Using the Internet for Mentoring

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) research announced recently that coaching and mentoring is the third most frequently used training method in the UK. And practically everyone is doing it; 87% of UK companies in fact.

Not only that but it works…
Business psychologist Professor Terri Scandura, found that mentoring boosts the salaries and promotion rates of mentees, but are undecided whether this is due to the mentoring process, the benefits of being introduced to the right people at a senior level or due to the fact that those who seek out a mentor are the sort of focussed and driven people that would be successful at work anyway. Gerald Olivero and colleagues also found that executive coaching boosted the productivity of public sector employees by 88% after eight weeks, compared to an increase of 22% using training alone.

A technique whose time has come…
It has been over ten years since David Clutterbuck wrote *Everyone Needs a Mentor*, but it was a book before its time. Ten years ago there was a general belief in the solution-based approach to personal development, which meant there was a training course for everything. If a direct report came to your office with a development need, the fastest way to get them out of your hair was put them on the most appropriate training course. Now, with more managerial self-awareness and a more holistic approach to development and training, a more process-driven approach is taking hold. And this means more involvement from the manager in their direct reports' development in the form of coaching and even use of a mentor or a personal/business coach to supplement this involvement.

Mentoring is now getting the ubiquitous e- in front. The communication technologies available on the internet offer three possibilities for mentoring: learning, meeting your mentor and being mentored.

Learn about coaching and mentoring
Firstly, one can learn about the skills of coaching and mentoring using e-learning programmes over the internet; both how to be a coach/mentor and how to be a good coachee/mentee. Most of us will admit that we would prefer to see, and understand why, someone is performing a skill well, before having a go at doing it themselves, which is possible using video clips of typical mentoring situations. And we do also like to get some feedback on how well we are managing to put those new skills into action. Therefore any e-learning programme needs to adopt a blended approach that encourages mentors to get feedback from their mentees on their skills and then encourage them to 'have another go'.

Meet your mentor
Secondly you could get matched up with a mentor over the internet. On the internet, there are more e-mentoring services for specific occupations/mentees than there are general mentoring services. And since mentors are traditionally unpaid, there is a strong not-for-profit bias to the services; professional institutions, higher education and social charities.

Get mentored
Thirdly, the actual process of mentoring and coaching can be performed completely or partially over the internet using email, instant messaging (e.g. using MSN) or desktop video-conferencing. The advantages of such mentoring are that geography and time zones are no longer a barrier to mentoring. The disadvantages are the lack of richness of the communication experience. However among younger people, who are the ones more likely to be mentored, there is some acceptance and even relish at the use of email and text messaging as a form of communication. However, not everyone agrees with the idea that such communication is 'lean', or lacking in richness. Amanda Harrington, a researcher in this area, contends that 'e-communication shouldn't be compared to face-to-face communication with a view to picking out all that it lacks, rather we should start with a blank sheet of paper and look for its features and benefits and work out how we are going to make the best of those'.

Mentoring is both effective and comparatively less expensive than traditional training. Adding an e- to mentoring gives it a further boost. It allows people to learn about the process, match themselves up with a mentor and be supported during the process itself. It's enough to make the most jaded training manager weep with joy.

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