

ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MENTORING PROCESS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING

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Abstract: *Mentoring is an important issue, not just in entrepreneurial training, but also in company foundation and development. The mentoring relation is a win-win relation, bringing advantages for both parties: the mentor and the mentee. Formal or informal, mentoring should transmit skills and competences not necessary conditioned in the classical education system, or to complete these abilities. The paper presents some practical advices to program and implement an efficient mentoring system, from the selection of the mentor(s) to the evaluation of the process and outputs.*

Keywords: *mentoring, entrepreneurial training, innovation, education, company foundation*

1. BACKGROUND

Mentoring is the process by which a person, the **mentor**, offers guidance and instruction to facilitate the personal, intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as **mentees** or **protégés**. The mentoring relationship can be defined as “...a particular form of relationship designed to provide personal and professional support to an individual. The mentor is generally more experienced than the mentee and makes use of that experience in a facilitative way to support the development of the mentee. Mentoring is used to assist

individuals at specific stages of development or transition and lasts for a sustained but defined period of time. The mentoring relationship provides a developmental opportunity for both parties and can thus be of mutual benefit”. This definition recognizes the mentor’s role to be facilitative, supportive and developmental. This is important to note as mentoring relationships are between equals: a mentor should have no supervisory responsibility or authority over a mentee. This definition also emphasizes that the benefits of the mentoring relationship are mutual.

Table.1 Advantages of the mentoring process

The advantages of mentoring	
for the mentor	for the mentee
a catalyst to reflect upon one’s own practice	provides a point of personal contact other than usual
a way of developing personal and professional skills further	provides a source of support and guidance
opportunities to network with other professionals	provides a critical friend with whom weaknesses can be explored and addressed and achievements shared and built upon
job satisfaction and increased self-esteem	provides regular meetings in which specific issues and ideas can be discussed and developed
new opportunities for career and professional development	provides a chance to explore teaching and learning in a non-assessed and non-threatening environment

Regarding the mentoring relationship, there are two types of mentoring relationships: formal and informal. Informal relationships develop on their own between partners, while formal mentoring refers to assigned relationships. Informal mentoring is often present in institutions or organizations, opposite to formal mentoring, which needs a “legal” frame and a program elaborated to achieve the goals and targets for given situations and expectations. During a mentoring process, a mentor can guide one or more mentees in the same time; furthermore a mentee can be guided by more mentors.

Let us consider that a person intend to start a commercial activity. He/she need, beside financial support and a permissive context, specific skills and competences, from technical to managerial one. This can request consultancy in various fields, motivation and moral support, in one word mentoring.

A good mentoring process, especially a formal one in the context of an organisation, needs a well-designed plan. Drawing up the plan for the mentoring program, some elements have to be initially defined. These input elements should include:

- the definition of aims
- the desired outcomes
- how long the program will run
- number and field of expertise of mentors
- how to select the right mentors
- performance indicators for evaluating the program
- who and how will the evaluation be done

For individuals, acting to found a company, these elements are defined by the future mentee, while for members of organizations these issues are the liability of the organization. In special cases the aims, desired outcomes and duration can be defined commonly by the mentee and the organization.

2. THE MENTOR

In entrepreneurial training the development of activities in a virtual environment, or, if possible, in the real world

have a huge importance. During these activities, the role of mentors is of big importance, so mentors have a central point inclusive in entrepreneurial training. Regarding the selection of mentors, their number and expertise, both for individuals or for members of organizations, two solutions are possible:

- selection of mentors from the organization members or the mentees connections
- selection through networks of mentors

Usually the human resource of organizations, especially the small or medium one, or the individual connections is limited, so that at least partially the second solution has to be involved. A large series of offers are made through the Internet, a lot of portals providing mentoring in different languages and for different fields of interest. For instance **MentorNet** is dedicated for engineering issues, while **BusinessMentoringProgram** is dedicated to financial and managerial issues.

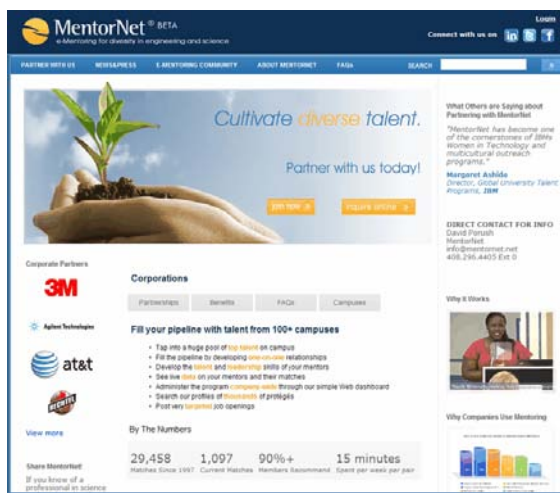


Figure 1. Different platforms dedicated to provide mentoring

Essentially, mentors for two fields of interest are available: **technology-oriented** mentors and **business-oriented** mentors. The technology-oriented mentors have the scope to guide the mentees during the process of finding technical solutions or implementing the mentee's own technical results, bringing to life the business idea. It is recognized that technical skills and competences are the basis of a good entrepreneurs. **Business-oriented specialized mentors** will act to offer support in the field of legislation, financing, human resources, intellectual property, financing, accounting etc. covering essential domains for the realization of a good business plan. Confidentiality is a sine qua non condition in the whole process of mentoring. Beside this quality, other personal qualities and professional skills are requested for effective mentors. Within personal qualities we can mention

- good interpersonal and communication skills
- approachable
- good listening skills
- desires to help others
- an open mind and flexible attitude
- be supportive without being controlling

- can give guidance to a mentee without making their decisions
- gives always honest answers
- oriented to find solutions, not to blame
- ability to probe and challenge
- willingness to debate and discuss
- has realistic expectations of themselves and others
- good organizational skills.
- Professional skills requested by good mentors, both technology- as well as business-oriented, are:
 - excellent practitioner
 - knowledge and experience of the mentee's new area of work
 - knows routines, procedures and policies
 - can offer a range of perspectives and teaching and learning techniques
 - can make suggestions based on their own expertise and experience
 - can empower the mentee with the knowledge gained from their experience

- can help the mentee to identify practice which meets professional requirements.

A mentor **is not**:

- a parent
- a professional counselor (although that may be their profession)
- a social worker (although that may be their profession)
- financier
- playmate

A mentor **should not**:

- break promises.
- condone negative behavior.
- talk down to a mentee.
- force the mentee into anything.
- be inconsistent.
- become a crutch.
- expect too much or too little.
- cause friction.
- break confidentiality (except in cases of potential harm to the mentee or other people).

3. ACTIVITIES TO BE CARRIED OUT BY MENTORS, WAYS HOW AND WHEN TO BE DONE

A mentor helps to induct, orientate and develop the teaching and learning skills of the mentee by:

- Attending regular meetings with the mentee
- Being well-prepared for meetings with the mentee
- Helping the mentee to set the agenda for discussions
- Making oneself available on an ad hoc basis to freely provide appropriate support and guidance
- Developing, monitoring and reviewing an Individual Plan with the mentee
- Initiating reflective dialogue with the mentee, particularly about the desired results
- Sharing, exploring and reflecting on teaching and sharing expertise
- Listening, clarifying, reflecting back and discussing
- Acting as a sounding board
- Conducting developmental non-graded observation(s) of the mentee
- Being observed by the mentee
- Facilitating the mentee to observe others
- Providing constructive feedback after observation
- Informing and supporting the mentee to adopt the proper practices
- Conducting oneself within professional boundaries, adhering to the provider's own policies and practices
- Observing the confidential nature of the relationship and the dialogue arising within it
- Attending group meetings with other mentors

- Attending relevant training to improve one's own performance and skills
- Sharing information to the mentee about continuing professional development and opportunities
- Having a duty of care towards the mentee and helping them to deal with any emotional responses triggered by the training process
- Guarding against the exploitation of the mentee by other parties

Before the first mentoring meeting, the mentor should find out the name of the mentee and something about him or her, and make a point of going to see the mentee by an attending session and introduce himself to him/her if this has not already been done previously. Discussions with the organization staff to find out expectations and information sources are recommended.

By the first mentoring meeting the mentor should make the mentee to feel comfortable, recognize the mentee's previous experience. The mentor defines his role and explains when and where mentoring meetings will take place, considering two possibilities: regular and incidental. The basic structure of the mentoring meetings has to be defined so that the mentee is in the knowledge of what's to come rather than making the process seem overly officious. This would also facilitate the mentor in being sincere, committed and regular in his duties. A possible structure for mentoring meetings: 1st *Regular or incidental concerns which have arisen since the last meeting.* 2nd *The main focus or task, as negotiated during the previous meeting.* 3rd *Next meeting: focus/agenda; time; place etc.*

Some types for the mentor to set the mentoring agendas

- Encourage the mentee to discriminate between urgent developmental issues or questions which must be dealt with as soon as they arise and the sorts of "everyday" or "incidental" issues for which an answer or advice may not need to be sought immediately but which are, nevertheless, very important to the mentee.
- Agree with the mentee a way of them noting down these "everyday" or "incidental" questions and concerns which come to light during their working life so that they are not forgotten before the next mentoring meeting. This could be a notebook or diary where they may want to incorporate their ideas.
- Agree with the mentee when and how you will deal with these "everyday" or "incidental" questions. (i.e., at the beginning or end of each mentoring session).
- Potential focus topics or tasks will often come to light during mentoring sessions. Be flexible and either respond to them immediately, if appropriate and practical to do so, or negotiate with the mentee for a future date and time to discuss them.
- Finish each mentoring meeting by establishing what the focus or agenda items will be for your

next meeting and ensure that both parties are aware of any materials they will need to bring.

- Do not overload your mentoring meetings; try to have one focus topic or task as your main outcome.

4. PROFESSIONAL “CODE OF PRACTICE” FOR MENTORS

The mentoring relationship is a professional partnership and should be treated as such. A professional, well organized mentor who can ascertain the needs of the mentee and respond accordingly can make the difference between failure and success for the mentee. Furthermore, the mentoring meeting is committed time and part of the mentee’s training entitlement.

- A mentor should arrange regular meetings with their mentee
- Mentoring meetings should be arranged at a designated time and place.
- If unavoidable circumstances mean that the mentoring meeting cannot go ahead at the usual time, it should be rescheduled for the next available opportunity.
- A mentor should arrive for mentoring meetings punctually.
- A mentor should arrive prepared for the agreed meeting.
- Mentors should give mentees their undivided attention: carrying out other tasks whilst discussing things with the mentee or taking phone calls during mentoring time should be avoided.
- Mentoring meetings should have a definite focus.
- The mentor and mentee should set the mentoring agenda together. A mentor should respond to the developmental needs of the mentee and should not impose their own issues or concerns on the mentoring time.
- A mentor should adhere to policies regarding confidentiality.
- A mentor should not pay lip-service to paperwork which records the mentoring time but should record meetings in a way which allows the mentee to develop by using it for future reference and reflection.
- A mentor should never exploit the mentoring relationship and should guard against the exploitation of the mentee by other parties.
- A mentor must realize their own limitations and request the help of coordinators/fellow mentors in order to meet the developmental needs of the mentee.
- A mentor has a duty of care towards the mentee and should help the mentee deal with any emotional responses triggered by the training process.
- A mentor should handle any problems concerning the mentoring process in a professional manner and in accordance with the

quality assurance procedures within their organization.

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