

Chapter 41

Tapping Social Capital through E-Mentoring: An Alternative Approach to Women's Career Development

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ABSTRACT

The value of mentoring for career development is widely recognized by researchers and practitioners. For women, being mentored is particularly valuable for their career growth. However, the reality is that professional women continue to encounter challenges men do not, both in finding mentors and in building healthy mentoring relationships. In this chapter, the authors examine how e-mentoring can be used as an alternative tool to address some of the challenges facing women in mentoring relationships and to assist them with their career progression. They conduct an integrative literature review to identify research on e-mentoring in the context of women's career development, and they identify trends in current e-mentoring research and make recommendations for improving e-mentoring practice. The chapter concludes with directions for future research on e-mentoring.

INTRODUCTION

As a means to personal and professional development, mentoring has long existed worldwide for centuries. Bierema and Hill (2005) noted that individuals who receive mentoring “advance farther, make higher salaries, and are more satisfied than those who do not” (p. 556). Similarly, Leck, Elliot,

and Rockwell (2012) identified positive career outcomes resultant from mentoring, including greater compensation, enhanced opportunities for promotions, higher job satisfaction, increased career and organizational commitment, and better work-life balance. For women, being mentored is particularly valuable for their career growth (Kelly, 2001). In fact, researchers argue that

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women need more mentoring than men in order to advance in the organizational hierarchy since they face more institutional, interpersonal, and individual obstacles than their male counterparts (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Kelly, 2001; Ragins, 1989; Tharenou, 2005; Wang, 2009).

Finding mentors, however, has been a major challenge for professional women. We identify three possible reasons for this. First, mentorship has traditionally occurred at the discretion and interest of the mentors who are primarily male. Male mentors tend to select male versus female protégées due to their comfort in developing professional and personal relationships with other males (Ehrich, 1994; Ragins, 1989). Second, the paucity of women in senior roles has resulted in a shortage of women who can serve as mentors. In 2012, women made up 46.9% of the U.S. labor force and comprised 51.5% of management, professional and related positions; however, they continue to have a small representation in high-ranking positions (Clarke, 2011) and experience gender inequity at work (Miller & Attridge, 2011; Weidenfeller, 2012). Note that the latest statistics (Catalyst, 2013) show the number of women executive officers in the Fortune 500 companies has stagnated in recent years, at 13.5% in 2009, 14.4% in 2010, to 14.1% in 2011, and 14.3% in 2012. This reality limits women's options for identifying female mentors (Ibarra, 1993; Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Third, when a mentoring relationship does exist for women, the career benefits are noticeably fewer compared to those for men (Kelly, 2001). The implication is: until mentoring becomes an integral part of women's professional development, they will likely continue to be disadvantaged by the discriminatory nature of traditional mentoring (Wang, 2009).

In this chapter, we propose one alternative—e-mentoring—as an effective approach to address some of the critical challenges facing women in the workplace. While e-mentoring is still an emerging phenomenon and an under-researched area, its value for career development of professional

women has already been documented (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Headlam-Wells, 2004; Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Graig, 2005). Bierema and Hill (2005) noted, “Traditional face-to-face mentoring is not always practical in a knowledge society where communication is instantaneous, computer mediated, and global” (p. 557). In line with these authors' propositions, we offer e-mentoring as an alternative means for women's career development based on two assertions. First, with the reach and convenience of a wide range of technologies, e-mentoring enables women to more easily tap into social capital to which they traditionally do not have access. Second, e-mentoring provides creative ways to help women overcome personal barriers (e.g., lack of social skills and assertiveness, Hamilton & Scandura, 2003) which are typically associated with traditional mentorship.

BACKGROUND

In this section, we provide an overview of e-mentoring. We start with a quick review of mentoring in general and then move to discuss the definition, characteristics, benefits, and disadvantages of e-mentoring.

Overview of Mentoring

Mentoring has been defined and understood differently by scholars. In her classical publication, “*Mentoring at Work*,” Kram (1985) defined mentoring by outlining the two basic types of its functions: career functions (which involves sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging tasks); and psycho-social functions (which includes role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship). Kram (1985) further distinguished the purposes of each type of mentoring function; that is, career functions aim to “enhance advancement in an organization” (Kram, 1985, p. 24), while psycho-social functions are to “enhance an indi-

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