

# EMCC Research Review

## Issue 6: Mentoring in Organisational Socialization



## Introduction

Dear Reader,

In this issue of the EMCC Research Review we will examine the role of mentoring in organisational socialization, often referred to as “onboarding” outside of the academic literature.

As illustrated by a review by Allen, Chao, Eby and Bauer from 2017 published in Journal of Applied Psychology, there is a strong affinity between the two domains, both in terms of theory and practice, so it seems only natural to unpack the relation in the current issue.

We start out with 2 older studies. The first study by Ostroff and Koslowski from 1993, is as relevant today as it was when it was published nearly 30 years ago. They investigate the role of non-supervisory mentoring in the socialisation of newcomers from a learning perspective.

Specifically, they show that the presence of mentors alters the information seeking behaviours of newcomers. Mentors are particularly useful gaining information about the organisation.

The next study is a very interesting quasi-experiment by Seibert. The advantage of this study is that it allows for a comparison of mentored and non-mentored individuals under similar organisational circumstances. Using a sample of newcomer engineers, the study shows that having a mentor contributes to higher levels of Job Satisfaction.

The final study was conducted by Thomas and Lankau who investigate the connection between mentoring and burnout. Interestingly, the authors do not look at the socialisation of newcomers, Instead, they look at the socialisation of experienced employees in the context of a constantly changing environment, something that applies to many organisations today. The study shows that mentoring and high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships prevent role stress and burnout.

I hope you enjoy reading the current issue.

Sincerely  
Content writer  
Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

## **Using mentors to gain information about the organisation as a newcomer**

*Study: The role of Mentoring in information gathering processes of newcomers during early organizational socialization*

*By: Cheri Ostroff & Steve W. J. Kozlowski*

*Published in: Journal of Vocational Behavior, 1993, vol. 42, pp. 170-183*

### **Introduction**

This was the first study to zoom in on the effect of mentoring on the context of organisational socialization. The goal of the study was to examine the degree to which newcomers use mentors more as sources of information during their onboarding relative to other sources. A mentor was defined as someone “someone with a high level than you (in the organization) who has helped you by taking you ‘under their wing’, even though they were not formally required to do so”, and the person could not be a direct supervisor. The mentorships investigated were therefore of the informal type.

### **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers investigated 332 newly graduated engineering and management alumni, who had been in their first job for 2-6 months. Out of these, 105 had a mentor. The remainder served as a comparison for the sake of teasing out the effects of being mentored versus not being mentored. Respondents were asked to indicate which out of 6 sources (mentor, supervisor, co-workers, observation, trying, employee manual) they used to get information about 4 domains of knowledge (task, role, workgroup, and organisation). Obviously, those in the non-mentored group did not rate how much information they gathered from mentors.

### **Main Findings**

The study showed that the presence of a mentor altered the information acquisition patterns of newcomers.

- Newcomers with mentors used their mentors to acquire information about the organisational domain and the task domain
- Newcomers with mentors acquired more information about the organisational domain than those without mentors
- Newcomers without mentors relied more on co-workers for information, but there was no difference in how the mentored and non-mentored individuals relied on supervisors
- Both mentored and non-mentored newcomers predominantly relied on observation as a source of information

### **Why is this interesting?**

The study's overall finding, that the presence of a mentor alters information acquisition of newcomers, is interesting in its own right. Especially because the study examined informal mentorships. Seeing that more extroverted individuals are more likely to find a mentor informally, this may give them a relative advantage.

The study also shows that mentors are particularly useful sources of information about the broader aspects of socialization pertaining to organisational issues such as politics and policies. This finding is particularly relevant for large and more complex corporations in which "learning how to do corporate" is likely an important part of the socialization process.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

The study indicates that it may be valuable for newcomers to have a mentor from a different part of the organisation or at least a mentor who is not also a direct supervisor. The main benefit lies in having a source of information about broader organisational environment, something that is quite inaccessible to newcomers. The benefit is likely more pronounced for inexperienced newcomers such as those in the current study. One could easily imagine how a graduate entering the world of corporate life would benefit from having a trusted person with whom they can talk about, what it means to be part of the corporate machinery.



## **Drawbacks**

The study is conducted on a sample of newly graduated individuals, which means it is questionable whether the findings are generalisable to other groups of newcomers. Likewise, it is important to remember how “mentor” was defined in the study. Their definition is in line with what is commonly known as informal mentors, that is, those who volunteer to mentor without being assigned the role. Therefore, we should be careful when generalising the findings to formal mentor-programs as are often used in onboarding programs today. Note as well, that the definition of “mentor” excludes immediate supervisors, who may indeed act as mentors in practice. However, the authors controlled for this, and it seemed that supervisors did not actually function as mentors in terms on newcomers’ information acquisition.

A final caution, as the authors point out; it is uncertain whether the organisational knowledge gained by mentored newcomers will bring long-term positive outcomes.



## **The benefits of having a formal mentor**

*Study: The effective of facilitated mentoring: A Longitudinal quasi-experiment*

*By: Scott Seibert*

*Published in: Journal of Vocational Behavior, 1999, vol. 54, pp. 483-502*

### **Introduction**

The study sought to test whether mentoring newcomers results in positive outcomes. While there is no shortage of studies on the topic, very few have adopted an experimental method, meaning that the causal effect of mentoring has remained elusive.

This study, on the other hand follows a quasi-experimental set-up that allows us to compare mentored and non-mentored individual under similar circumstances.

### **What did the researcher do?**

The author investigated a formal mentoring program for newcomers in a fortune 100 company. 109 newly hired mechanical and electrical engineers were included in the study. The programme seemed quite well-structured. Before committing to the programme, mentees and mentors had the opportunity to meet and talk informally after which mentees chose their mentors. The mentors in the study were more senior than then newcomers, and they volunteered to participate. The mentorship was set to last one whole year after which the pair were free to continue if they wanted. Direct supervisors could not function as mentors. Mentors and mentees met on average twice a month.

The study was conducted as a quasi-experiment, meaning that in addition to the group who received mentoring, the study also featured a control group who did not. The particular strength of this set-up is that it allows for an analysis of the causal effects of the mentoring programme. As the first round of the programme only included mechanical engineers, the electrical engineers from that round function as a control group. Moreover, the mechanical engineers from the year prior to the initiation of the mentor programme were also included in the control group.



Both groups answered two questionnaires, one shortly after entering the organisation and another after 12 months. Thus, only mentees answered the questionnaires.

The outcomes measured were Job Satisfaction, Organisational Commitment, Work-role Stress, and Self-esteem at work.

The mentor behaviour measurements were Career (providing exposure, protection, and challenging assignments) vs. psychosocial mentoring (Role modelling, Counselling, friendship), frequency of interaction, and general level of satisfaction.

Data were also collected on a number of control variables including Salary, Alternative Employment Opportunities, Job Characteristics, and Hours Worked per Week.

Finally, the members in the control group who had informal mentors were eliminated from the study to ensure a mentored vs. non-mentored comparison.

### **Main findings:**

The results can be divided into 2 sets, one set of results pertaining to the comparison of the 2 groups (mentored and non-mentored), and an examination of the specific effects of different mentor behaviours (Career vs. Psychosocial).

#### *Mentored versus non-mentored newcomers*

- Mentored newcomers had significantly higher levels of Job Satisfaction than non-mentored newcomers – the effect size was deemed moderate (0.6 Standard Deviation)
- There were no significant differences between mentored and non-mentored newcomers in terms of Organisational Commitment, Work-Role Stress, and Self-esteem at Work
- The direction of the effects on the latter three were positive, but failed to reach significance



### *Career vs. psychosocial mentoring*

- Higher levels of Psychosocial Mentoring were positively associated with higher levels of Job Satisfaction, Organisational Commitment, Self-esteem at Work, and lower levels of Work-role Stress
- Higher levels of Career Mentoring were not positively associated with Job Satisfaction
- Higher levels of Career Mentoring were associated with an increase in Work-role Stress

### **Why is this interesting?**

First, the quasi-experimental nature of the study is interesting. Having a control-group with which one can compare results allows the author to uncover (closer to) causal effects.

Like a number of previous studies, the author shows how mentoring is positively associated with job satisfaction, however we can now say that the effect comes specifically from mentoring, and not from other sources, due to the strength of the research design.

It is also quite interesting to see that it was Psychosocial Mentoring that accounted for the positive effects.

Finally, it is interesting to see that mentoring may not be the panacea it is often made out to be.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

Implementing a well-organised and supervised mentoring program is likely to increase the Job Satisfaction of newcomers with little to no previous experience. However, do not expect fireworks and miracles.

Also, it would make sense to emphasise the importance of psychosocial mentoring when training and preparing mentors to participate in the programme.



## **Drawbacks**

While the study is impressively rigorous from a methodological point of view, the sample size is still rather small. One could speculate whether a larger sample would have resulted in significant differences between the mentored and non-mentored groups. Also relating to the sample, the study is done at one specific company, meaning that we cannot rule out some influences of the organisational culture on the results.

Moreover, the sample comprised only engineers, so again generalising to other professions, such as schoolteachers or salespeople, should be done with caution.

The study suggests that Career Mentoring is associated with higher levels of Work-role Stress, however this finding does not emerge from the experimental part of the study design, so the direction of causality may be the opposite – it may be that more stressed newcomers asked for more Career mentoring.

## **Organisational socialization, mentoring, and stress**

*Study: Preventing burnout: The effects of LMX and mentoring on socialization, role stress, and burnout*

*By: Christopher H. Thomas & Melenie J. Lankau*

*Published in: Human Resource Management, 2009, Vol 48(3), pp. 417-432*

### **Introduction**

In this study the authors investigate both leadership and mentoring and their effects in terms of burnout prevention. What makes this study particularly interesting is that it deals with organisational socialization of current members, what is known among practitioners as reboarding (as opposed to onboarding of newcomers).

Burnout and stress rates are at an all-time high with severe negative effects for everyone involved, both the stressed individuals, their friends and family, and the organisation. In this study, the authors draw on two connected theories of burnout: Conservation-of-Resources (CoR) theory and the Job Demands-Resources model. The former suggests that burnout occurs because of a perceived loss of resources and a threat to something they value at work. The latter expands on the former by defining demands and resources connected with the job.

In this study, the authors investigate the role of supervisors and mentors as types of social support resources that enable employees to cope with job demands, and therefore work as a safeguard against burnout in times of change.

### **What did the researcher do?**

A sample of 422 nurses from an American hospital participated in the study. The sample was split into 3, those who did not have a mentor, those who used their supervisor as a mentor, and those who had a mentor who was not their supervisor.

Based on Leader-member exchange theory, the authors also measured the quality of the relationship between supervisors and their subordinates.

## **Main findings:**

Below, I have listed the main findings

- A high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship decreased role stress and burnout, even without the presence of a mentor
- Non-supervisory mentoring combined with a high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship also prevents role stress and burnout
- The relationship between supervisory mentoring, organisational socialization and role-stress was non-significant
- Non-supervisory mentoring combined with a high quality supervisor-subordinate relationship was the most effective role stress and burnout prevention

## **Why is this interesting?**

One of the most interesting findings in the study is the magnitude of the effects, especially for those had good leader-member relations and an additional mentor on the side. This combination explained 81% of the variance in role stress and 41% of the variance in burnout. This indicates that relational support works as a strong bulwark against burnout in times of change and uncertainty.

Another interesting finding is that having supervisors as mentors did not reduce role stress. It seems that leaders are better off establishing high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships than engaging in mentoring.

Finally, the study shows that mentoring (and high-quality supervisor-subordinate relations) should not be restricted to newcomers. In the constantly changing world, faced by most companies today, mentors work as burnout-preventors among seasoned employees as well.

## **How can you put this into practice?**

4 practical implications appear apparent:

- First, ensure that supervisors have high-quality relations with employees – it is likely going to prevent stress.
- Second, help employees find mentors from elsewhere in the organisation. Building a supportive network is likely going to prevent burnout
- Third, do not restrict mentoring to newcomers; it works for everyone
- Fourth, it might not be a good idea to assign mentor-duties to supervisors

### **Drawbacks**

The study is somewhat limited by the sample. Nursing is associated with an extensive amount of emotional labour that is not seen in many other jobs. Therefore, generalising the findings to, say, mechanical engineers or programmers may not be warranted. However, they may generalise quite well to other contexts such as teachers, psychologists, and perhaps employees working in HR or people and culture.

In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study is limitation, as we are not able to tell the direction of causality and how the relationships develop over time.



## Conclusion

The three studies in the current review show that mentoring plays an important role in organisational socialisation whether of newcomers or experienced employees in situations characterised by a high degree of change.

It also seems that it may be advisable to use mentors who are not supervisors – that is locate mentors from elsewhere in the organisation.

Finally, a word of caution. The study by Seibert showed that while mentoring does have positive effects, it may not be the panacea it is often made out to be.