Chapter 8.10
Virtual Mentoring

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ABSTRACT

With the proliferation of information technology and its saturation within homes, classrooms, and organizations, the traditional landscape of mentoring relationships is quickly becoming a faceless phenomenon. Virtual mentoring is rapidly being the more preferred way to initiate mentor and protégé relationships because of constraints that prevent people from meeting face-to-face. It is through this computer-mediated method of interaction where benefits surface that increase computer-mediate dialogue, allow for the free exchange of knowledge and information regardless of an individual's role within the interaction, and provides women a channel to voice their opinions and ideas free from gender bias. Outside of these benefits; however, limitations do exist that should be closely monitored so that the continued success of virtual mentoring can remain a viable option.

INTRODUCTION

With computerized technology on the forefront of organizational advancement, and the increased desire for globalization, virtual mentoring is rapidly becoming the preferred method of choice when mentors and protégés communicate with one another. No longer is geographic distance a barrier. Asynchronous technologies promote the development of virtual organizations, let mentors and protégés respond to inquiries at convenient times, and provide organizational members an opportunity

to influence the current generation by using an assortment of web sites, podcasts, and a myriad of other types of technology to foster creativity. Additionally virtual mentoring programs can serve as virtual voices for women, minorities, and other marginalized and underrepresented groups. It is through this chapter where the prevalence of virtual mentoring will be reviewed.

Mentoring, as a concept, goes back thousands of years to Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Homer tells the story of an elderly and wise sea captain named Mentor, who gives Odysseus's son, Telemachus, guidance while his father is gone on his long journey. In modern times, the word "mentor" has been used to refer to a relationship where one individual with more knowledge and experience aids another individual who has less knowledge and experience (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorham, 2001). Mentoring can be described as the communication relationship where a senior person advises, teaches, and encourages a junior person's professional and sometimes personal development (Hill, Bahniuk, & Dobos, 1989).

Today we see a mentor as "someone who helps someone else learn something that he or she would have learned less well, more slowly, or not at all if left alone" (Bell, 2000, p. 53). One type of mentoring relationship is the virtual mentoring relationship. To date, very little research has been conducted in the area of virtual mentoring (Harrington, 1999). The book chapter examines the realm of virtual mentoring and how it pertains to virtual work. Moreover, this chapter aims to identify mentoring practices and processes underlying virtual organizing. Most importantly, the chapter provides an understanding of the practical implications of mentoring to virtual work.

According to a UK website, called "Mentors Forum", a website devoted to mentoring, mentor provide four key elements in their relationships with their mentees:

- **Coach:** to show the learner how to carry out a task
- **Facilitate:** create opportunities for learners to utilize new skills
- **Counsel:** help learners explore consequences of potential decisions
- **Network:** refer learners to others when mentor's experience is insufficient

Overall, mentors offer many roles to their mentees. This type of relationship often relies on effective communication. It has been demonstrated that mentor-mentee relationships can create more satisfaction, increase productivity, and increase understanding (Conner, 2002).Hence, there are several benefits to mentorship.

For the mentor, there may be some benefits such as:

- Offers knowledge to others
- Offers a new perspective on their current task
- Offers insight for the future
- Offers a personal actualization in one's talent/skill/compentency

For the mentee, there may also be some benefits such as:

- Obtains advice from the mentor
- Obtains assurance from mentor's support
- Obtains personalized attention
- Obtains a new perspective on the current task

The mentor-mentee relationship is valuable for any organization because it also offers many benefits, such as:

- Creating morale
- Fosters creativity and growth
- Increases satisfaction and retention

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