

APPLYING MENTORING PROGRAMS IN UNIVERSITIES TO IMPROVE THE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BUSINESS AND ACADEMIA

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Abstract

Good relation and communication between business and academia are crucial nowadays. Business wants students to come fully prepared from the university, and universities need to know the expectations of business in order to secure adequate preparation on the academic field.

This article aims to examine the individual approach of communication with students through mentoring programs as a tool for personal development and better employment opportunities for graduates. The authors aim to make literature review of mentoring as an individual technique for communication and development, followed by suggestions on how mentoring could be implemented in university programs to prepare students for their successful business life. This article will also show the advantages and disadvantages of this type of personal development through individual approach.

Keywords: *communication, business communication, student communication, interpersonal communication, academic development, mentoring, coaching, mentor program, coaching program*

1. MENTORING AS A CONCEPT

The connection between business and academia has never been strong in Bulgaria. During business and scientific conferences this link has been a topic of discussion for many years. The business complains that students graduate their university education and go into the business field lacking the “real life” knowledge and skills. On the other hand the academia complains that the business is not involved and supportive enough, and does not provide specific requirements to the university level educational system.

Mentoring has been known as an educational tool for centuries. In Bulgaria the form of personal advising and coaching is a trendy development technique primarily used within business organizations. On a micro-level scale there are many start-up forums which provide mentoring for the starting businesses within the “incubator” phase.

However, to date there is no macro-level link between business and academia making the mentoring opportunities available to students during their student and academic life, and preparing them for the entry into the business reality.

Mentor or partnership programs connect people who have specific skills and knowledge (*mentors*) with individuals (*protégés*) who need or want the same skills and advantages to move up in work, skill level, or educational performance.

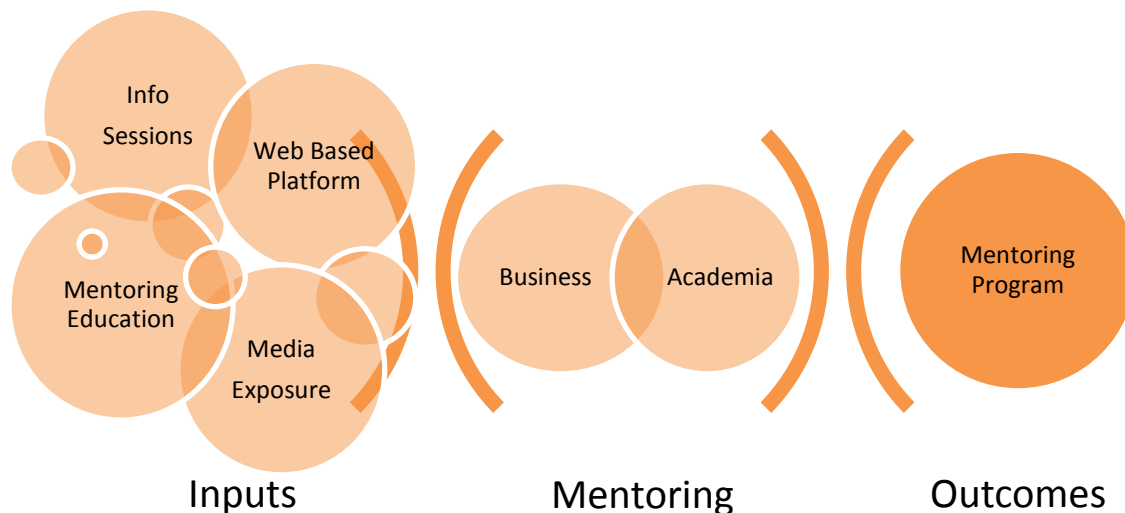


Figure 1: The Mentoring Process

Mentoring is a time-proven strategy that can help young people of all circumstances achieve their potential. Mentors are considered to be caring individuals who, along with parents or guardians, provide young people with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and a constructive example. But mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Every young person who would benefit from a mentoring relationship has individual needs. Effective mentoring programs offer enough flexibility to help meet each mentee's personal needs, yet allow mentoring relationships to flourish within a safe structure.

2. ADVANTAGES OF A MENTORING PROGRAM

According to Dr. Jean Rhodes, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, the most significant predictor of positive mentoring results is whether mentors and mentees share a close, trusting relationship. Such relationships do not just happen. ¹They need ongoing support and monitoring, particularly during the early stages, to ensure that the relationships do not terminate prematurely. As Dr. Rhodes notes, when the tool of change is a close relationship - as is the case with mentoring - everyone should proceed with care. In an article entitled "What Makes Mentoring Work?," written for the Research Corner at Mentoring.org, Dr. Rhodes described four program practices that are essential for strong and effective mentoring relationships. Those practices are as follows:

- Conducting reasonably intensive screening of potential mentors;
- Making matches based on interests that both the mentor and the mentee share;
- Providing more than six hours of training for mentors; and
- Offering post-match training and support.

Mentoring relationships are one form of social support. A mentoring relationship can have a powerful and professional impact on students. Beginning graduate students often need emotional support and guidance to successfully achieve their goals. Mentors can expedite progress through graduate school requirements and help define career goals. Reskin (1979) found that students with mentors demonstrated higher levels of productivity in research, publication, and presentation of conference

¹ Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™, Third Edition

papers. Additionally, graduate students reported, as benefits of mentoring, increased confidence to try new behaviors, more effective communication skills, and the increased ability to access the political workings of organizations.

Benefits arise to mentors as well. Mentors gain satisfaction in witnessing the development of the students with whom they work, are able to contribute to the future of the profession, enjoy a sense of rejuvenation and creativity, and in the case of faculty mentors, gain assistance in research endeavors.²

Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee. Often the recognition of the support comes at later stage.

Mentors are best remembered as people of great, understated wisdom who were there when we needed them.³ The specific advantages of a mentoring program are:

- Increases the confidence and skills of protégés.
- Improves active attendance.
- Opens opportunities for the protégé.
- Offers a rewarding relationship for both people.

Mentoring is an effective approach to organize, create, capture, and distribute knowledge. It supports short- and longer-term situational as well as topical learning between individuals and groups. It also reduces the time required for knowledge transfer by providing direct access to a range of experts and peers who can share the required knowledge and skills in an environment that promotes rapid learning.

Because 80 percent of learning is informal, mentoring empowers learning in ways that manuals, intranets, and training programs cannot. It shortens the learning curve, enhances productivity, and helps mentees to align to their personal strategy. In addition, knowledge transfer fuels succession planning, ensuring that once executives retire, someone with plenty of company knowledge will be ready to step into place.⁴

3. TYPES OF MENTORING

There is a lack of European definitions for types of mentoring and this is why in this paper we will use the following definitions of mentoring types based on those in the second edition of the “Elements of Effective Practice For Mentoring”.

Traditional One-to-One Mentoring: One-to-one mentoring places one adult in a relationship with one youth. At a minimum, the mentor and mentee should meet regularly at least four hours per month for at least a year. There are exceptions—such as in school-based mentoring, which coincides with the school year—and other types of special mentoring initiatives. In such special circumstances, mentees need to know from the outset how long they can expect the relationship to last so they can adjust their expectations accordingly.

Group Mentoring: Group mentoring involves one adult mentor forming a relationship with a group of up to four young people. The mentor assumes the role of leader and makes a commitment to meet regularly with the group over a long period of time. Most interaction is guided by the session structure, which includes time for personal sharing. The sponsoring mentoring program might specify certain activities that the group must participate in, or in some cases the mentor may choose or design

² Robert L. Bowman, Vicki E Bowman, Mentoring in a graduate counseling program: Students Counselor Education & Supervision, 1990, Vol. 30, Issue 1, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection

³ Dan Holden, The lost art of Inspired Mentoring, Industrial Management, 2014

⁴ Five benefits of a workplace mentoring program, Chronus Mentoring and Talent Development Solutions

appropriate activities. Some group mentoring activities may be intended as educating exercises, while others may simply be for fun.

Team Mentoring: Team mentoring involves several adults working with small groups of young people, with an adult-to-youth ratio no greater than one to four.

Peer Mentoring: Peer mentoring provides an opportunity for a caring youth to develop a guiding, teaching relationship with a younger person. Usually the mentoring program specifies activities that are curriculum-based. For example, a post graduate student might tutor an undergraduate student in a subject or engage in other skill-building activities on site. These youth mentors serve as positive role models. They require ongoing support and close supervision. Usually in a peer mentoring relationship, the mentor and the mentee meet frequently over the course of a semester or an entire academic year.

E-mentoring (also known as online mentoring, or telementoring): E-mentoring connects one adult with one youth. The pair communicate via the Internet at least once a week over a period of six months to a year. Some programs arrange two or three face-to-face meetings, one of which is a kickoff event. Often the mentor serves as a guide or advisor in university- or career-related areas; for example, helping the mentee complete an academic project or discussing future education and career options. During the summer months, e-mentoring can serve as a bridge for mentors and mentees in traditional one-to-one relationships.⁵

Traditional mentoring is often thought of as a one-to-one relationship between an older generation mentor and a less experienced and younger mentee. While this relationship still holds its place in mentoring today, the role of mentoring in the workplace has expanded to include a much wider range of learning opportunities. We will use the types of mentoring provided as tools at the workplace and we will adapt them for the purpose of university level mentoring:

Distance Mentoring: This will become one of the most preferred ways of communication between mentor and mentee because it overcomes physical space limitations and time constraints. Sometimes the most effective mentor or mentee is located elsewhere. Distance mentoring has evolved as a resourceful strategy that enables the mentee to find the perfect match no matter what the location of the mentor is. The immense surge of technology in the workplace has assisted this style of mentoring as most of the communication relies on electronic tools such as e-mail, audio/video-conferencing, etc. (Mentoring software can assist with distance mentoring - but is by no means limited to this mentoring type).

Situational Mentoring: In some cases, the mentoring relationship is used for a short time and an express purpose rather than as an overall developmental strategy. This approach enables the mentee to focus on their specific need without going through a more general procedure that would only slow down the learning process. The start-up incubators provide such similar type of situational mentoring, provided to help the mentees with a specific issue or a problem.

Mentoring Circles: This format highlights a more fluid approach to mentoring. Rather than having a fixed mentor and mentee, mentoring circles encourage a cycling of information between all of the members. A combination of action learning, coaching and peer mentoring allows the participants to take turns being the mentor and the mentee, generating a wider source of support and inspiration. Again, this type of mentoring could be observed during project-based performances.

Group or Team Mentoring: This style of mentoring also moves away from the traditional one-on-one approach. Whether it involves one mentor in charge of multiple mentees or one mentee who has multiple mentors, group mentoring strengthens the ties between all of the participants involved. Although it is less structured than the formal one-on-one approach, group mentoring encourages a natural exchange of information through its team-based mentality.

Peer Mentoring: This is a one-on-one approach to mentoring that focuses on an area of expertise and assigns the mentee to a more experienced peer who has a job at the same level. This relationship is not

⁵ Elements of effective practice for mentoring, 3rd edition

intended to be hierarchical but rather meant to encourage a reciprocal learning environment that promotes a sense of community.

Reverse Mentoring: In this type of mentoring the roles of traditional mentoring are reversed. A younger student takes on the role of the mentor while the mentee is an older and often more experienced student. This relationship closes the knowledge gap for both parties because it acts as a “two-way street”, encouraging the two parties to both teach and learn at the same time.⁶

Mentoring creates an environment of trust, belonging, understanding, support, and encouragement for a diverse workforce. It gives mentees an opportunity to voice their concerns, overcome hurdles, and find solutions. As a result, it inspires mentees to perform to their highest ability. Mentoring not only helps universities develop and retain diverse talent, but it also helps build a robust community of diverse talent for the future. The effects of diversity mentoring help universities differentiate themselves from their competitors and gain new students while providing long-term support for their students and alumni.

Regardless of the form mentoring takes, it facilitates sharing knowledge, expertise, skills, insights, and experiences through dialogue and collaborative learning.⁷

4. MENTOR STYLES

The types of mentoring have been analyzed but these types can be performed by a variety of mentors. Different mentoring relationships generate a whole host of mentor styles.

The **wise leader** is someone who through executive title, seniority, or status within the organization has reached the pinnacle of his or her career and is worthy of and willing to impart knowledge and wisdom to others in the organization. Often natural leaders, these politically astute individuals exude a certain air of confidence and innately understand and have thrived within the organization's culture and practices. While most of their mentoring relationships are formally arranged, wise leaders have been known to take on protégés in informal apprenticeships.

The **life coach** is a professional mentor, often in the organization's human resources division or an outside consultant. Staff looking to change jobs or careers often hire life coaches outside the work environment to evaluate their performance, prepare for new career opportunities, or simply set and achieve personal goals. These relationships tend to be short term with a targeted and prioritized set of objectives. While life coaching usually happens in a face-to-face environment, more and more life coaches are offering their services virtually—over the telephone or the Internet.

The **teacher** could be an educator, working with current or past students to build their professional talents and skills, or someone who assumes the “honorary” role of teacher—promoting learning and growth by imparting knowledge, debating ideas, or recommending resources. A teaching relationship might be officially sanctioned, such as enrolling for independent study, or as informal as dropping by during office hours for a chat.

Peer mentors participate in informal relationships in which colleagues or friends pair up to help each other grow within an organization. They might team up to gain professional development experience, share networking contacts, or simply support each other's career path choices.

The **confidante** is not so much a mentor as someone to use as a touchstone or sounding board. It is helpful in both healthy and dysfunctional work environments to have a confidante with whom to bat ideas around, air frustrations, request reality checks, and seek advice.

⁶Types of Mentoring for Today's Workplace, January 14, 2015, <http://insala.com/Articles/Mentoring-software/types-of-mentoring-for-todays-workplace.asp>

⁷ Five benefits of a workplace mentoring program, Chronus Mentoring and Talent Development Solutions

The **self-help mentor** takes the form of books, manuals, articles, checklists, software, Web sites, and so forth that provide proven formulas or step-by-step advice on how to grow professionally. While not a substitute for the real thing, some of these popular resources are useful in helping an employee map a career path and/or lay a foundation for future mentoring relationships.

The **inner mentor** is the internal voice that calls upon intuition to glean and mold life experiences into a personalized leadership philosophy. This nontraditional self-mentoring approach takes into account past experiences, current competencies, and future potential. The first step is to conduct a life experience inventory, identifying experiences that might hold leadership potential. It is the deconstruction—the picking apart—of these experiences to reveal underlying values and beliefs that will translate into a customized set of leadership principles.⁵ The process of mentoring oneself is difficult—it takes concentration, self-reflection, and the ability to trust your own instincts.⁸

Mentoring can take place in a wide array of settings, such as workplace, school, university, club, juvenile corrections facility (primarily in the United States), community setting, and virtual community, where e-mentoring takes place.⁹

5. GOALS OF MENTORING

The goal of mentoring is to develop and integrate a sustainable connection between learners from academia and mentors from industry sectors, providing support by distributing interactive educational content and services, and encouraging the effective and efficient personalized and supervised learning. Goals and objectives of mentoring could also be the following:

- To develop resources and tools to make informed career decisions.
- Through coaching and feedback, to develop leadership, teamwork, creative thinking and to enhance interpersonal skills.
- To advice on personal growth, academic, and career topics (including possible career paths).
- To provide a forum for observation, practice and mastery of professional networking skills.¹⁰
- The author suggests specific goals of a larger scale mentoring program. They are stated as follows:
- To establish a tool where mentors can provide mentoring to students of different levels of education.
- To inform and educate the stakeholder groups of the benefits of mentoring as proven tools for personal and career development.
- To strengthen the institutional and educational partnerships of the country with other European Union countries.
- To involve business organizations through educational and informative sessions of the benefits of mentoring and the recruitment potential, as well as of the social responsibility impact of the program.
- To involve governmental institutions in order to secure larger scale exposure and higher level impact of the program.
- To involve schools, universities and career centers and to improve their relation to business.

⁸ Susan E. Metros and Catherine Yang, *The Importance of Mentors*, The Ohio State University, 2006

⁹ How to build a successful mentoring program using the elements of effective practice, Mentor National Mentoring Partnership

¹⁰ The Xavier Mentoring Program

- To engage the media in order to secure higher exposure, higher societal impact and to involve more beneficiaries.
- To engage volunteers.
- To increase the social awareness and the corporate social responsibility within the country.

The methodology of developing a mentoring program includes informing the parties involved about the existence of the program and about the benefits and principles of mentoring.

The educational institutions need to be informed about the availability of such a service and how the educated can benefit from it. There could be informative sessions planned within the educational institutions, through career centers, or through education fairs. Other channels of information could be the media.

The business has to be informed about the existence of a mentoring program through media channels, through educational sessions and seminars, through conferences or through in-house training on mentoring. The business individuals have to be aware of the benefits from involving into a mentoring program as mentors and how this will be useful for the organizational goals and recruitment.

6. MENTORING TARGET GROUPS

In each mentoring program there are different stakeholder groups. For the purpose of this article we will examine the participant groups in a mentoring process as primary and secondary groups.



Figure 2: The Stakeholder Groups in a Mentoring Process

6.1. Primary Target Groups:

Mentees (mentored) – studying individuals who will receive mentorship in the form of advising, coaching, supervising, guiding, sharing, and accompanying from mentors. These could be:

- Students from undergraduate programs (expert, bachelor, etc. degrees) studying in state or private institutions
- Students from graduate programs (master degrees) studying in state or private institutions
- High school students studying in state or private high school institutions
- Pupil from state or private schools

6.2. Secondary Target Groups:

Mentors: individuals or groups of individuals who provide mentorship to studying individuals in the form of advising, coaching, supervising, guiding, sharing, and accompanying. Mentors are people with specific expertise, knowledge and experience in an area where the mentored searches development.

- Business organizations
- Business representatives (mentors, donors)
- Government institutions (ministerial departments, state educational institutions)
- Public sector representatives (mentors, partners, CSR)
- NGOs
- State and private universities
- Career centers
- Recruitment agencies
- State and private schools
- Volunteer organizations and individuals

7. ACTIVITIES OF A MENTORING PROGRAM

There is a lot to be done to secure the success of a mentoring program. To enable not only a good start but also a successful sustainability of the program the author suggests a specific set of activities related to every mentoring program. They include:

- Development, maintenance and support of a (digital) platform where mentees and mentors meet
- Data base collection of both mentors and mentees
- Organization and delivery of informative sessions for the public
- Organization and delivery of informative sessions for business organizations
- Organization of mentoring educational sessions for both business and academia
- Organization and support of university mentoring centers
- Organization and support of school mentoring centers
- Organization of conferences, seminars, and other public events

There are further ways to popularize a mentoring program and they could include informational meetings, posting flyers, to inform parents or potential mentees, to invite friends (and their friends) to mentor, to ask community leaders to suggest individuals, and through newspaper advertisements.

7.1. Recruiting mentors

To ensure that the supply of mentors meets the demand, there is a need for recruiting mentors. Recruiting is the process by which the program finds people to join or participate in the mentoring program. There are several methods to decide on ideal mentors among which focus groups, concerns surveys, brainstorming and other. There is a need to be decided upon what will mentors be doing, how long will the mentors commit, as well as what qualities and qualifications would be ideal in a mentor for the purpose of the specific mentoring program.

To ensure relevancy and accuracy in the mentors selection the screening and application process should involve official application, skills inventory, personal history, short answer question, field of expertise, background check, references, and an interview. The list of mentor selection requirements could be enriched depending on the specifics of each mentoring program – e.g. school or university mentoring program, or workplace mentoring program.

7.2. Mentoring program at the workplace

High potentials are an incredibly valuable asset to any company, but they're often difficult to retain. With careful cultivation, companies can increase retention to ensure they'll be able to appoint suitable leaders at the top when needed—which is crucial to the health and future of every organization. However, because high potentials are so important, it's imperative to engage them while also exposing them to different areas of the business, developing their leadership skills, and ensuring they're learning what they need to excel in prospective new roles.

Mentoring is an effective strategy to reward high potentials with personal attention and guidance, which leads to nurturing an organization's leadership chain. By connecting high potentials with leaders, top performers, and each other across the company, learning spreads throughout the organization. This results in improved engagement while leveraging internal resources, which keeps costs to a minimum.

A company called Sun Microsystems released the results of a study that explored the value of mentoring. The study examined the financial impact of mentoring and how Sun could target its spending in this area. The researchers looked at data from more than 1,000 Sun employees over a five-year period. The study concluded that, "mentoring has a positive impact on mentors and mentees, producing employees that are more highly valued by the business".

The study also found that 25 percent of employees in a test group who took part in the company's mentoring program had a salary grade change, compared with five percent of employees in a control group who did not participate in the program. 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. In addition retention rates were much higher for mentees (72 percent) and mentors (69 percent) than for employees who did not participate in the mentoring

program (49 percent).¹¹

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the many benefits of mentoring throughout universities and organizations, and the mentoring lifecycle. Easily adaptable, mentoring can address multiple talent and career development initiatives. It's a proven, cost-effective way to develop students of all levels and is an engagement tactic that shouldn't be overlooked. However, setting up a program requires thought, planning and effort. Software makes it easy to start and manage a mentoring program if the program will have more than 50 participants. Additionally, software can provide in-depth metrics on the health of the program plus to demonstrate how the program helps achieve goals like student engagement, development, and career recruitment.

¹¹ <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu>

Overall the expected impact of a mentoring program should be modernization of education, training and learning, emergence of innovative digital mentoring and learning environment, development of digital learning and teaching resources, increased personal development and skills capacity in academic learners, personalized informal approach towards academic learners, development of mentoring centers and programs, collaboration with a large number of business, educational, governmental and European Union institutions.

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