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Does e-mentoring work? The effectiveness and challenges of an International Professional Mentoring Scheme

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1. Abstract

Advances in technology have enabled online solutions to open up possibilities of mentoring relationships that cross boundaries of time, geography and culture (Zay 2011). This empirical study uses an action research approach to evaluate mentor-mentee relationships which are defined by their international separation. The paper highlights the extent to which e-mentoring relationships developed within this scheme and discusses the factors to be considered when technology is used to support mentoring relationships.

2. Originality/value of the research

There is little evidence of utilising the potential of overseas practitioners as mentors to enhance the global competencies of students studying in the UK.

The pilot research explores models of mentoring to support employability strategies in Higher Education and offers further research opportunity to compare face to face and e mentoring models.

3. Key words

Mentoring, e mentoring, virtual mentoring, employability, career development

4. Introduction

A key driver behind this international e-mentoring scheme is to offer a learning experience to post graduate students studying in the UK through mentor mentee conversations to understand organisational practices in an international context through mentor mentee conversations. The scheme has provided the opportunity to explore and utilise the potential of overseas senior practitioners as mentors to support UK students as mentees to enhance their global mindset. This is particularly pertinent in the light of current emphasis on Global leaders and therefore the need to build global competencies for graduates (Diamond et al, 2011). Another driver behind this scheme is the alumni feedback in India that identified the value that a mentor could add to the student experience.

Bierema & Merrian (2002) note that e mentoring 'is a computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé which provides learning, advice, encouragement, promoting and modelling that is often boundary less, egalitarian and qualitatively different from face-to-face mentoring'. Therefore, e-mentoring allows new definitions of mentoring as it opens the possibility of relationships that cross the boundaries of time, geography and culture, thereby differentiating it from the traditional face-to-face mentoring.

The objective of this study is to provide an insight into an international e-mentoring scheme where the mentor and mentee are geographically dispersed. The study tracks 23 mentor-mentee relationships over 3 to 4 months to evaluate success, challenges and barriers to effective learning of post graduate students at Middlesex Business School matched with senior HR practitioners in Indian multinationals.

To reiterate, our research question is "*Does e-mentoring work?*" Whilst other concepts such as employability and diversity *are* touched upon, the main focus of the study is the *medium* of mentoring rather than its influence upon these other concepts.

5. Literature Review

The process of mentoring, the role of a mentor and mentoring programmes in organisations are not new and most discussions make reference to the role played by the mythical character, Mentor, from whom the process takes its name. What is less commonly relayed is the description as 'wisdom personified; a paradoxical union of both path and goal' (Bierema and Hill, 2005, p 557). These authors conclude that the definitions and the functions of mentoring vary widely which probably contributes to the widely differing degrees of formality and structure associated with mentoring schemes. At one extreme there are the overly bureaucratic schemes dominated by administrative procedures; at the other extreme is the 'light touch' approach in which aims, objectives or strategic relevance are poorly developed or articulated and outcomes rarely pursued for the purpose of evaluation. What is not in doubt is that mentoring is a developmental relationship in which experience and knowledge are passed from one party, the mentor, to another party, the mentee.

The rapid evolution of ICT has been seized, in some cases without question, as a way of extending the process of mentoring to overcome spatial and temporal divides. Much debate has ensued, and continues, seeking to determine whether the benefits of face-to-face, traditional (or t-mentoring) are maintained, enhanced or diminished by the increasing range of modes of electronic communication now available for what is variously referred to as e-mentoring (Bierema and Merriam, 2002; Shpigelman et al, 2009; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003), virtual mentoring (Bierema and Hill, 2005; Zey, 2011) or instant mentoring (An & Lipscomb, 2010).

Scandura and Hamilton (2003) summarise the strengths of e-mentoring, for example in overcoming the challenge global organisational structures by allowing mentors to be in different places, different time zones, to communicate either synchronously or asynchronously and even to remove some of the visual status cues which sometimes inhibit communication between the more senior or experienced mentor and the less experienced mentee. Bierema and Hill (2005) echo some of these

advantages but also highlight some of the challenges such as cost and reliability of technology, the challenge of articulation via online skills, the *loss* of visual cues such as body language and facial expressions which are regarded by most commentators as being as meaningful to a relationship as the spoken words, and the challenge of creating appropriate matches when participants have no first-hand experience of each other prior to engaging. The authors also touch on the challenge of sustaining the relationship when partners are beyond each other's physical reach, accessible or dependent purely on only by electronic means, and communication depends upon both parties readiness to open the line of communication. Haddock-Millar & Rigby's work on the Cabinet Office-backed *Public Sector Mentoring Scheme* (Haddock-Millar & Rigby, to be published) referred to this as 'managing the down time' which has been quoted as being the main reason for partnership failure in a significant number of cases.

Other factors influencing the degree of success of a mentor-mentee relationship include the style, or range of styles, adopted by the mentor, an understanding of the stages that a relationship may, and possibly needs to evolve through, and an understanding of the key ingredients of success required for each mentor-mentee exchange. Clutterbuck & Klasen (2002) describe mentor styles in terms such a coach (sic), facilitator, counsellor and guardian depending upon the degree and balance between influence (directive or non-directive) and emotional or intellectual challenge. The stages that a relationship evolves through are described as rapport, direction, progress, maturation and close with the key variable related to each stage being 'intensity of learning'.

Finally, to ensure that each exchange delivers optimum value both parties need to ensure a high clarity of purpose built on a foundation of high rapport. Given the context of this paper, to achieve this combination of clarity and rapport requires the cultivation and practice of highly valuable attributes in both the mentor and the mentee.

6. Research Methodology

This exploratory research project starts with a research question:

Does e-mentoring work? The effectiveness and challenges of an International Professional Mentoring Scheme

This practitioner action research aims to draw on a combination of approaches that contribute to addressing the issue under investigation. This involves a cycle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action (Lewis 1946) offering descriptions, explanations and analyses of action to share knowledge and the learning that led to the creation of that knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). This is also the search for best practice in people (Cooperrider 1995) through appreciative inquiry and dialogue as action research tools. Both tools were used to build key themes in focus groups with mentees.

This pragmatic approach invites a mixed methods strategy to undertake this small-scale investigation that is aimed at evaluating, developing and improving practice. However, rather than mixing or a combining of qualitative and quantitative research methods, we have opted to use an integrated approach which examines practice through observation, questioning and artefact (Plowright, 2012).

The researchers acknowledge the subjective nature of participants' responses and therefore applied reflexivity as a key element which involved being alert at all times to human subjective processes in undertaking this research, with the self-awareness that knowledge is relative to their own perspective (Potter and Wetheral, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992).

Data

The primary source of data on the project was a series of mentor and mentee progress update questionnaires with follow up interviews with mentors and mentees to evaluate the outcome of the relationships. A mentee focus group was conducted in March 2013 to capture experience and best practice, as well as areas for development. The voices of other stakeholders such as the project team, module tutors of mentees were heard through semi structured interviews. Student

progression within their study programme and where possible within the employment arena has also been monitored to provide background quantitative data. A summative evaluation was undertaken in April 2013 through a questionnaire to participants to determine whether the scheme ultimately achieved its objectives.

Overview of informants

	April 2012 to July 2012	January 2013 to April 2013
Mentors	13	10
Mentees	13	10
Project team	2	2
Module tutors	4	4
Director of Programme	2	2

The composition of the mentee participants (by programme) was: Masters in Human Resource Management (17), Masters in International Human Resource M (2) and Master of Business Administration (4). The senior practitioners in multi-national organisations in India were from across a diverse sector including aviation, automotive manufacturing, consulting, construction, manufacturing, IT consultancy services, engineering, telecommunications, social media and pharmaceuticals.

7. Results

This section will highlight responses in relation to key factors which influence or appear to influence the e-mentoring relationships.

E-communication

The methods of communication identified for mentor mentee conversations were telephone, Skype or email. The *main* method of communication used by mentees and mentors was email and telephone.

- 96% of the participants used email and telephone
- 77% used Skype
- 10% had face-to-face communication (as opportunities arose)

However, 77% of the participants experienced some barriers and difficulty in their chosen method of communication. The main constraints were arranging mutually convenient time for telephone and Skype conversations due to difference in time zone. 32% of the participants faced some problems with Skype and telephone connections. Nevertheless, 23% of the participants confirmed that they were able to use their chosen method of communication effectively.

Overall, a clear message was that at least one face-to-face conversation can go a long way to building rapport and trust.

E-mentoring

Responses from both mentors and mentees confirm that overall e mentoring saves time and resources.

E mentoring saves time? Strongly agree 50% ; Agree 50%

E mentoring saves resources other than time? Strongly agree 58%; Agree 42%

However, this is mainly due to the ease with which communication can take place in the virtual world. Both mentors and mentees acknowledged that time and commitments were still required to set up and undertake the mentoring conversations.

Overall, the participants recognised that e mentoring had increased their learning experience.

Do you think e mentoring has provided a useful opportunity for learning?

36% strongly agreed; 50% agreed and 14% neither agree nor disagree

The 14% represents those whose relationships had failed to develop beyond the initial introductory email and maybe one or two contacts by telephone or email overall.

To identify the challenges of e mentoring, participants were asked to identify at least one barrier to e mentoring. Interestingly, three mentors felt there were no barriers which could not be managed. These mentors had used emails, telephone and skype and two of them had one face-to-face communications with their mentees.

Some examples of barriers identified by both mentees and mentors were the challenges of agreeing mutually convenient for mentoring conversations due both to the difference in time zone and time constraints of participants. Strong commitment of mentors and drive and initiative of the mentees also proved to be a challenge in this study.

Therefore, although learning is becoming progressively more virtual in our high technology, globalizing knowledge society and virtual mentoring holds great promise for a low cost, high impact career development tool that spans the globe and provides access to the diverse workplace (Zay 2011), the challenges and barriers identified here need to be considered in devising e mentoring.

E-mentoring relationship development

Cultivating an e mentoring relationship poses challenges. Rapport (or virtual intimacy) may be difficult to create particularly if participants have not met (Zay

2011). However, as identified above video Skype conversations can address this to some extent as it can replicate a face-to-face conversation.

The study applied the Clutterbuck model (1998) of life cycle of a mentor mentee relationship (below) to analyse the stages of relationship of individual pairs. Following the introductory emails between mentees and mentors, the rapport building stage progressed at different pace for each pair. Of the 23 matches 8 reached maturity (7 to 10 hours of communication), 6 relationships moved between rapport building and direction and did not move to 'progress' stage (3 to 6 hours of communication) and 7 relationships struggled at the rapport building stage (30 to 45 minutes) with 1 or 2 conversations either by email or on the phone and 2 did not progress beyond the introductory email exchange.

Again, using Clutterbuck's Situational Mentoring Model which was introduced to both mentors and mentee through their development toolkit and support sessions, the most frequently adopted mentoring style of this group of mentors was analysed. Almost three quarters (71 %) of the mentors adopted either the coaching or the facilitator style which demonstrate that the mentor conversations were non- directive, supporting the intellectual need of the mentees. The 29% of the mentors who identified with the councillor and/or guardian style focused their conversations on sharing their expertise and offering career counselling.

Clutterbuck also suggests that the keys to a successful mentor-mentee relationship lie in the partners building and maintaining a strong rapport and having high clarity of purpose during each exchange. The responses from the questionnaires and the interviews revealed 8 relationships achieved high rapport and high clarity, 4 high rapport and low clarity, 5 low rapport and high clarity, 6 low rapport & low clarity of purpose.

The need for mentors *and* mentees to assume mutual responsibility for the success of the relationship and for the mentee to be willing to commit to reflective practice and personal growth which has been strongly advocated by Bierema & Hill (2005) is confirmed through these findings. Any issue of cultural differences or diversity as a barrier to this process was discarded by the respondents. Another encouraging

point to note from these findings is that both parties were using and understanding a common language to respond to our enquiry which in itself reassures us that our 'toolkit' (used during the development workshops) had served a purpose in helping these remote partners to engage with common understanding. Again, Bierema & Hill (2005) has highlighted this need to educate both mentors and mentees about the process and provide a structure that supports the relationship.

8. Discussion

The purpose of this section is two-fold. Firstly, we seek to pick up on the empirical findings of the actual pilot and use this as evidence to evaluate the extent to which e-mentoring has been effective in this particular project. Secondly, we consider some of the factors beyond the e-mentoring itself that may have a bearing on this relationship and the potential benefits.

It is worth reiterating the peculiar character of this mentoring project and its participants. Firstly, unlike most of the programmes described in our literature search, this is not an in-house, intra-organisational programme; rather it involves participants from a range of disparate organisations. Secondly, the programme does not feature employee-to-employee relationships, meaning that the partnerships are not aligned and directed to a common organisational goal or performance criteria. Thirdly, unlike in-house programmes, this project is not about organisational knowledge sharing and organisational learning; it has individual mentee employability as its goal. This means that the mentor must have a particular level of skill to ensure that any guidance is a response to the mentee's identified needs rather than, as in many in-house schemes, the possession of a reservoir of *tacit* organisational knowledge for simple 'downloading' from the more experienced to the less experienced.

An unique exchange

There is no doubt that for the students who were engaged in meaningful conversations with their mentors, the scheme offered an unique experience to learn about international work practices and enhances their employability.

The impact of shifting towards e-communication

There appears to be a rather simplistic assumption that because modern communication technologies have the capacity to overcome the challenge of increased physical distance and offer practical method of engaging in building, capturing and sharing knowledge (Bierema & Hill, 2005) that the *quality* of the relationship, when compared with a face-to-face relationship, will remain intact

and/or the anticipated benefits will be delivered intact or diluted to some extent. We believe that the expectations of sustainability and success of the relationship need to be managed as the balance shifts from face-to-face more towards the e-medium. High rapport is the key driver in mentoring relationships; this implies that there is trust and mutual confidence, which is the necessary basis for a successful association (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002). Can this be realistically built over such a distance?

Increased Physical Distance and not geographically bound

We acknowledge the point that physical distance and the medium of a form of technology can act as a shield by rendering physical or visible disparities neutral (Shpigelman et al 2009) and offer greater flexibility in creating mutually beneficial mentoring relationship with alternative work arrangements in the spirit of learning (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Zay 2011). However we argue that as distance and remoteness between partners increases the risk not only to the relationship increases (Clutterbuck 2002) but a point is reached where the risk to the relationship *increases both sharply and disproportionately*. This not simply a function of distance; others factors attain greater criticality.

Reliability of media

Within an organisation there is the likelihood that mentor and mentee will use common equipment and be supported by the same in-house maintenance services. Schemes such as this one are characterised by widely varying technologies, with many being financed and maintained by individuals in most cases. This raises the risk of compatibility and reliability.

The Down Time

All relationships have periods when partners are not in the same physical space and within 'walking-down-the-corridor' distance. Differing expectations with regard to turnaround time and frequency of interactions has been highlighted as a major problem in a study on e-mentoring between teacher and students (Harris 1996). When these distances span time zones it is likely that these periods will become longer. Combine this factor with other factors such as the risk of unreliable equipment and mentors with their own organisational priorities far outweighing the

voluntary mentoring role, the down time, or off-line, period can become an increasing and disproportionate threat to a relationship.

Also, within developmental mentoring the main responsibility for the relationships lies with the mentee. They should drive the association, set meetings and define the agenda. How do we ensure that students place a high enough priority on the relationship especially when other commitments press?

Demands on Project Team Resource

We do not dispute the capacity of the technology. Our experience however is that once the physical distance exceeds a point which renders e-mentoring necessary, the demands upon the Project Team escalate rapidly too, even when and particularly once the mentor-mentee relationship is put in place and intended to be self-sustaining.

9. Limitations & implications for research and practice

A limitation of this research is the subjective nature of participants' responses and difficulty in measuring long term outcomes (such as employability). Another point linked to this is the voluntary nature of participation which, given time commitments of the senior practitioners, may hinder responses. Also, the number of participants on the scheme is small and the scheme is currently based in two countries, the UK and India.

One clear point to emerge both from our literature research and undertaking and evaluation of this project is that there is little, if any evidence at present of utilising the potential of overseas practitioners as mentors to enhance the global mindsets and global competencies of students studying the UK. Our opinion is that although the richness of face-to-face engagement cannot be replicated, even with visual aids such as Skype, but this should not deter Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) from considering this potentially valuable employability support programme.

There is opportunity for further research such as comparison of face to face and e mentoring, diversity mentoring, models of situational mentoring and the link between mentoring and employability using other models and frameworks. However, further research is needed into the optimum combination of project elements, in particular the size of the project team, the number of participants and pairings, and the degree of communication to support the relationship once it is underway.

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