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Does your  
Organisation  
need Learning 2.0?  
by Rob Wilkins P33

Thinking Mentoring:  
Consider the Online  
Option

by Dr Kim Rickard P14

ISSN 1449-8146



Heart of Success  
by Adelina Mostafa – P16

Is your Organisational  
Knowledge about to retire on  
you? by Arndria Seymour – P26



# Thinking mentoring? Consider the online option

by Dr Kim Rickard, APESMA

E-mentoring uses email as the primary means of communication between mentor and mentee along with other online or web-based tools. While it's not suitable for everyone, it's potentially a powerful way of delivering these opportunities to those who are too busy to access mentoring in other ways, and has reach to those in regional or rural locations, or those mobile rather than office-based.

Dr Kim Rickard explains the pros and cons of e-mentoring and what makes it work well.

Observers have noted that people who are successful in their chosen field very often have one thing in common – a mentor.

This seemingly simple common characteristic however belies the complexity of developing, delivering and evaluating mentoring in a program environment. Mentoring is uniquely characterised by the diversity of support and advice provided by mentors to mentees and this of course makes delivering a quality experience challenging – but not impossible.

## How does e-mentoring compare with traditional mentoring?

There's no question that there can be disadvantages to e-mentoring when compared with traditional face-to-face mentoring. Email lacks

the cues associated with face-to-face communication such as facial expressions, posture, dress, social status indicators and vocal cues and this may in turn negatively impact on communication and learning.

There is research however which suggests that email-based communication can potentially remove obstacles such as geographic dispersal and time constraints, provide a forum which allows for fairly sophisticated and considered exchanges between participants improving the chances of higher learning, and has the added potential benefits of mentor impartiality and interorganisational connections. Research also indicates that one of the major obstacles to mentoring is the failure of mentoring partners to make time to meet – so e-mentoring can facilitate participation by simply using technology to make it easier to cross paths. Personal email has also been shown to have characteristics that can foster the development of personal relationships online, especially for members of minority groups where status differences can be a problem – some research suggests that the power differential which may mark a face-to-face mentoring partnership can be overcome using e-mentoring. It's also been suggested that e-mentoring may limit problems with cross-gender mentoring.

So the potential advantages of e-mentoring include flexibility, fewer (or different) social constraints, reflexivity, self-paced and self-directed learning all supported by previous discussions being available to read

back on which helps with continuity and the ongoing development of discussions.

Most importantly, e-mentoring has in common with face-to-face mentoring the power to deliver a learning experience which directly addresses the particular needs of those participating in the program. In e-mentoring, a well developed structure supports the mentoring partners through the initiation/relationship-building phase, the development phase, the consolidation and discussion phase, and the concluding and redefinition phase, with the mentee and mentor actively (and sometimes ruthlessly!) adapting the structure along the way. Participants generally find the support valuable as a resource for keeping their program on track, providing discussion topics, referral to program tools and other resources, helping set program goals and a communications schedule and providing a third party for both mentees and mentors to touch base with if needed. And of course combining face to face meetings *with* e-mentoring has the potential to leverage the strengths of each of the different mentoring models – to get the best of both worlds – so that's another important option to consider.

### Critical success factors

Research shows that e-mentoring can be a powerful way of delivering an individualised learning experience for mentees, and for getting mentors on board who might otherwise be too busy to offer their services.

To be effective, e-mentoring should be underpinned by a commitment to regular quality interaction between mentoring partners, mentees and mentors ready to adapt the program to their own needs, supported by a well-developed structure and tools, placed in a broader program context, and provide training for mentees and mentors in goal-setting and needs identification.

### Outcomes

The intended impact of a program should be informed by the needs of the target group and the objectives of the program. Outcomes are likely to be as diverse as the needs of those participating in it, and program evaluation should aim to capture this diversity and detail. Measurement legitimately includes but should not be limited to the outcomes reported by mentees – where possible, quantitative and qualitative measures of effectiveness should be combined.

Because of their importance to the sustainability and scalability of an e-mentoring program, evaluation should also consider mentors as key stakeholders. Achievable and measurable KPIs should be set for the host organisation, and the goals of the mentoring program should of course be aligned with the broader strategic objectives of the host organisation.

### Cost comparison with traditional mentoring

Cost-effectiveness is always an important consideration when organisations are considering offering a mentoring program. Apart from the additional IT infrastructure costs associated with establishing a support website, the cost of developing an e-mentoring program is comparable to a traditional mentoring program – requiring investment in content development, incentives for mentor participation if needed, marketing, training for participants, liability insurance and appropriate staffing to ensure that the host or moderator is appropriately trained. The potential cost savings are in the infrastructure required to deliver the program once it's been set up. If the right settings are in place, e-mentoring programs can be high quality, sustainable, scalable, responsive and incur only minimal expenditure to deliver. But the key is to ensure the right settings are in place upfront, and there is a commitment to continuous improvement.

Obviously the bottom line is that the learning needs of the target group should drive the mentoring model adopted by an organisation. If your target group is geographically dispersed, in regional and rural areas, across workplaces, time zones, are time-poor and juggling multiple priorities, under major time constraints, and/or have diverse learning needs, e-mentoring is definitely an option worth considering. It makes sense – commercially and otherwise. There is no reason why e-mentoring can't operate effectively in the commercial as well as not-for-profit sectors.

E-mentoring is ultimately no short-cut. Done badly, it is likely to fail like any other mentoring program – online or otherwise. Done well, e-mentoring can be not only effective – it can be a powerful life-changing experience.

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