



# Informal Mentoring as an Organisational Resource

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Mentoring is a mechanism for supporting junior managers but until now little research on the benefits to the organisation has been reported. This paper reports on a survey of managers in a UK local government authority to ascertain their views of the benefits of informal mentoring to the organisation. Both mentors and protégés perceived mentoring as investment in a future pool of managers and a tool for the management of change. Mentoring was also seen as assisting in the transfer of knowledge, organisational learning and cross-departmental communication—in other words, as nodes in an information network. Further research is suggested into mentoring as a micro-level knowledge-producing community of practice. As informal mentoring is likely to bring longer-term advantages to the organisation, the paper also discusses how to capture the benefits of informal mentoring when designing formal schemes. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Mentoring is an important form of support for managers at all stages in their careers, and is considered particularly useful for women managers in male-dominated organisations. In a major US study of senior females and their CEOs, 91 per cent of female executives mentioned having a mentor, and many saw this as the ‘single most critical piece to women advancing career-wise’.<sup>1</sup> Previous research has indicated the benefits of mentoring from the protégé’s perspective. Support may be career-focused, with the mentor acting as sponsor, coach, protector, challenge-giver and exposure-provider. It may also be psychosocial in nature, with the mentor taking the role of friend, social supporter, parent, role model, counsellor and acceptance-giver.<sup>2</sup> Less has been reported regarding the value of mentoring to the mentor, but this includes the rewarding experience, improved job performance, a loyal base of support, organisational recognition and generativity (a sense of continuity and regeneration for the mentor).<sup>3</sup> Much

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of the previous research into mentoring is US-based, although some researchers have been active in the UK, particularly in the area of best practice in mentoring for top-level positions.<sup>4</sup>

While many articles have hinted at the benefits of mentoring to the organisation, these have seldom been discussed in detail, although they are said to accrue to the organisation indirectly through the support given to promising young individuals who have been identified by more senior managers. A notable exception is Wilson and Elman, although no empirical results are reported, and no measure of the organisational benefits has been found in the literature.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this paper is to provide empirical evidence of the perceived benefits of mentoring to the organisation itself.

The aim of this study was to examine whether the views of managers would be in agreement with the benefits of informal mentoring suggested by the literature. We undertook a case study of Cambridgeshire County Council, a UK public sector organisation which was considering whether to introduce an assisted informal or more formal mentoring scheme. This followed a decade when the presence of mentoring relationships was not monitored at all.

This paper focuses on the organisational benefits of informal mentoring. We review the literature on organisational benefits, although it is scant. We then report the findings from our survey of male and female managers' perceptions of the benefits of informal mentoring to the organisation. Of particular interest is the view of mentoring as an organisational mechanism for the production and capture of tacit knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we review implications for further research, and for managerial practice.

### Formality in mentoring

There are two contrasting theoretical models underpinning the rationale for mentoring programmes.<sup>7</sup> Mentoring may be undertaken as a social exchange, with a rational, cost-benefit approach. The mentor's performance is formally monitored and recognised by the organisation. In contrast, a communitarian model leads to people enacting helping behaviour through core values as members of a community, which is a more sustainable model as such behaviour becomes the norm. The organisational culture is key to success in this model.

Mentoring may be informal, with little or no intervention by the organisation other than an initial introduction. In contrast, formal mentoring programmes are usually carefully structured and monitored. Individuals seeking mentors or protégés complete application forms stating interests and needs, and are allocated mentors or protégés by the system. Often the two parties do not meet until the match has been made, allowing no chance for interpersonal liking and interest as a basis for selection. In many cases, where all new recruits have to be mentored, the mentor role is a duty imposed by the management, and hence mentors may carry out the role without personal interest in the

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