Utilizing Mentoring in the Distance Learning Environment

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Abstract: The value of mentoring can be seen in many different learning and training environments. This value, and its pedagogical contributions, are present regardless of the delivery platform, but the actual mentoring environment changes when education and training shifts from a face to face to a virtual or blended environment. This paper presents the foundations of a mentoring program and also the approaches that can be used to transition mentoring to a virtual environment.

Introduction

As the composition of student populations in higher education continues to diversify, and program content continues to expand, new methods to best deliver instruction are necessary. Over the past twenty years much of the focus on these methods has been the use of digital technologies in fully online or blended environments, and also as supplements to support different learning styles in the traditional classroom. One of the key concerns with this shift to virtual learning environments has been the potential loss of personal attention to students.

The traditional solution to providing students with individual guidance has been to establish mentoring relationships, whether through student organizations, the use of faculty advisors, or other mechanisms. The value of mentorship is widely recognized, and in current practice is a popular topic in business management. Growing online graduate programs have also driven an increased use of online mentoring for graduate students (Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013). As the recognition of mentorship as a valuable tool for developing individuals expands there has been increased attention to how to leverage digital tools to facilitate the mentoring relationship.

To identify the value of mentoring, and also how to integrate it into a virtual environment, the definition and current uses of mentoring will be explored. Following

this exploration, mentoring in the virtual environment will be introduced. By understanding both the foundation of mentoring as a practice and also how it functions in a virtual environment, practitioners will be able to better apply the approach with students.

The Value of Mentoring

Rowland (2012) defines mentoring as, "transferring knowledge and skills from an established professional to a junior or new member of the field and e-mentoring uses an asynchronous electronic means to communicate and establish the support of a mentoring relationship" (p 229). In business applications mentoring offers opportunities for employees to be successful in the orientation and socialization process with a new position. The process also offers opportunities for skilled employees to transfer those skills to others who are either new to the work or are struggling with the demands of their position. This exchange of knowledge has the potential to be very valuable in all aspects of employee development.

Kreitner and Kinicki (2012) explain that the socialization component of mentoring promotes a sense of membership in the organization. In addition to the social benefits, mentoring has real impacts on the performance of the individual in the organization. Employees who are part of a positive mentoring experience generally exhibit higher organizational knowledge, greater job and career satisfaction, and better job performance (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004).

While these benefits are identified in the workplace, they easily translate to higher education environments. A part of developing students in professional programs is orienting them to the language and professional practice of the discipline, which parallels the socialization of an employee in a new organization. The transfer of knowledge and skills is a much more direct connection as educational programs have the specific goal of developing these attributes in students. Given the value of mentoring, the natural question becomes one of how to best design and implement a mentoring program. Appropriate training of mentors is critical for a successful mentoring program and mentoring is increasingly being demanded by both students and institutions.

Demand for Mentoring

A review of the existing literature indicates that students benefit from mentoring in higher education (Khan & Gogos, 2013). These benefits are recognized by both students and institutions and combine to create an overall increase in the need for mentoring programs. Holtzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, and Young (2014) found that students were requesting mentoring from faculty to support their academic and professional development. From the institutional perspective there is a recognition that online learning demands an instructional shift to more of a mentoring approach (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012), that online mentoring is a valuable support mechanism for online students (Crawford & Persaud, 2013), and that mentoring is an element that positively impacts student performance and should be included in

institutional assessment (Britto, Ford, & Wise, 2013). With students seeking mentoring opportunities and universities recognizing the value of mentoring to student success the programs clearly have a place in the design of modern educational environments. To be successful institutions need to develop and execute a successful design process.

Designing a Mentoring Program

Successfully designing a mentoring program begins with establishing clear support from the leadership of the organization. This clear support adds to the likelihood that members of the organization will engage in the mentoring process (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2008). With support in place the development of the program can begin.

Much like instructional design or other problem solving approaches, developing a mentoring program begins with conducting a needs assessment. A needs assessment is important in regard to the institution of a mentoring program because it assists in the identification of problem areas, can be used to increase managerial support, aids the development of data for evaluation, and assists in determining costs and benefits of training (Brown, 2002). Of critical importance when conducting the needs analysis is to remember that the purpose is to successfully match mentors with mentees in a process designed to meet established goals (Kahle-Piasecki, 2011).

The outcomes of the needs analysis will inform the content of the mentorship design. Implementing a formal mentoring program involves setting program objectives, policies, guidelines, and activities (Hezlett & Gibson, 2005). In an educational setting the program objectives for a mentoring program may closely mirror the already established objectives of the corresponding academic program. Policies, guidelines, and activities will likely be dictated by the nature of the program as well as both the capacity of the organization to support the mentorship program and the demand of the students to participate.

Once the program is designed and launched, the process is not over. To be successful in the long term, evaluation must be performed to determine where the program is or is not satisfying the identified needs. This will take the form of a training evaluation, with Kirkpatrick's four-level model of Reaction, Learning, Behavior, and Results being a popular choice (Kirkpatrick, 2006). This evaluation approach does well in considering the needs of most organizations and includes the opinions and resulting actions of participants.

These general design guidelines provide a foundation for building a mentoring program and can apply to different environments. For online or blended learning environments a specific focus is necessary on designing mentoring into the virtual environment and applying the appropriate digital tools. While the focus is on online and blended environments, these digital tools can be successfully applied to support mentoring in traditional environments as well.

Defining Virtual Mentorships and Environments

The overall purpose of virtual mentorships is the same as that for mentorships in a more traditional environment. The goal is to deliver the mentee opportunities for learning, advising, encouraging, and modeling; the difference is that in a virtual environment these activities are independent of time and place (Kumar, et al., 2013). E-mentoring activities, those of vocational, psychosocial, and role-modeling functions, are similar to traditional mentoring environments; but in e-mentoring, technology is responsible for facilitating the relationship between the mentor and the protégé (Rowland, 2012).

This central role of technology in the e-mentoring process is an important consideration when designing a virtual environment for mentorship. The digital tools offered in an e-mentoring environment deliver specific opportunities for those engaged in the experience. Liu, Macintyre, and Ferguson (2012) explain that online mentoring features a flatter hierarchy and, through its structural composition, creates benefits in engagement, retention, and progression. The virtual nature of an e-mentoring environment also offers opportunities to create and maintain learning and organizational connections while at the same time removing much of the opportunity for discrimination based on physical traits that is possible in a traditional environment (Rowland, 2012).

The next consideration when designing an e-mentoring program is to identify the actual goals of the mentorship. Williams, Sunderman, and Kim (2011) identify nine different aspects of the e-mentoring environment that should be considered when designing and maintaining the mentoring process: Structure, Learning Objects, Administrative Support, Technical Support, Communication Tools, E-mentor Training, E-mentor Coaching Support, In-person E-mentor gatherings, and E-mentor Evaluation. The balance displayed in this list is very important. For a mentorship to be successful, both parties need to be supported and developed and the process itself needs to be well designed. In response to this the Williams, et al. list focuses on the tools and procedures that will make the process successful and support and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that the mentors are prepared and executing successfully. The absence of the mentee on this list may seem inappropriate, but if the process and the mentors are well designed, closely monitored, and working well, then by default the mentees are receiving what is necessary to be successful in their role.

The success guidelines for mentoring environments are supported by other literature as well. Kumar, et al. (2013) explain that successful online mentors provide structure, are timely in their feedback, and deliver feedback that is valued by students. Strategies that have been successful in online mentoring include using multiple modes of communication, proper structure of the mentoring environment, and student initiative (Kumar, et al., 2013). Clearly the structure of the environment, as well as the means of communication are critical elements in an e-mentoring design. Liu, et al. (2012) explains that online mentoring communities can be developed and maintained through using the rich media provided by Web 2.0 technologies.

Designing Virtual Mentorships

The design of virtual mentorship environments should be based on the elements that define the process and participants. Beginning with the environment, the right interface linking to the proper tools will provide people with opportunities to engage with one another and begin to build the community. Specifically, the technologies need to facilitate interactions and connections that enable learning in an open, unstructured environment (Liu, et al., 2012). The number of potential tools that can be applied to this task is far too large to discuss in detail here, and as Web 2.0 technologies evolve a complete list at the time of this writing would likely be inaccurate by the time of publication. The important point is to select technologies that give participants that open communication and community building opportunities that lead to successful mentorships.

Beyond the technical tasks involved in establishing a virtual mentorship environment the human element also must be addressed. Just as faculty members require training to be effective online instructors, they also need development to be effective as online mentors. Competencies to support this role as an online mentor include: online developmental competence, social competence, cognitive competence, teaching competence, communication competence, managerial competence, and online technical competence (Kumar, et al., 2013). Serving as a mentor in the virtual environment is a complex and demanding role. Training should cover the required competencies and also involve active engagement in a mentoring environment and follow-up assessments to ensure that the mentor has the proper set of skills to be successful.

With the environment and mentor both prepared, the final element of the virtual mentorship is the mentee. Straus, Johnson, Marquez, and Feldman (2013) identified success factors of mentees as being open to feedback, effective listeners, and respectful of the mentor's input and time. These success factors outline a mentee's responsibilities in the relationship and also provides a framework for their training needs. Providing the necessary preparation allows mentees to take advantage of the opportunities available in a mentorship and completes the third component of a successful mentoring environment.

Conclusion

The similarities between traditional and virtual mentoring provide a good foundation for constructing a virtual mentorship environment. The execution of that virtual environment, however, demands attention to some different considerations, particularly in regard to the technical and training aspects of a mentoring program. By pursuing an appropriate development process, establishing a sound operating environment, and properly training participants, virtual mentoring allows for an expansion of mentoring to time and space independent environments.

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