

Developing Tomorrow's Leaders: Innovative Approaches to Mentorship

By Michael Bergelson



As the economy improves and the hiring environment becomes more competitive, smart use of mentoring can provide companies with an edge in attracting, developing, and retaining top talent. We look at innovative approaches that are freshening up some organizations' mentoring programs.

The phrase “war for talent” was coined by McKinsey and Company back in the late 1990s. Now, thanks to a convergence of economic and demographic trends, this war is becoming increasingly fierce, and is set to intensify in the years to come.

A recovering world economy means tighter labor markets and more competition for top leadership talent. And at the same time, the retirement of the baby boomer generation is fueling an exodus of experienced managers. The Conference Board predicts a 15-year period of growing talent shortages, in which companies will find it increasingly difficult to hire and retain qualified employees.¹ In such an environment, it's easy to see why more than 60 percent of senior executives in developed economies cite “leadership gaps” as their top business challenge.²

There is near-universal agreement that developing talent requires some component of person-to-person education. Yet executives can be too busy to develop the skills of their own teams, and HR functions are too often resource-starved. A majority of companies report shrinking HR budgets in 2014, and three quarters are facing either static or declining HR staffing levels.³ Consultant Josh Bersin, founder of Bersin by Deloitte, which provides research and advisory services in enterprise learning and talent management, reports that 60 percent of organizations complain of the problem of “the overwhelmed employee,” adding to managers' pressure.

Traditional concepts of career development and internal mobility are being challenged or tossed aside altogether, along with hierarchies, job titles, and, in some cases, even the HR function itself.⁴ Every future-looking research or opinion piece on HR encourages “redesign,” “reinvention,” and “redefinition.”

Mentoring can help organizations attract the right people, develop them into future lead-

ers, and retain their loyalty for the long term. Everwise data shows that protégés consistently identify business-critical skills as areas for improvement, including executive presence, personal brand, career planning, strategic thinking, and influence.

Indeed, mentoring is the top training and development priority for companies in 2014,



Fewer than 1 in 3 people have participated in a corporate mentoring program

Source: *Wall Street Journal*

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with 67 percent planning to introduce or expand mentoring and coaching programs this year.⁵ Although mentoring is a time-tested solution for managerial development and advancement, a number of companies are taking fresh approaches as innovative as in-flight mentoring and virtual speed mentoring.

A Brief History of Mentorship

The concept of mentorship dates back to antiquity. The character of “Mentor” was introduced in Homer's *Odyssey*, and from there passed into many European languages as a word meaning a trusted guide for someone younger or less experienced.

Traditional economies, like the medieval guild system, incorporated their own versions of mentorship, with the mentors referred to as master craftsmen, and the protégés called apprentices. The modern mentoring relationship bears striking similarities to the master apprentice one, involving the passing on of skills, knowledge, and wisdom from generation to generation.

Today, though, mentorship can also take different forms. In peer mentoring, for example, colleagues of a similar level of experience mentor each other, learning together and collaborating to overcome obstacles. Reverse mentoring involves young people acting as mentors to more senior colleagues, recognizing that even people with limited experience have valuable skills and perspectives to share. And group mentoring brings people together to support each other in achieving their goals, sharing experiences, and holding each other accountable.

What all these forms have in common is that they involve people connecting with one another to share knowledge. When it's done right, both mentor and protégé become better people as a result of the interaction.



Mentorship is needed now more than ever. But many companies have tried and failed to implement programs that deliver real impact. As a result, there's a gap between what people want and what they're being given. According to a recent global survey of more than 10,000 professionals, only one in three has been involved in a mentoring program, even though 83 percent of those surveyed believe they would benefit.⁶

New Approaches

It's no surprise that companies are rethinking how they develop tomorrow's leaders and boost productivity and engagement across the organization.

To unlock potential across the organization and also to encourage the cross-pollination of new ideas from outside, innovative companies are revisiting and reimagining the person-to-person knowledge management and delivery system of mentorship. There are some particularly creative models emerging that may provide inspiration.

In-Flight Mentoring

Delta Airlines recently announced a new seating section on its planes: Innovation Class. Up-and-coming professionals apply to land a coveted first-class-style seat next to a leader in their field. They can then chat with their

new mentor for the duration of the flight, getting advice and hopefully forming a powerful connection.

The first session took place in March, pairing Eric Migicovsky, founder of smartwatch developer Pebble, with visual artist James Patten. Then in early May, chef Sean Brock mentored Irina Vishnevskaya, a Minneapolis restaurateur who is currently working to open a gastropub with its own microbrewery.

While classic mentoring typically lasts much longer than the duration of a flight, these one-off sessions are an interesting twist, and reveal the value in concentrated interactions with eminently qualified experts. Companies could consider adapting the idea to their own situations, offering their employees the chance to compete for a mentoring session with an established industry figure.

Speed Mentoring

In a similar vein of intensive sessions, some organizations have pepped up their mentoring initiatives by playing off the speed-dating phenomenon.

At the 2012 Women of the World festival in the U.K., protégés were given exactly 15 minutes to discuss with a mentor an issue or challenge they were facing, before moving on to talk to a new person. In total, each

woman had the chance to talk to four different mentors.

Companies such as Rockwell Collins have run similar events. In 2012, members of the company's African American Professionals Forum and Latino Employee Network met with 30 of the company's senior leaders. In this case, the "speed" rules were even stricter: just four minutes with each mentor, which meant participants could speak to up to 18 different people during the session.

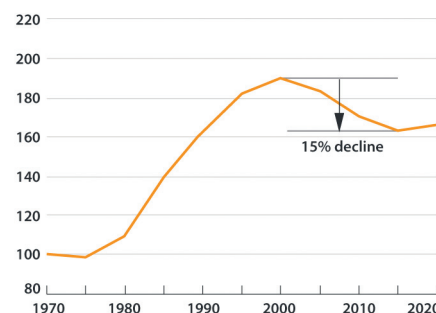
Despite the shorter time, employees reported getting valuable career advice. The event also gave senior leaders the chance to spot potential talent, while providing an opportunity for potential long-term mentorships to be developed.

IBM has taken it a step further by holding speed-mentoring events inside the virtual world Second Life. A group of experienced business leaders act as the mentors, and junior employees meet with them in specially built "mentoring pods." Each session lasts 15 minutes, and when the time is up, the mentors move on to different pods and speak with new protégés.

Speed mentoring can present a welcome break from day-to-day routines for people in both roles without any longer-term commitments beyond particular events. As such, it can be an easy way for companies to reap some benefits of mentorship and see the results to determine overall intentions with such programs.

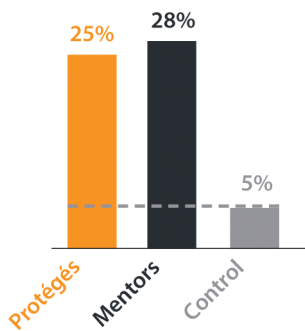
A Manager Drought?

35–44 year-olds in the United States



Source: McKinsey, United Nations

Merit-Based Salary Increases



Source: Gartner, Sun Microsystems

Shadow Boards

In India, industrial conglomerate RPG Group offers a new form of mentoring to promising young managers. It invites them onto a “shadow” board, where they grapple with the same challenges as top management. A senior team member helps younger colleagues come up with solutions to those challenges, while helping to develop their management skills at the same time.

The program has been running for several years, during which time RPG has reaped powerful benefits. It gives talented young employees the chance to meet with senior executives and learn from them. They are exposed to the kinds of situations that senior leaders deal with, get practical experience in managerial problem-solving, and witness how innovative solutions to real challenges can emerge.

Closer to home, KPMG’s Leaders Engaging Leaders program pairs 60 managers with senior leaders, including members of the board of directors. Its program doesn’t involve a separate “shadow” board, but it shares the same aims as RPG’s program: to bridge the gap between top management and promising leaders in more junior positions, and to prepare the protégés for future leadership roles.

Shadow boards can amplify certain elements of mentorship programs, such as accelerating employee growth by exposing them to issues beyond their daily jobs. The program also can engender greater loyalty by allowing employees to envision themselves in more senior roles and underscoring the company’s seriousness about their understanding such roles.

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Job Swapping

In 2012, Dharmesh Shah, chief technology officer at HubSpot.com, traded roles for a day with Kayak.com’s CTO Paul English. The experience gave both an opportunity to learn from each other, which is what mentoring is all about—except that instead of talking, they were essentially living each other’s lives. Job swaps have traditionally taken place internally, but HubSpot and Kayak are among the organizations experimenting with external swaps.

The swap yielded some concrete results. Shah, for example, was so impressed by some of Kayak’s policies—like the “couch rule,” which says that employees must chat with anyone they find sitting in the lobby—that he decided to implement them at HubSpot.

Other companies are experimenting with similar programs, with employees trading places for anything from a day to 12 months. For example, in 2012, U.K. managers from the supermarket chain Tesco exchanged places with counterparts at Coca-Cola Enterprises, resulting in broader experiences for the participants, fresh perspectives, and improved management skills. And last year, U.K.-retailer John Lewis organized a six-month job swap program with Julia’s House, a charity that cares for children with life-limiting conditions.

Job swapping between companies and within companies can broaden the perspectives of participants. The particular roles and individuals for such swaps can be selected for the specific areas of exposure that they or management feel would benefit them most. Like other mentor programs, the benefits of job swapping hinge on the low risk and low commitment associated with an occasional and brief exercise that can bring fresh energy to a

job function or organization, yet be discontinued without disruption if it doesn’t work.

Rotational Mentoring

A program sponsored by Women in Technology in the Washington, D.C.-area provides female executives with the chance to meet with people from its pool of volunteer mentors. Mentors are deliberately rotated so that protégés speak to someone different at each session.

60%
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Source: Bersin by Deloitte

In this program, the mentoring lasts for four sessions, after which the protégé “graduates” and is encouraged to become a mentor herself. But the rotational principle can also be applied to longer-term mentoring, in which protégés work with one mentor for a year or two before being assigned to someone else. One of the key benefits of mentoring is the chance to form a long-term connection with a single person.

These more transient programs provide a chance to meet more people and to get fresh perspectives on the issues they’re working on. And, of course, in certain situations when a strong connection is established, the relationship can sustain authentically beyond the specific program’s construct, which can be the best indicator of effectiveness.

In a competitive hiring environment, any extra advantage in attracting and retaining the best employees is critical. Mentoring offers an attractive option for companies seeking to develop tomorrow's leaders and stay competitive in the global war for talent.

Data-Driven Mentoring

Some companies are taking a fresh look at formal mentoring programs—using big data techniques to improve the experience and outcomes for participants. For example, a Fortune 500 global tech company has taken a data-driven approach to mentoring, implementing an Everwise solution that pairs its managers with experienced mentors from outside the organization.

Data sets from more than 60,000 historical, cross-organizational mentoring relationships drive the matching algorithms, leading to a 94 percent match satisfaction across their partnerships. Partnership outcomes data are fed back into the system to help tune the match algorithm over time.

This organization also relies on external relationship managers to help define partnership goals and ensure ongoing engagement between mentors and protégés. Three added benefits of external staffing are that they're specially trained and dedicated to ensuring positive mentoring outcomes; they reduce demands on already taxed HR staff; and their arm's-length relationship promotes honesty among participants.

The results include a 97 percent successful mentorship completion rate, with 90 percent of protégés reporting that they were very satisfied with mentors, and 89 percent making substantial progress towards their goals.

As new technologies and services allow for smarter and more effective analysis of outcomes data, we expect data-driven mentoring to become more popular. It utilizes technology to strengthen the effectiveness of the human touch, allowing well-designed men-

toring programs with smart matching to be successfully scaled up to eventually support large populations (in the Fortune 500 company's case, a 36,000 employee division).

Recommendations

The research shows that employees want mentoring but don't receive as much support as they could, especially as overall HR programs align with the organizational imperative to develop human capital in the competitive global market for top talent. As these examples demonstrate, such programs can take innovative forms or can simply benefit from formalizing and scaling an existing approach.

Some of the more unusual examples we've looked at are unlikely to replace traditional mentoring programs but can enhance them and boost employee engagement. They could either be implemented in their existing form or adapted to fit the circumstances of individual businesses. In-flight mentoring wouldn't work for most companies, for example, but a similar principle could be used to inspire unique in-person flash-mentoring sessions.

It's also important to look beyond today's senior leadership and extend mentoring to a broader proportion of the workforce. An estimated 70 percent of Fortune 500 firms have some form of mentoring in place, according to management professor Ellen Ensher of Loyola Marymount University, but often it's only for high-potential or executive positions. The vast majority of employees feel they don't have access to mentoring.

Extending an existing program boosts retention, develops the leaders of tomorrow, and

lifts the entire productivity curve. Influential organizations like KPMG are already examining how they can scale their programs beyond senior leadership. Kathy Hannan, managing partner for corporate responsibility and diversity, told *Fortune* magazine: "The goal is ultimately to drive it down deeper into the organization. It really helps with retention ... and gives folks a line of sight to a number of opportunities across the firm."⁷

In a competitive hiring environment, any extra advantage in attracting and retaining the best employees is critical. Mentoring offers an attractive option for companies seeking to develop tomorrow's leaders and stay competitive in the global war for talent. Innovative approaches can help launch and scale mentoring, while infusing more excitement into existing programs. **P&S**

Endnotes

- ¹ Evolving talent shortages in the U.S. (May 2012). The Conference Board.
- ² Bersin, J. (December 2013). Predictions for 2014. Bersin by Deloitte.
- ³ 2014 HR Agenda (January 2014). The Hackett Group.
- ⁴ Weber, L and Feintzeig, R. (April 9, 2014). Companies say no to having an hr department. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- ⁵ 2014 HR Agenda (January 2014). The Hackett Group.
- ⁶ 2013 *Employee Insights Survey* (2013). Robert Walters International.
- ⁷ Rouen, E. (April 19, 2012). When leaders are scarce, employees look to peers. *Fortune*.
- ⁸ Weber, L and Feintzeig, R. (April 9, 2014). Companies say no to having an hr department. *The Wall Street Journal*.

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