Mentoring Practices
In Today’s World

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A MENTOR IN TODAY’S WORLD?

If you were to ask most people to picture a workplace “mentor,” they might think of a wise older person—usually a senior-ranking figure in an organization—giving gentle guidance to a fresh-faced young man or woman at the start of his or her career.

But today’s fast-paced business world offers other models for mentoring relationships.

One such model is “reverse mentoring,” in which a younger, less experienced figure gives guidance to an older one. For example, a younger colleague might offer advice on the business use of social media or other technologies to a coworker who grew up before the internet became a way of life.

Peer mentoring or cross mentoring between approximate equals has also become more common, perhaps because technology is changing so rapidly that it’s hard for anyone to develop expertise in every area.

Another given of the traditional mentoring model—that it is a relationship of long standing—also cannot be taken for granted anymore, given the busy schedules of both mentors and mentees. Many employers that have developed formal mentoring programs set a six-month limit on the process.

There are even “point mentoring” programs limited to advice on one specific issue, and mass gatherings for potential mentors and mentees to meet each other that resemble “speed dating,” several people told Bloomberg BNA.

And, of course, the internet makes possible “virtual mentoring” for people who are not in the same work location.

This issue of Workforce Strategies looks at all these different models and how to manage them so that everyone gains the maximum possible benefit.
NEW TAKES ON AN AGE-OLD PHENOMENON

People have been passing on knowledge and skills to those less experienced since forever, whether the process is called apprenticeship or mentoring. But in the 21st-century business world, there are lots of new ways of doing that, HR professionals and consultants say.

“We refer to it as ‘learning partnerships’ because ‘mentoring’ conveys a very traditional relationship where some old, wise man is meeting with some young person,” Steve Hunt, senior vice president of human capital management research at South San Francisco, Calif.-based HR software company SAP SuccessFactors, told Bloomberg BNA. A better model, he said, is “two people who can learn from each other.”

One problem with traditional mentoring is that people tend to interact with “people with whom they’re most comfortable, so there are some gaps—for example, people of color weren’t getting access,” according to Naomi Sutherland, senior client partner at consulting firm Korn Ferry Hay Group.

Some organizations have tried to solve that problem by setting up formal mentoring programs and assigning mentors and mentees to each other. But that “doesn’t work especially well because [mentees] have to have a personal connection with the mentor,” Sutherland, global lead of life sciences for the consultancy, told Bloomberg BNA.

It’s better, she said, to establish a “reciprocal value relationship” where the mentor gets something out of it, such as “reverse mentoring” where a usually older mentor gets the benefit of a usually younger mentee’s technological knowledge. Another example is the diversity benefit a mentor may gain by working with someone from a different background, thereby gaining the advantage of insight into a mentee who thinks differently, she said.

Changes in how HR departments work are also driving changes in mentoring, Julie Harrison, product marketing manager at Ottawa-based Halogen Software, which specializes in cloud-based HR programs, told Bloomberg BNA. “HR is transforming from what used to be an organization-centric model to an employee-centric model, which is one of the reasons for the resurgence of mentoring,” she said.

She also pointed to changes in how performance management is done, from a focus on one-way extraction of the maximum possible contribution from the employee to “a two-way street with more frequent discussions and coaching.” These can be done with an assist from technologies—video briefings with notes kept on file on the computer, email, web apps, or phone, she said.

Another factor behind the broadening of the concept of mentoring is the relentless drive for greater productivity. “Because mentoring, especially real quality...
mentoring, can take a significant amount of time, organizations are trying to become more efficient,” Verna Ford, a principal consultant for Korn Ferry’s Leadership Consulting Corporation, told Bloomberg BNA.

That rationale, said Ford, who is based in the firm’s Atlanta office, has led employers to back the creation of “mentoring circles, where a mentor works with four or five different mentees, especially if a common interest can be identified.”

Within these circles, mentees might meet once a month over three to four months with another member of the circle who is identified as the mentor for the given topic, then switch to a different mentor within the group for the next topic, she said.

An even faster-paced way of matching mentors and mentees is to hold a big conference with a “speed dating” type of setup, wherein employees can sign up to meet briefly with a mentor. “It’s a one-time thing, maybe not true mentoring, but it gives them access to senior people, and they can reach out to them individually afterward.”

There is potentially no limit to the different forms into which mentoring is evolving. There can be four levels of support related to mentoring, Sutherland said. True mentoring is best seen as “an ongoing relationship,” she said, but there is also “sponsorship, where a more senior figure gets you opportunities; advocacy, where a more senior figure gets you access; and basic support.”

Hunt said SAP SuccessFactors provides service for six kinds of learning partnerships:

- traditional-style career mentoring;
- transition and socialization (“like an onboarding buddy”);
- skill development partnerships;
- intergenerational or reverse mentoring, where the younger partner is the mentor, and which is about “helping people who have come in to work at different times better understand each other”;
- diversity mentoring; and
- health and well-being partnerships.

The goal of increasing diversity is especially prominent in the new world of mentoring. Harrison noted that mentoring can be used to help address the underrepresentation of women at the executive level. “Someone who’s broken through whatever challenges exist can share those experiences,” she said.

“I see a lot more people looking at mentoring for purposes other than just helping people rise up the career ladder,” Mark Murphy, founder and chief executive officer of Washington-based Leadership IQ, told Bloomberg BNA.

Twenty years ago, nobody would have thought of the “reverse mentoring” now going on, Murphy said.
Also, he said, “diversity wasn’t a forefront topic 20 years ago, the way it is now,” and the mystique of startups has now grown so that they are now seen as “scrappy and innovative,” something those who work for larger companies may want to look to for mentoring.
BEST PRACTICES FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORING

It may sound obvious, but the start of any successful mentoring relationship must be a decision on what the goal is, several people told Bloomberg BNA.

“Mentoring is a means to an end,” and the parties “have to decide what the end is,” LeadershipIQ’s Mark Murphy said. If the goal is “helping people navigate the career paths in an organization,” you are talking about “one type of metric—the traditional older mentor and younger mentee.” But if you are seeking broader outside perspectives, you might want to consider reverse mentoring with younger, millennial mentors.

Defining goals is the first of four steps SAP SuccessFactors’ Steve Hunt said is advisable for developing any mentor relationship. The other steps are ensuring appropriate partner fit, clarifying roles, and establishing a plan.

Similarly, Halogen’s Julie Harrison said it’s important to define up front “what you expect to get out of it, and be clear on the format and objectives. Otherwise, it’s a big risk.”

Once the goals are clear to everyone, it’s important to make sure they are ready for the tasks ahead. “The best way to avoid pitfalls is to prepare mentors and mentees for what they’re getting into, then offer support,” Korn Ferry’s Verna Ford said. “It’s good to provide a half day or a full day of orientation to both parties.”

This orientation should include counseling on things to talk about, Ford said.

Mentors also should be cautioned to avoid giving the employee specific advice on how to do his or her job, which is the manager’s role, she said. An exception would be if the mentor and the manager are collaborating to support the mentee to achieve a specific work goal, she added.

“I coach mentors to focus on the more subjective factors of performance,” such as “executive presence,” Ford said. Also, some skills or habits of behavior may be more appropriate in some work cultures than others. For example, she said, it may or may not be acceptable for the mentee to publicly challenge a manager’s ideas.

Encouraging mentoring programs while also fostering diversity may be a challenge. Ford noted that in a classic mentoring relationship, the mentor may say, “There’s someone who reminds me of myself at that age. I’ll show them the ropes.” But that may leave out potential mentees who have a different background from the mentor. This is one reason some organizations have designed programs to assign mentors and mentees to each other.

Along these lines, Murphy said one recent study suggested that it may make sense to pair a mentee of color with a white, male mentor.
But Ford said assigning mentors and mentees doesn’t always work because “it’s not a natural pairing, it’s like a forced marriage.”

A case in point was a program at Fidelity Investments that had a committee that would match people based on profiles they filled out to be mentors and mentees, Rachel Ernst, who is now the director of employee success at San Francisco-based performance management software company Reflektive, told Bloomberg BNA. But participants commented that they would prefer for the relationships to grow “more organically and not on paper. So we had a ‘speed-dating’-like mixer session for potential mentees and mentors to meet.” Though they talked for only five minutes each, “it worked better than matching them without their meeting each other.”

Fidelity also developed a web page with articles about mentoring, ideas for what to talk about, and a brochure or handbook with advice on roles, how to set goals, and suggested discussion questions, Ernst said.

There are advantages to pairing people with similar backgrounds and other advantages to pairing people with different backgrounds, depending on what is to be accomplished, Korn Ferry’s Naomi Sutherland said. In the final analysis, though, the relationship has to be “built on trust,” she said.

It’s also vital that there be “reciprocal value” in the relationship, she said. “In general, you’re asking people to invest their time and discretionary energy in the relationship, so both people have to get something out of it.”

The organization should provide “conversation guides” and “discussion starters” to help mentors and mentees get the ball rolling, Sutherland said.

And if there are already mentoring programs in place that people aren’t taking advantage of, it may be because they don’t have access to them or don’t even know about them, she said.

Sutherland recalled one large pharmaceutical company she worked with that had no fewer than 50 formal mentoring programs in place. Yet, employee surveys indicated they wanted mentoring. It turned out employees could get access to some of those programs only if they were already enrolled in a leadership development program, she said.

Murphy also cautioned against being overly selective about who gets to have a mentor. “If you stick all the high performers in the mentoring program” and then judge by their success, he said, “that’s not a fair comparison; it’s like comparing the first-round picks in the NFL draft to the fourth round.” And keep measurements of whatever you are trying to improve by offering mentoring, such as employee retention, among those who do and those who do not have mentors, he said.
Virtual office staffing company BELAY, which is based in the Atlanta metropolitan area, can boast that its mentoring program has been around for a good part of the firm’s history.

Shannon Miles, co-founder and co-CEO of the company, along with her husband Bryan Miles, said the firm was established in 2010 and the mentoring program has been around for a couple of years. “It has really been organic and will probably be formalized now as we’ve learned what works and what doesn’t,” she told Bloomberg BNA.

BELAY’s 71 employees and 520 contractors are all U.S.-based and all work from home, providing customer support remotely. With that kind of set-up, it isn’t surprising that the mentoring program is structured in a loose and flexible way. The person the mentor works with is “not necessarily someone who reports to you,” Miles said.

A mentoring partnership at BELAY generally lasts about six months, although “if it worked out for the two individuals, it could go longer,” Miles said. Mentor and mentee talk about once a month and review the latter’s goals.

“Oftentimes they will read a book or two together,” not necessarily about mentoring but about such subjects as goal setting, emotional intelligence, operations, or personal development, Miles said. Then the mentee is asked to prepare a “net out” explaining how he or she will apply the lessons from the reading.

Miles herself led a group of women through a year-long mentoring program, she said. From her perspective, being a mentor is about “imparting what you’ve learned so you can replace yourselves,” she said. But it has to be a two-way street: “the mentee has to take the initiative and seek that out.”

For the mentoring relationship to be successful, Miles said, both mentor and mentee must set “clear expectations” early in the relationship and agree on such basics as how frequent their meetings will be, how much time they have to devote, and the level of transparency they will have with each other. From the mentor’s side, she suggested, one key message should be, “You don’t have to do everything I say, but it has to be okay that I say it.”

It’s also important, Miles said, for the mentor “to know where the mentee is struggling” so that he or she can provide help in that area; to follow up to ensure that the work is getting done and that the relationship is consistent; and to work toward “the integration of the personal and the professional while maintaining professional boundaries. Helping someone meet those all-encompassing goals can be really special.”
CASE STUDY: REFLEKTIVE USES MENTORING FOR ONBOARDING

San Francisco-based performance management software company Reflektive began a mentoring program last summer, with the focus on onboarding new employees. The company has been around since 2013 and has 100 employees, Rachel Ernst, director of employee success (an in-house term for human resources), told Bloomberg BNA.

Separate departments, such as sales and employee success, each have their own mentoring programs, which Ernst helps them put together. The “onboarding mentor” works with his or her mentees for about three months on average, she said, adding that when setting up a department’s mentoring program, “I ask the head of the department how long it takes till the employee is up to speed,” on average.

Ernst said mentoring programs she has worked on in other companies, including Fidelity Investments and Quantcast, are usually longer, “starting with a pilot of about six months, long enough to know whether they’re meeting the goals they’ve set and long enough to get ongoing value out of it.”

To ensure success, she said, you have to start out by asking, “What’s the purpose of the mentoring program? What are we trying to solve?” There have to be set expectations for both mentor and mentee, and they both have to understand what the goal is so that they know they want to participate, she said.

Mentors and mentees should meet weekly, she said, or perhaps every two weeks for busy senior executives. The size of the organization matters, too. “Up to 200 or so employees, it tends to be about onboarding,” Ernst said. “From 200 to 500 employees, it’s about peer mentorship. Over 500 employees, it’s more about people looking for someone more senior to mentor them.”

The Quantcast program was about helping women develop their careers through peer mentorship, she said. It drew on the career development organization Levo League to help women in their early-to-mid twenties “pose questions to more senior women” and such prominent figures as Sheryl Sandberg and Warren Buffett.

Generally, Ernst said, “the most important thing is making sure you have enough people who want to be a mentor” and that they have enough time for participation before starting a program. Roles should be clearly defined and resources made available to participants. “People like, when they’re in a program, for mentors and mentees to get together and learn from each other.”
CASE STUDY: SAP MAKES MENTORING ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

It’s not surprising that technology plays a leading role in the mentoring program at South San Francisco, Calif.-based cloud computing company SAP, an American branch of the German software company.

Through the Peer Learning Program, which is open to all SAP employees, anyone at the company who is “hunting for a specific skill or experience” can “use technology to find a mentor,” Bianca McCann, vice president of HR for SAP’s cloud HR expert network, told Bloomberg BNA.

“We have procedures to make sure mentors are prepared,” she said, including training if they haven’t mentored anyone before, so they can have “robust conversations” with mentees and achieve their goals.

“For SAP, mentoring serves career advancement of talents and accelerates connectivity among employees,” says an internal company information sheet on the company’s “global mentoring practice” that McCann sent to Bloomberg BNA. “Mentors learn from others, develop further and enhance job engagement while mentees can learn and grow in a safe environment.” The sheet states that about 12-24 sessions of an hour each are scheduled over a six-to-12 month period, with variations based on the topic and different mentoring processes.

A separate information sheet from the company outlines a five-step process for SAP employees to become a mentor: the person needs to learn about SAP’s mentoring program, decide whether mentoring “is an appropriate form of further development for you,” get his or her manager’s approval, receive training, and create an online “mentor profile” on the company’s intranet.

“Mentoring at SAP is embedded in leadership and learning, and is offered to talent segments” such as women, McCann said. She herself founded LEAP, the Leadership Excellence Acceleration Program for women at SAP, which is based around “circles” of four to six people each. Each circle includes one “senior figure” but also allows for “cross mentoring” among the other members.

The reason for this structure, she explained, is that “when you are having a mentoring relationship with one person, it can feel artificial. You have lunch together, but it feels forced. The circles are a less artificial grouping.”

Another key to SAP’s mentoring program is the use of coaching. The company boasts 300 “certified coaches” who have been trained externally, McCann said. “This coaching extends to point mentoring, where you need advice in the moment, though we also have long-term mentoring.”

Research by Harvard Business School has shown that “mentoring is the most impactful effort” that can be undertaken to improve diversity, McCann said. For women in particular, being mentored by other women tends to make them want

“Mentoring at SAP is embedded in leadership and learning, and is offered to talent segments” such as women, SAP’s Bianca McCann says.
to go out and mentor others, she said, an insight that she puts into practice through the Everwise network, which is external to SAP. Just two weeks before speaking to Bloomberg BNA, she said, she got an email from a woman she had mentored at Sony saying that she had signed up to be a mentor herself.

However, women also need men as mentors, McCann said, because it’s still often the case that men are more senior than women within an organization. By doing this, men can be important “majority allies” toward achieving diversity, she said.

For a “best-in-class approach” to mentoring, McCann suggested focusing on making mentoring programs accessible to everyone, as SAP has done. Often, organizations have mentoring programs, but they are “hidden or specific to one type of talent.”
CASE STUDY: ‘MICRO MENTORING’ AT WORKDAY

“Micro mentoring” is a way of bringing together multiple generations of employees at Pleasanton, Calif.-based Workday, Greg Pryor, vice president of leadership and organizational effectiveness, told Bloomberg BNA. Workday offers enterprise cloud solutions for HR and financial management.

Pryor said he has been involved in more formal mentoring programs as well, but the “lighter” approach of micro-mentoring is a way “to help people look up a skill or a job they’re in. We encourage people as they look for career advice and into different roles” to use the company’s own technology to search for others in those roles who can advise them. The internal network can also help an employee being transferred to a new office within the international software firm look for a possible mentor in the new location, he said.

“We provide them with the tools to find people in different experiences and jobs for short-term mentoring opportunities,” Pryor said. The micro approach “doesn’t carry the more heavy sort of weight that more formal mentoring opportunities do,” he added. “People can get in and out quickly.”

For HR, managing this short-term mentoring program doesn’t require playing as much of a “curator” role as it would have to with a more traditional, long-term mentoring program, he said. The main thing HR has to do is provide the platform.

Another advantage of the micro approach that Pryor cited is that it works well for younger “millennial” workers who “are looking for a breadth of connections” as they try out different kinds of roles and form networks for specific purposes that they may later leave behind. “Shorter, more focused mentoring relationships keep that energy alive,” he said.

A University of Chicago researcher found that “people who have connections in a wider variety of networks within the organization,” which a short-term mentoring approach helps foster, may find it easier to deal with “reputational challenges like a failed project” than those who rely on more homogenous networks, Pryor said. Millennials are fostering more open, broader networks of this kind, which can benefit both mentor and mentee, and which are more easily achieved through micro mentoring, he said.

Pryor said mentoring programs can benefit from publicly available resources, like Everwise, a cross-organizational network available online that he compared to the popular dating site Tinder, and even YouTube videos that can serve as a “conversation point” between mentors and mentees.
CONCLUSION

Mentoring may yield great returns in areas other than the classic career advancement for the mentee, but both sides have to feel they are getting something out of the relationship.

For mentoring to work, of course, the project has to be voluntary for everybody. SAP SuccessFactors’ Steve Hunt said it’s important to “be careful that people don’t get overwhelmed” and there “be an easy way for people to say they can’t mentor right now without coming across as rejecting.”

Said LeadershipIQ’s Mark Murphy, “In general, one of the classic things to worry about in mentoring is picking the right mentors. Find people who want to do it. Some people get hung up on an exact personality fit between a mentor and a mentee, but it’s more like finding the right therapist—it may take a couple of tries.”

There also needs to be “leadership support for mentoring” to ensure the programs’s success, Halogen’s Julie Harrison said.

Everwise, which offers cross-organizational “learning experiences” for talent development, can be found at https://www.geteverwise.com/


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Mentoring Programs that Work by Jenn Labin. Available from the Association for Talent Development. https://www.td.org/Publications/Books/Mentoring-Programs-That-Work