

Formal mentoring programs: The relationship of program design and support to mentors' perceptions of benefits and costs [☆]

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship of formal mentoring program design elements (i.e., voluntary participation, input to matching, and effectiveness of training) and management support to the benefits and costs perceived by formal mentors. Data were collected from 97 formal mentors from a Midwestern financial institution. Multiple regressions were performed controlling for time as a mentor in the program, hours spent mentoring, and number of protégés. Voluntary mentor participation was positively related to perceiving rewarding experiences and negatively related to being more trouble than it was worth. Input to the matching process was negatively related to nepotism, and perceptions of training effectiveness were positively related to generativity. Finally, perceived management support for the program was positively related to rewarding experience and recognition, and negatively related to generativity and bad reflection. Three supplemental group interviews were conducted to further explore some of the survey findings. Directions for future research and implications for formal workplace mentoring programs as well as mentoring programs in cross-disciplinary contexts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Despite the prevalence of formal mentoring programs in organizations (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006b; Allen & Poteet, 1999; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003) and concern about their value (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), relatively little empirical research has been conducted on formal mentoring

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programs and factors that might improve their effectiveness (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006a; Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Wanberg et al., 2003). Most of the studies that have examined formal programs have focused primarily on the career outcomes and psychosocial benefits to the protégés (e.g., Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000). Given that mentors are vital for the success of formal mentoring programs (Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen et al., 2006a, 2006b; Allen & Poteet, 1999), more research on mentors is critical due to the shortage of mentors in organizations (Allen, 2003; Finkelstein & Poteet, 2007; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and concerns regarding the usefulness of these programs.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship of key factors in the development and support of a formal mentoring program to the perceived benefits and costs to mentors participating in that program. Four aspects of formal mentoring programs are examined: the extent to which mentor participation is voluntary, the amount of input mentors have into the matching process with their protégé, the perceived effectiveness of the training mentors receive, and the perceived level of management support for the program. Examination of these key factors is important in order to enhance the attractiveness of formal mentoring programs to prospective mentors. Not only is the attraction of mentors important to workplace mentoring programs, but also to formal mentoring programs in other contexts, such as youth mentoring (Big Brothers/Big Sisters) and graduate student–faculty mentoring. Designing and supporting mentoring programs to increase perceived benefits (e.g., recognition, improved job performance) and reduce perceived costs (e.g., mentoring is too time-consuming) to mentors should be helpful in both recruiting and retaining formal mentors (Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

1.1. The mentoring process

Mentoring has been defined as a relationship whereby a more senior, experienced individual is committed to providing developmental assistance and guidance to a less experienced protégé (Kram, 1985). Mentors provide protégés with career functions and psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). Career functions include providing protégés with challenging work, coaching, exposure, protection, and sponsorship. These functions ensure increased visibility and learning for protégés. Psychosocial functions include providing acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship and role modeling to protégés. These psychosocial functions serve to increase the self-worth of protégés by affirming their identity.

In contrast to informal mentoring relationships where the pairing evolves naturally based upon mutual identification and interests (Kram, 1985; Ragins et al., 2000), formal mentoring relationships are developed with organizational assistance where protégés and mentors are matched through some process (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000). Formal mentoring relationships are usually designed for a limited duration, such as one year (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Scandura & Williams, 2002). One of the primary benefits of formal mentoring programs is that they can be structured to achieve a variety of objectives (Gibb, 1994, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000) such as the career development of high-potential individuals, advancement of women and minorities, and enhanced knowledge-sharing inside the organization (Scandura & Williams, 2002). To motivate mentors to actively participate in such programs, it is important to consider the potential benefits and costs that formal mentors may incur (Allen, 2004; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Wanberg et al., 2003).

1.2. Mentor benefits and costs

Although researchers have investigated factors related to a mentor's willingness to engage in a mentoring relationship and the benefits and costs mentors may experience (e.g., Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1996; Ragins & Scandura, 1994, 1999), the majority of this research has been based upon mentors in informal mentoring relationships. However, research by several authors (e.g., Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Wanberg et al., 2003) suggests that benefits (e.g., personal satisfaction) and costs (e.g., dysfunctional relationship) would also appear during formal mentoring.

There are many benefits that can be derived from mentoring. First, the personal satisfaction mentors receive from observing and participating in the success of their protégés (Allen et al., 1997; Eby & Lockwood,

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