting the interests of the less experienced one is therefore well established. In the modern workplace mentoring is seen as a vital career development tool (Hegstad 1999, Hegstad & Wentling, 2005) and it is generally

believed that having a mentor has a strong effect on the career of the protégé (Allen et al, 2008). There are seen to be significant benefits for protégé, mentor and organization (Ragins & Cotton, 1999, Fagenson-Eland et al, 1997). Possibly the most commonly used definition of mentoring is ‘a relationship between a younger adult and an older, more experienced adult that helps the individual learn to navigate in the world of work’ (Kram, 1985). Traditionally, mentoring was seen as a dyadic relationship. In the modern career context it is seen as a developmental network, involving a number of different relationships, both formal and informal, from a variety of sources (Higgins & Kram, 2001, Chandler & Kram, 2007). The defining features of mentoring relationships are that they are dyadic, reciprocal yet asymmetrical (the protégé is the main focus), dynamic and that mentors are ‘distinct from other potentially influential people’ (Eby & Allen, 2008 p.160).

Kammeyer-Muller & Judge (2008 p. 269) comment that mentoring is seen as a ‘powerful influence on success’ in organizational environments. Informal mentoring relationships develop naturally with mentor and protégé selecting each other. Protégés are selected on the basis of attractiveness to the mentor on a number of levels – reflection of self, personality, perceived competence and ability, learning orientation (Allen et al, 1997). Mentors are selected on the basis of perceived competence, organisational seniority and access to influential decision-makers, personality and interpersonal skills. Mutual liking, admiration and respect are the factors behind the relationship. Informal mentoring relationships tend to last for a number of years and evolve to meet both parties changing developmental needs. In an informal relationship, both parties will usually select people who are respectively, successful or perceived as

high flyers of the future. Although informal mentoring takes place in an organizational context, a mentorship may survive during several organisational moves and may have led to some of them. Formal mentoring programs are used by organizations as an attempt to replicate informal mentoring in the hope of receiving individual and organisational benefits, with goals, structure and timeframe often established at the outset. Formal mentors are sometimes seen (Ragins & Cotton, 1999) as being less committed to the interests of their protégés.

Mentors perform both career development and psychosocial functions; as described by Kram (1985), these are career development functions (sponsorship, coaching, protection, providing challenging assignments and exposure within the workplace or field) and psychosocial functions (acceptance and confirmation, counselling, friendship and role modelling). A mentor may provide some or all of these functions for one or more protégés at any time. Mentors may be (but are not necessarily) an individual's direct supervisor. There are four phases of the mentoring relationship (defined by Kram (1983 as cited by Russell & Adams, 1997, Chao 1997) which are initiation, in which the mentorship forms, the cultivation phase (during which the mentor is closely involved with advancing the protégé's career), followed by the separation phase. In this period the protégé becomes increasingly independent and the functions provided by the mentor decrease. Lastly, comes the redefinition phase, which goes on indefinitely, as the relationship changes into a more peer-like relationship. Research has focused, often from the point of view of the protégé, on the correlation of mentor functions with protégé outcomes or on comparisons of outcomes for mentored or non-mentored individuals or those with formal versus informal mentors.

Research tells us about the antecedents of mentoring, which create the most favourable environment for successful and effective mentoring in organizations. Hegstad (1999) describes the two most important facilitating dimensions of mentoring as being the existence of organizational support for employee career development and the existence of company training programmes for mentors. In a 2005 study of formal mentoring programs in Fortune 500 companies in the US, Hegstad and Wentling found that the most important antecedents for mentoring were organizational culture (top management support, teamwork focus and open communication) and organizational structure (physical arrangement, job design, hierarchy were all important). They found that organizations with flatter, less hierarchical structures were more likely to establish and succeed with formal mentoring programs. Ragins (1997) in a study of the effects of changing demographics and diversity on mentoring found that the antecedents for informal relationships included organizational factors, such as structural segregation, management systems and organizational culture, interpersonal factors such as perceived competence, identification with or of individuals, interpersonal confidence and the reactions of others to a relationship. Finally, she found that individual factors such as cognitive difference and stereotyping, attitudes towards diversity and prior experience were also antecedents for mentoring.

Research also tells us about moderators which affect the mentoring process. Hegstad and Wentling (2005) suggest that moderators include top-level commitment, the alignment of program and organizational goals, good communications, reward systems which value time spent in mentoring activities and good selection and matching of protégés and mentors. The importance of organizational support for mentoring is also

shown in the results Allen et al (1997) found in a qualitative study of mentoring from the point of view of the mentor. They found organizational support for learning and development, manager/co-worker support, a structured environment and empowerment of mentors to be important moderators in the success of mentors.

For mentoring to be fully effective, there must be a supportive organizational environment and strong motivation on the part of the mentor, combined with receptivity on the part of the protégé. In an informal mentoring relationship, at least the last two of these conditions will automatically exist. In a formal mentoring relationship there is a need to artificially create this environment and this is not always successful, hence the perception that informal mentoring is the best form and that formal mentoring is better than none at all but not as effective as informal mentoring.

Mentoring is linked with a wide range of outcomes for protégés, mentors and organizations. Looking first at the outcomes for protégés, these are both personal and professional and can also be divided into subjective and objective outcomes (Allen et al, 2004). Career –related outcomes include receiving organizational exposure and sponsorship, coaching and being given challenging assignments. Psychosocial outcomes include increased self-image and self-efficacy and increased confidence. Outcomes for protégés are usually reported in two ways. These are reporting career outcomes for mentored versus non-mentored individuals and correlating mentor functions with protégé outcomes, which can be divided in to subjective and objective outcomes (Allen et al, 2006).

It is generally accepted that ‘mentoring is related to important career outcomes such as salary level, promotion rate and job satisfaction, among other outcomes’ (Allen et al, 2004, p.127). Their study, which summarizes pre-existing data about the relationship between mentoring and benefits for protégés, is generally supportive of the claim that mentoring has benefits, but they point out that the effect sizes are often small. They also point out that the type of mentoring provided, formal or informal, may make an important difference in the benefits received. There is a link between career- related mentoring and objective career success indicators, including compensation and promotion, which are often used as variables for research (Allen et al, 2004; Eby et al, 2008, Blickle et al, 2009). There is also a link between psychosocial mentoring and subjective career success e.g. career satisfaction and commitment (Allen et al, 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Scandura (1992) found that the provision of vocational support is related to the number of promotions an individual receives and that social support functions are related to compensation levels. Other recorded outcomes for protégés include faster promotion rates, higher compensation and accelerated career mobility (Chao, 1992, as cited by Russell & Adams, 1997), higher job and pay satisfaction and self-esteem (Dreher & Cox, 1990, as cited by Russell & Adams, 1997). Russell and Adams (1997) also cite research as indicating that protégés benefit from reduced role stress and role conflict. They say that 90% of protégés note that it is an effective development tool.

Factors which impact on mentoring outcomes for protégés include race and gender. Dreher and Cox (1996) studied the effect of race, gender and mentoring on the compensation outcomes of a group of MBA students. They found that a ‘variety of

processes work to the advantage of those who are “similar” to existing corporate leaders’ (Dreher & Cox, 1996, p.297), who tend to be white and male. Specifically, African-Americans, Hispanics and women were less likely to form relationships with white men and there was a significant compensation difference (over \$16,000 per annum) between those who had white male mentors and those who did not. The argument is that this is a direct result of the tendency for mentors (mostly white men) to form relationships with those most like themselves, combined with the suggestion that white men have more access to and benefit from influential decision-makers.

More work on gender and its’ impact on formal and informal mentoring outcomes was done by Ragins and Cotton (1999). There are a number of significant findings in this work, including a suggestion that women face more barriers to informal mentoring and are therefore more likely to seek formal mentoring. There are significant differences between informal and formal mentoring, which can be summarised by saying that informal relationships are made by choice, last for several years, evolve as needed and levels and frequency of contact are chosen by the parties concerned. In contrast, formal relationships are created by organizational intervention, are often intended to address specific organizational goals and are constrained by both length of time and frequency of interaction. ‘Formal mentors can be expected to provide less of each of the nine career development and psychosocial functions than informal mentors’ (Ragins & Cotton, 1999, p.532). Those protégés with informal mentors reported higher levels of career development, friendship, social support, role modelling and acceptance functions than un-mentored people. They also reported greater satisfaction with their mentors. An interesting finding of this study was that people with informal mentors had more

promotions and higher compensation than un-mentored people but when compared with those with informal mentors levels of promotions were higher but there was not much difference in compensation between those with formal and informal mentors.

Additionally, Ragins and Cotton (1999) found that outcomes differed according to gender pairings. For example, female mentors with female protégés are more likely to engage in social activities, male protégés with female mentors reported receiving fewer functions (acceptance, challenging assignments and organizational exposure) and had lower levels of satisfaction and compensation, plus a slower promotion rate. Male protégés of male mentors received greater compensation and slightly more promotions. The most effective combination was female protégés of male mentors, who received the highest compensation levels and the greatest number of promotions. This agrees with the findings of Dreher and Cox (1996) in that those with white male mentors tend to have the best outcomes. Overall, looking at the two variables of compensation and promotion, people with informal mentors tend to have better career outcomes than those who have no mentor or a formal one (although there is some value in formal mentoring relationships). It has, of course, been often noted that nearly 30 years after equal rights legislation in the UK it is still the case that women tend to have a less successful career outcome than equivalent men, perhaps there is a link to the level and source of career support people receive.

There are a number of reasons for people becoming mentors and a number of common outcomes which are reported (Allen et al, 1997; Hegstad, 1999). Some are mentors by choice and some have been selected by their organizations. The level of mentor



commitment is positively related to protégé reports of mentorship quality (Allen & Eby, 2008) and, I would suggest, to the perceived effectiveness of the mentorship as a result. Positive outcomes include building extended support networks and creating a competent workforce, passing on knowledge, increased self esteem (Allen et al, 1997) and career rejuvenation, improved job satisfaction and improved job performance (Bolman Pullins & Fine, 2002; Hegstad,1999). It is clear that mentors seek benefits from their protégés, both personally and professionally and that most of these relate to either improved self esteem and satisfaction or to improved professional esteem and job satisfaction. These are derived from the success of their protégés and from being known and seen to have contributed to that success. Managers who are highly regarded by their protégés are also highly regarded by their bosses and perceived as good performers in other areas as well (Gentry, Weber & Sadri, 2008).

Organizational outcomes from mentoring are various, although it is easier to measure this with reference to formal programs, where expectations, goals and timings are often defined at the start. For example, Marshall Egan & Song (2008) measured the success of a formal mentoring program aimed at helping a group of employees adapt to their new jobs. They found greater levels of the variables measured - which were job satisfaction, organizational commitment and perceived person-organization fit – in those individuals who had taken part in the program than in those who had not. Outcomes for organizations include higher levels of employee motivation, improved job performance, higher levels of organizational commitment, better employee retention, leadership development, on-the-job training and identification of talent (Hegstad & Wentling,

2005). Mentoring is also used as an important tool in the socialization of new employees.

It seems clear that research tells us that informal mentoring is more effective than formal, that some mentoring is better than none, that a supportive organizational culture is necessary for effective mentoring and good selection and matching of mentors and protégés is essential for effective formal mentoring. Additionally, the gender and race of participants have a significant effect on mentoring functions received and the outcomes on which we can judge effectiveness. However, there are some serious questions which need to be answered.

One question is, what is mentoring, is it an independent construct or simply a combination or confusion of other constructs? A number of other constructs (McManus & Russell, 1997) have a similar effect on individuals and mentoring could be integrated conceptually with all or any of them. Examples are LMX (leader-member exchange) which provides psychosocial functions, OCB (organizational citizenship behaviour) which provides career related functions, social support and socialization. The conclusion reached by McManus and Russell (1997) is that mentoring functions serve the same purpose as these other constructs but that mentoring takes the process further, perhaps by formalizing the concepts involved.

This discussion does however highlight one aspect of the central question, which is about the extent to which mentoring results in the effect we think it may have. It is clear that we can see career outcomes for protégés, for mentors and for organizations. However, it is hard to tell how much of the outcomes we see are due to the effects of

mentoring and how much of the outcome is arrived at for other reasons, such as individual knowledge, skills and abilities. It may be that the individual may have networked well enough to have made the connections and gained the access to promote their career and to have gained the necessary organisational exposure and access to challenging assignments without the support of their mentor.

The reason for this difficulty is that there are structural issues with much of the research in this area. There is ambiguity regarding the results of studies on mentoring outcomes (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Allen et al, 2008). Many papers do not differentiate clearly between the different types of mentoring and the result is that it is difficult to make clear comparisons between findings and the findings themselves are sometimes unclear and contradictory.

There is very little experimental research, most research has been carried out by field studies which makes it impossible to establish cause and effect, so we are unable to fully test theories about mentoring and its effectiveness (Allen et al, 2008). Other developmental relationships, such as friendship and loving relationships have been studied under laboratory conditions and it would be helpful for work of this kind to have been done on mentoring.

A further problem is that most of the research is based on surveys (90% of the research is quantitative) and is therefore over-dependent on self-reporting. Mentoring relationships, especially informal ones, take place over long periods of time and the effects are also seen over long periods, yet 91% of studies are cross-sectional. Two

thirds of the research studies are on protégés. There is need for more work on mentoring from the mentor's and from organizational perspectives.

Research tells us about the antecedents and moderators of mentoring. It also tells us about the perceived outcomes by which we judge the effectiveness of mentoring. However, the effects are often weak and because of the weaknesses in the structure of the existing research, we are not able to satisfactorily prove the necessary causal relationships and are left with a number of 'likely' assumptions. We are able to see a wide variety of career outcomes, which we think are partly due to mentoring interventions but are not able to see to what extent this is true. We can see that many successful people have had mentors during their careers, what we cannot tell is how successful they would have been without the mentoring and to what extent their career outcomes are caused by the effects of mentorship relationships.

In conclusion, research is able to tell us that mentoring appears to have an effect on organizations and in some instances to have a significant effect on career outcomes for individual mentors and protégés. We judge the effectiveness of mentoring by the career outcome with which it appears to be associated. However, research is unable to tell us the extent to which these outcomes are directly attributable to the mentoring process and and we are therefore unable to be certain of the extent of the effectiveness of mentoring in organisations.

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