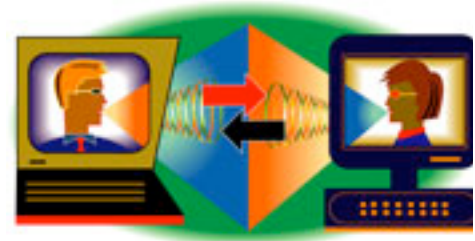




Workplace Loyalties Change, but the Value of Mentoring Doesn't

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In Homer's great poem "The Odyssey," Odysseus had a tough time finding his way home to his palace in Ithaca after the Trojan War, what with all those monsters, dangerous whirlpools, Sirens and Lotus Eaters threatening to derail his journey. But Odysseus at least had the comfort of knowing that he had left a wise and trusted fellow named Mentor to be the guardian and teacher of his son, Telemachus, during his absence.



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Modern employees need mentors as much as Telemachus, especially in these times of corporate upheaval. One of the most notable shifts in the workplace in recent years has been the rapid disappearance of the prototypical loyal employee who would work 30 or 40 years for the same corporation and then retire with a gold watch and a pension. Many workers today hold positions at multiple companies during their careers, and may feel no particular loyalty to remain at any organization for any great length of time. By the same token, many companies feel no special loyalty to their workers.

Despite this sea change in corporate culture -- and in some instances because of it -- mentoring is just as important as it ever has been for younger workers looking to learn the ropes from more experienced employees, according to experts at Wharton and other business schools. Indeed, mentoring may also be more important than ever for organizations themselves, since linking up a mature mentor with a promising protégé is an excellent way to keep valued up-and-comers from jumping ship and taking jobs elsewhere.

Increasingly, management experts view mentoring not just as a one-on-one relationship but as a component of social networking, where protégés, also known as mentees, gain valuable knowledge by interacting with many experienced people. Mentees, for example, often look to more experienced co-workers for career guidance and professional advice and use them as sounding boards for ideas and problem-solving. Mentors also help employees learn about, and become acclimated to, an organization's culture and politics.

Yet these days, frequent job changes by younger workers could actually dissuade senior managers from volunteering to be mentors, since they may not wish to spend valuable time with someone who might leave the company before long. Therefore, young workers who want guidance should be more aggressive in seeking to build relationships with mentors than they were in the past, according to these experts.

[Peter Cappelli](#), a Wharton management professor and director of the school's [Center for Human Resources](#), says mentoring has assumed a different guise in recent years in response to the disintegration of the traditional employer-employee contract as a result of downsizing and outsourcing.

"If you go back a generation ago, your immediate supervisor had the responsibility to develop you; the mentor was your boss," says Cappelli. "Bosses knew how to be mentors. They knew what employees needed to do and they knew how to give employees a chance to accomplish things. Mentors were assessed based on the number of subordinates who got promoted and how the subordinates moved along in their careers."

But the boss-subordinate model of mentoring shifted in the 1980s. "Companies had a surplus of white-collar managers, and reengineering waves in corporations were about getting rid of people," Cappelli notes. "Companies told mentors, 'We're trying to get rid of people, so we can't promote your mentee.'"

Although bosses continued to play an important role as mentors when they could, the supervisor-subordinate model waned and companies sought other ways to help workers navigate their way in the workplace. According to Cappelli: "Companies said, 'What do we do for these folks? Bosses aren't helping them anymore.' The idea became to find mentors who weren't necessarily someone you worked closely with or for. Instead of your supervisor, your mentor became somebody you could bounce ideas off of and get career advice from. It became more low-impact."

Safe to Let Your Guard Down

Terri A. Scandura, a management professor and dean of the graduate school at the University of Miami, says most Fortune 500 companies see mentoring as an important employee development tool, with 71% of them having mentoring programs.

Various academic studies since the 1980s have demonstrated the many benefits of mentoring. "Clearly, employees who have mentors earn more money, are better socialized into the organization and are more productive," Scandura says. "They experience less stress and get promoted more rapidly. Because of the positive benefits shown to mentors, companies are still very interested in this process."

Wharton management professor [Katherine Klein](#) says what mentees look for in a relationship with a mentor is "having a sounding board and a place where it's safe to be vulnerable and get career advice. It's a relationship where one can let one's guard down, a place where one can get honest feedback, and a place, ideally, where one can get psychological and social support in handling stressful situations."

For their part, effective mentors are experienced people who should possess knowledge of career paths inside, and even outside, the organization, Klein says. "Mentors also should have an understanding of the organization's values, culture and norms so they can pass these along to mentees. The mentor should be sensitive to the mentee's needs and wishes, and enhance the mentee's career potential, while simultaneously looking for ways the mentee's potential can benefit the organization."

And what do mentors derive from the relationship? "You get the satisfaction of seeing somebody develop. And don't forget that mentees may be in a position to help the mentor at some point. Mentees may also make the mentor look good. There's no question that Tiger Woods made his father look good," says Klein, referring to Earl Woods, who taught the golf champion how to play the game at an early age and served as his coach into adulthood.

Scandura adds that mentors can obtain more than just a glow of satisfaction at having helped someone: They can actually learn a lot about their companies and discover new ideas by engaging with mentees. "Dealing with a person who is your junior improves your network," she says. "Mentors know more about what goes on in lower levels when they deal with mentees. Junior people can provide information to mentors.... [They] are up on the latest technology and knowledge. So it's an interactive process: Mentors and protégés become co-learners."

Mentoring also offers benefits to organizations. For one thing, firms enjoy increased employee engagement and productivity. A positive mentoring relationship can go a long way to helping a firm retain its best employees, thus improving an organization's "bench strength," according to Scandura.

If a company wants to implement a successful formal mentoring program, both the mentor and mentee must be genuinely excited about the initiative, adds [Jennifer S. Mueller](#), a Wharton management professor. "It has to be a long-term program with frequent meetings, and the meetings have to be meaningful, not arbitrary. You can't just meet to talk about 'stuff' three times a year."

Scandura agrees. Companies can set up mentoring any number of ways, but the most effective approach "is where the human resources department -- or even top management -- identifies the people who have the experience and knowledge and says, 'We want them to be the most involved in the mentoring

program."

Sun Microsystems Study: Higher Retention Rates

In October 2006, Sun Microsystems, a technology company based in Santa Clara, Calif., released the results of a study that explored the value of mentoring. The study, conducted by Gartner, a research and advisory firm, and Capital Analytics, a software and services company, used statistical analysis to examine the financial impact of mentoring and how Sun could target its spending in this area. The study concluded that "mentoring has a positive impact on mentors and mentees, producing employees that are more highly valued by the business."

The researchers looked at data from more than 1,000 Sun employees over a five-year period, broken down by job classifications, such as administrators and engineers. The study examined 68 variables -- including product area, base pay, previous job code and reason for termination -- to find correlations with a half-dozen metrics: employee salary grade, salary grade change, job performance rating, promotion, merit increase in salary and salary increase due to promotion.

The study found that 25% of employees in a test group who took part in the company's mentoring program had a salary grade change, compared with 5% of employees in a control group who did not participate in the program. The research also showed that the program had positive financial benefits for mentors: 28% of mentors in the test group had a salary grade change as opposed to just 5% in the control group. In addition, the study determined that administrators benefited more from the mentoring program than engineers. "This result was somewhat counterintuitive, since Sun had expected that higher skill positions would benefit most from the program," the study reported.

The researchers also learned that Sun's mentoring program was least effective for the highest performers. This was an especially startling result since most mentoring programs focus on developing high performers with high potential, and led the researchers to conclude that "the better investment for Sun would be to spend the money on lower performers to help them raise their level of performance."

Other findings from the study include: Mentors were promoted six times more often than those not in the program; mentees were promoted five times more often than those not in the program; and retention rates were much higher for mentees (72%) and mentors (69%) than for employees who did not participate in the mentoring program (49%).

Men Mentoring Men

Formal mentoring programs are only one way for young workers to increase their knowledge. Informal mentoring relationships are often more typical and more beneficial to both mentor and protégé, according to Klein. "Mentoring often happens informally," she says. "It happens most commonly when somebody senior starts giving advice and starts playing the role of a sounding board. When I go to somebody and say, 'I'm considering taking that job, what do you think?' -- that can be the beginning of a mentoring relationship."

Formal corporate mentoring programs are worthwhile, but they can founder if the mentor and protégé do not hit it off. "A formal mentoring program is like a blind date set up by somebody who ostensibly knows both people, but it might not be a good match," Klein notes. "And if a formal mentoring program simply tells the mentor to initiate an hour-long conversation with the protégé about his or her career every quarter, it's not going to be terribly meaningful. But it can be meaningful if it sets a relationship in motion. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with formal programs. But in some cases, it might be more productive for a company to simply say to managers that it's important for them to play a development role for junior people and ask the managers to reach out to them."

It is particularly important for senior management to encourage mentors to offer help to women and minorities, according to Klein. "Companies should be mindful of the fact that it may be difficult for women and minorities to find mentors. Senior management should tell all managers to 'step out of your comfort zones and provide support and advice for a broad section of employees.' Statements like that, backed up by the most senior people, can make a big difference."

Klein says it is particularly important for protégés to be proactive in trying to establish a relationship

with a senior person and be energetic in keeping the relationship going. She uses the phrase "irresistible protégé" to describe these employees.

"Research shows that protégés influence the amount of mentoring they receive," according to Klein. "You're more likely to get mentored if you're talented, have an outgoing personality and are career- and goal-oriented. Once a mentor sees that you're eager, the more likely it is the mentor will want to spend the time and social capital on you, introduce you to the right people, and so on. One unfortunate consequence of this is that sometimes people who are most in need of guidance don't have mentors, which means companies must make a special effort to reach out to the people who really need mentors."

Klein points to one study, for instance, that showed it is easier for young men to get mentored by senior men than it is for young women to get mentored by senior men. Since men continue to hold most of the senior positions in organizations, it can be difficult for young women to get mentored. There is nothing necessarily nefarious about this tendency, says Klein, adding, "Each of us tends to attract people like us." But organizations do need to tackle this issue.

Young people may also wish to be assertive in trying to establish a mentoring relationship because they may not stay with the same organization for more than a few years. Failing to find a mentor might result in the younger person missing out on career-advancement opportunities at their current firm or making bad choices by moving to another firm or changing careers, says Klein. But management scholars do not yet know a lot about how this change in the workplace is affecting the mentor-mentee relationship.

"If the employment contract is shorter and looser than before, if people do not stay in organizations for decades like they once did, what does that mean for people who need mentors?" Klein asks. "If you find a mentor in Company A and you move to Company B and the mentor moves to Company C, can you still get mentored by this person? Or are people having to rebuild mentoring relationships with greater frequency because everybody is moving around more than before? We don't know the answers to those questions yet."

But Wharton's Mueller suggests that even if a mentee leaves a corporation after four or five years, the corporation may still reap long-term benefits from having mentored that young person. "The organization can benefit when an employee leaves if the person rises in prominence," Mueller says. "That person can generate alliances. If the person moves to a company that is not in direct competition with you, he or she may stay in touch with people at your company and exchange valuable information."

In the end, some employees may find that the best mentors are their managers -- whether they call them mentors or not.

"In my years of observation of people in organizations and their development, I find no method more powerful for the development of management skills than, simply, working for top-notch managers," says David Sirota, co-author of *The Enthusiastic Employee: How Companies Profit by Giving Workers What They Want*. "By 'top-notch' I mean both that they know how to manage -- and are therefore good role models -- and that they have a strong interest in their subordinates' development so that they take the time and provide the challenging job assignments that facilitate this development.

"This is not to say that mentoring programs, formal management development and job rotation are not important. They help. But a caring managerial role model has, in my observation, by far the biggest impact. Companies, then, in planning for the development of employees who they feel have high potential should be certain to provide them with that kind of experience."

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