

Chapter 5.15

Social Implications of E–Mentoring: Development of an E–Mentoring Model

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ABSTRACT

E-mentoring, also known as online mentoring or virtual mentoring, is changing the way that traditional mentor and protégé dyad members interact with each other. Mentoring has been widely known for its ability to enhance the career development, and to provide psychosocial support, for more junior organizational members. Through the use of computer-mediated communication technology, e-mentoring may allow individuals to bridge geographic and time differences. However, there is still much we do not know about e-mentoring and its social effects. This chapter focuses on whether or not computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology will allow for true mentoring relationships to develop, as well as what personal characteristics may be necessary to grow these virtual relationships. A model and proposition for future research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

It is indisputable that computer-mediated communication technology (CMC), that is the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging and related technologies, is changing the social landscape and the process of how we communicate with one another. Harris Interactive reported that more than 156 million adults, or 73% of the U.S. population age 18 and older, were communicating online in 2004. The Harris Interactive study characterized online users as representative of “mainstream” America in that 30% of users reported having a college degree or greater, and 48% noted annual household incomes of \$50,000 or greater (Harris Interactive, 2004). Eurostat reports that close to 54% of European Internet users link up every day or almost every day, and 82% link up weekly. In Europe, student use is particularly high (ranging from 42 to 96%) on a daily basis as is use by people educated at a graduate level (Eurostat, 2005).

As these individuals continue to use CMC, Kock (2004) suggests that this new digital media is creating new social situations and communication behaviors. Social scientists cannot entirely agree on what these social changes may be (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Nie & Ebring, 2000; Lin, 2001) or if computer-mediated technology can substitute sufficiently for face-to-face (FtF) communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Given the social implications of CMC use and the challenges facing the e-business environment, it is agreed that investigating these phenomena during the early stages of the new medium's diffusion and institutionalization is incredibly important research (DiMaggio et al., 2001).

E-mentoring is a recent social construction using CMC. Whether it is called e-mentoring, or online mentoring, telementoring, cybermentoring or virtual mentoring (Single & Muller, 2001), e-mentoring can be characterized as an ongoing, computer-mediated relationship that involves the receipt of mentoring functions between junior (inexperienced) and senior (more experienced) partners. E-mentoring relationships are evolving from traditional mentoring relationships due to CMC. Traditional, FtF mentoring involves the mentor providing psychosocial and vocational support functions. The setting and pursuit of goals for personal and professional development is an important element in the transfer of learning in mentor-protégé relationships, and mentors often offer feedback and information to help the protégé attain his or her goals (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003; Kram, 1985). Through the use of CMC, e-mentoring relationships are changing social patterns and communication styles, and allowing e-mentors to provide similar support functions for e-protégés.

Mentors provide protégés with three broad functions: career development (i.e., exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, sponsorship, challenging assignments), psychosocial support

(i.e., acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship) and role modeling (demonstrating, articulating and counseling regarding appropriate behaviors implicitly or explicitly) (Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992). The career development functions provide vocational support and are associated with protégé outcomes, including enhanced knowledge, skills and abilities, opportunities for promotion, and increased compensation. Vocational support also is provided through role modeling, which allows protégés to understand appropriate interpersonal behavior and culture within the organizational context, and aids protégés in performing tasks and communicating well with superiors, peers and subordinates. The psychosocial functions provide socio-emotional (social) support and are associated with protégé outcomes, such as job and career satisfaction, career balance, and increased expectations of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Dreher & Cox, Jr., 1996; Scandura, 1992; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003).

E-mentoring appears to be a necessary form of relationship, given the technology-dependent environment within which we work and the need to interact using CMC. Increased use of communication technology expands opportunities for individuals to obtain information that will contribute to successful career advancement. Relying solely on FtF mentors may become impossible given the globalized workforce and geographically dispersed subject matter experts. In fact, Hamilton and Scandura (2003) stated that the key distinction between e-mentoring and traditional mentoring is in the amount of face-time between mentor and protégé. Many researchers have suggested that savvy professionals would be well advised to establish a network of developmental relationships (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Higgins & Kram, 2001). This network can include individuals within and outside a person's organization or industry. The network allows the individual to consult experienced professionals, who might aid in navigating complex organizational, subject

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