

EMCC Research Review

Issue 3: Outcomes for Organisations



Introduction

Dear Reader,

In the two prior issues of this research review, we have investigated what benefits mentor and mentee gain from mentorships. In this issue, we zoom in on organisational mentoring, and ask what benefits the organisation as such may gain from implanting mentoring programs. Obviously, most of the positive outcomes experienced by mentors and mentees will have positive side effects on the organisation as well, but in this issue we want to address organisation-level outcomes rather than those at the individual level.

The first paper, authored by Henriques and Curado, investigates whether mentoring can foster organisational learning during times of change. As this issue is written during the Corona-crisis, the issue of change and learning seems as pertinent as ever. The authors conclude that mentoring is indeed a means to foster learning as mentors act as information centres and give access to what they label “organizational memory”.

The following paper investigates to which extent having formal mentoring programs can help improve the employer brand of the company by increasing attractiveness. While the internal benefits of mentoring are relatively well documented, this study goes beyond what we know and look at mentoring as a means for position the company as an employer in the labour market. The study showed that individuals, in particular those with higher learning goal orientation, were more attracted to companies with a formal mentoring program.

The final study uses a longitudinal data set to identify the causal effect of supervisory mentoring on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), that is, positive employee behaviours that go beyond the employment contract. The study shows that mentoring increases OCB targeted at other individuals but not the organisation.

I hope you enjoy this issue of EMCC Research Review.

Sincerely
Content writer
Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

Mentoring and knowledge sharing

Study: "Pushing the boundaries on mentoring: Can mentoring be a knowledge tool"

By: Paolo Lopes Henriques and Carla Curado

Published in: Journal of Business Economics and Management vol. 10, no. 1, 2009, pp. 85-97

Introduction

Mentoring has long been argued to constitute a valuable and efficient means for knowledge sharing in organisations. To test this proposition, the authors ask whether mentoring can be a useful resource for furthering organisational knowledge, in particular during organisational change. More specifically, they look at the role of mentors as knowledge access facilitators.

What did the researchers do?

The study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. The researchers conducted a total of 133 interviews spread across 5 organisations from 3 different industries in Portugal. Both mentors and mentees were interviewed, and the mentorships were a mix of formal and informal.

The researchers specifically investigated the role of mentors in relation to three different knowledge spheres. First, they examined the role of mentors in facilitating faster access to knowledge centres, that is, centres of explicit knowledge. Second, they investigated the role of mentoring in relation to helping mentees gain access to "organisational memory" which constitutes implicit job-specific knowledge. This is done by facilitating the contact between mentees and those who hold the specific implicit knowledge needed. Finally, they examined the role of the mentor's privileged status in terms of allowing the mentee access to the organisational knowledge base.



Main Findings

- The role of mentors in facilitating access to knowledge centres

Although all organisations had formal information systems in place, the mentor nonetheless played an important role in helping mentees gain faster access. Also, in case mentees had access problems, the mentors played an important role in re-establishing access.

- The role of mentors in facilitating access to organizational memory

During change, tacit knowledge is both highly valuable and notoriously difficult to locate. The study showed that mentors were considered a reliable source of and access provider to tacit knowledge in times of turbulence.

- The role of mentor status

Although all mentors in the study were high status, the data did not provide clear evidence of how this might affect the mentees' ability to gain knowledge during change.

Why is this interesting?

The study offers deep qualitative insights into the role of mentors in creating, sharing and maintaining organisational knowledge during times of change. The conclusion seems to be that mentors play an important role in fostering organisational knowledge. This is clearly valuable for any knowledge-driven company as knowledge sharing and creation is a key factor for success in this context.

How can you put this into practice?

- Establish mentoring programs to enhance the knowledge management capabilities of the company
- Mentoring may increase the effectiveness of existing knowledge management systems



Drawbacks

The qualitative nature of the study is both a strength and a drawback. The strength is that it offers deeper insights into how mentors contribute to knowledge management. The drawback is that the data cannot say anything about whether there is a measurable effect and what the magnitude of this may be.

The cross-sectional nature of the study is a drawback as well. It would have been particularly interesting to follow respondents over the entire course of a change period in order to see whether the mentees' perceptions of the mentors' role in knowledge access changed over time. This however, remains a question for future studies.

Formal mentoring and organisational attraction

Study: Formal mentoring and organizational attraction

By: Tammy D. Allen and Kimberly E. O'Brien

Published in: Human Resource Development Quarterly, vol. 17, no 1, pp. 43-58

Introduction

In this study, the authors set out to investigate if the positive effects of formal mentoring programs go beyond the organisational boundaries, specifically whether having formal mentoring programs increase the attractiveness of the company.

What did the researchers do?

The study followed an experimental set-up. The setting involved 190 students who were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of a fictive company based on a brochure produced for the purpose. The participants were alternately, randomly assigned to two conditions, one in which the company brochure contained information about a formal mentor-programme, and one in which there was no mentioning of a formal mentor programme. Afterwards the participants were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of the company based on a validated scale. The authors also gathered data on the participants' "learning goal orientation", "self-efficacy for development", and "proactive personality".

Main findings:

- The condition with a formal mentoring programme scored higher on attractiveness. Although the difference was statistically significant, it was not very large.
- The higher the respondents scored on "learning goal orientation", the more attracted they were to the brochure with the formal mentoring programme.
- Self-efficacy for development" and "proactive personality" did not have any effect on attraction

Why is this interesting?



The positive internal effects of mentoring are reasonably well documented, and so are the positive individual-level outcomes. However, this study is the first to show the effects of mentoring as an employer branding element.

How can you put this into practice?

If the company has formal mentor programs, it would be highly recommendable to promote this fact in both the broader employer branding activities of the company as well as for instance job ads. If the company is particularly interesting in attracting curious, learning-driven individuals, it further compounds the importance of doing so.

Drawbacks

The study follows an experimental set-up, which, despite of the strengths, inevitably has a number of weaknesses. The main drawback pertains to “external validity”, that is, how valid are the findings outside of the lab? For instance, it is questionable whether a brochure will be read as carefully and have the same effect in an everyday situation. In addition, a large number of other variables influence the attractiveness of a company and these may interact with the attractiveness-increasing effect of having a formal mentoring programme. Finally, the study also draws on a sample of students, who, being inexperienced, might value the prospect of having a mentor somewhat higher than more experienced people.

Mentoring and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour

Study: Cross-lagged relations between mentoring received from supervisors and employee OCBs: Disentangling causal direction and identifying boundary conditions

By: Lillian T. Eby, Marcus M. Butts, Brian J. Hoffman and Julia B. Sauer

Published in: Journal of Applied Psychology, vol. 100, no. 4, pp. 1275-1285

Introduction

This study wanted to investigate the effect of mentoring on employees' "organisational citizenship behaviour" (OCB). OCB is defined as a type of positive, extra-role behaviour and covers the efforts that employees make beyond their formal job descriptions. The authors divide OCB into two groups, interpersonal behaviours benefitting individuals (OCB-I) and impersonal behaviours that benefit the organisation (OCB-O).

What did the researchers do?

In order to test for causal relationships, the authors adopted a longitudinal design, more specifically a cross-lagged model design. The participants (190 mentor-mentee dyads) filled in two questionnaires, one year apart. Both mentoring, OCB-I, OCB-O and the other variables below were tested at both times, in order establish the causal direction of the effects.

The researchers also added "perceived organisational support" and "co-worker support" as boundary conditions. Both of these have been shown to increase employee OCB on their own, and therefore the authors hypothesised that they would diminish the effects attributable to mentoring specifically.

Finally, they also controlled for relationship quality and length.

Main findings:

- Mentoring causally predicted employees' OCB-I. That is, mentoring increased behaviour beyond the job description targeted at helping other individuals.



- Mentoring did not causally affect OCB-Os. That is, mentoring did not increase behaviours beyond the job description that benefitted the organisation.
- Co-worker support moderated the relationship between mentoring and OCB, meaning that co-worker support operates as substitute for mentoring in this regard.
- Perceived organisational support had no moderating effect.

Why is this interesting?

The study is particularly interesting because of the longitudinal data collection strategy, which enables the authors to establish causal relationships. Until this study, no one else had done this, so it remained unclear, whether mentoring led to employee OCB, or whether employees' OCB led to the provision of more mentoring.

It is also quite interesting that the OCB benefits following from mentoring pertained to individuals and not the organisation. In addition, co-worker support and not perceived organisational support could substitute mentoring in increasing OCB. The common theme here seems to be that the benefits are of an interpersonal or relational kind rather than and organisational one. Arguably, this makes sense, as noted by the authors, since mentorships are personal in nature – mentees are mentored by individuals not the organisation.

How can you put this into practice?

The first thing to notice is that mentoring is unlikely to increase employee OCB-O, so this should not be the aim of implementing a mentoring programme. On the other hand, mentoring has now been shown to causally predict an increase in employee OCB-I, likely due to the role modelling associated with mentorships. Naturally, of course, these behaviours may have an indirect effect on organisationally relevant metrics.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that supportive co-workers may be a substitute for supervisory mentoring. Thus, peer mentoring and a collaborative climate are viable alternatives to supervisory mentoring, which is good news for practitioners, since we cannot expect all supervisors to be ideal mentors.



Finally, it is important for practitioners to know that OCB is not an innate trait; it can be learned through mentoring.

Drawbacks

The sample, although large and varied, comprised companies from the health care industry exclusively, so it might be difficult to generalise to other industries. The authors also note that they are unable to specify which specific mentoring practices that account for the increase in OCB-I. That said, this is a very well conducted study.



Conclusion

The three studies in this review reveal some of the effects that mentoring can have on organisational outcomes. The impact on organisational learning is probably not particularly surprising. On the other hand, the study on the positive effect of formal mentoring on organisational attractiveness reveals a new potential benefit for companies. Moreover, it is not particularly difficult to implement this practically, if you already have a formal mentoring programme.

The final study revealed that there are limitations to the effects of supervisory mentoring. Specifically, while the influence on extra-curricular work benefitting other individuals was positive and causally established, there were no discernible effect on extra-curricular work to the direct benefit of the organisation.

Thus, the conclusion seems to be that mentoring can have direct, positive organisational level outcomes in addition to the positive side effects that follow from the benefits for mentors and mentees.