

Chapter 60

Relationship between Senior and Junior Researcher: Challenges and Opportunities for Knowledge Creating and Sharing

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ABSTRACT

The professional development of a young researcher is mainly influenced by the organizational culture and the relationship with academic colleagues, especially mentors. This chapter presents the results of a qualitative study conducted on a sample of 16 researchers employed in three Slovenian public universities. The study examines the senior-junior researcher relationship, as the relationship between mentor and mentee, the nature of their cooperation, and how new knowledge is generated and transmitted. In-depth semi-structured interviews and content analysis for structuring qualitative data was used. The results indicate that the professional development of junior researchers is based mostly on their independent work where the mentor guidance is only occasional. Despite the development of information and communication technology, and in particular the Social Web tools, the mentorship in the framework of higher education institutions is still based on a face-to-face relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations that wish to remain successful in the market in this age of globalization, marked by the financial and economic crisis, must be able to adapt to its rapid changes and to fulfil every new demand. Universities are also adapting to this trend, as they fight for their survival with the help of public funds or of those acquired with marketing activities. Universities represent a work environment where an individual and the knowledge he possesses are an important source of competitive advantage, which

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is why universities, in order to avoid losing competitive position, are encouraging experts to pass their knowledge onto their younger colleagues. The most common form of such transfer of knowledge takes place during the process of participation of experienced academics and those who are just starting their academic career. The future of universities and higher education institutions depends to a large extent on the quality of cooperation between older, more experienced colleagues and younger ones and on the care for career development of junior faculty (Whitcomb, 2004).

Two of the main forms of cooperation between senior and junior faculty are formal and informal mentoring (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, and Yeo, 2005). These two forms of cooperation between already established experts and novices in the field of research differ mainly in the way of the relationship is established and its duration. Formal mentoring is formed systematically, with the involvement of the organization and it mostly lasts a short period of time. It does not necessarily require a personal relationship or understanding between mentor and mentee. On the other hand an informal mentoring relationship is formed spontaneously and without intermediaries (Douglas, 1997), which brings us to the conclusion that an informal mentoring relationship is a relationship between a mentor and a mentee, who have a special affinity for each other and both derive pleasure from the cooperation. While a formal mentoring relationship can be entered into by two individuals from different departments (Douglas, 1997; Murray, 1991) informal mentoring relationships are mostly formed by senior and junior researchers working in the same field of science and who have similar goals and interests (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). However, Boice (Boice, 1992) notes that informal mentoring is very rarely seen in the educational system and that only a third of new teachers are in such a relationship.

The time-limited nature of formal mentoring results in a lower level of trust and emotional closeness between experts and novices. In the case of a prolonged relationship, which is typical for informal mentoring, the mentor and the mentee have more time at their disposal to develop psychosocial and career development functions, which is why the results of their participation may only become apparent after a longer period of time (Ragins and Cotton, 1999).

Because of the benefits of mentoring programs, some organizations, including universities, began organizing "Network Mentoring" programs in the field of pedagogical work, in which large numbers of people from different faculties or departments can participate. This form of mentoring requires a relationship in which all the participants are equal and where mentors and mentees can swap roles and thus actively contribute to the relationship (Haring, 1999). In their study performed at the Purdue University, Wasburn and LaLopa (2003) found that this form of mentoring satisfied the needs of both mentors and mentees. The former because the informal nature of the program and an opportunity to evaluate their teaching style and cooperate with teachers/researchers from other schools. The latter because the program allows them to exchange views on teaching, acquire new ideas on teaching techniques and gain an insight into the teaching style, which is used in various scientific disciplines. Network Mentoring programs have proven to be an opportunity for the mentee to obtain the desired information and reduce the feeling of isolation. At the same time, these programs contribute to the improvement of pedagogical work, for the mentors and the mentees (Wasburn and LaLopa, 2003). A review of the available literature showed no such initiatives in the field of research.

Most of the literature on the subject of mentoring in the field of scientific research focuses mainly on the relationship between mentor and doctoral or post-doctoral students (Olson and Connelly, 1995; Whitley and Oddi, 1998), while the area of cooperation at the individual level between senior - junior researcher remains relatively poorly researched. For those individuals who are just starting their academic career, the right mentor can be a great source of help and support, which is why it is not surprising that

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