

Alternatives to traditional mentoring in fostering career success

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Abstract

Researchers have called for an examination of the roles that alternatives to traditional mentoring play in individuals' career success. This study tests how important, but less examined factors, such as employees' direct leader, personal and work factors such as ability and the formality of the organization, and employees' engagement in career management strategies relate to career outcomes. Mechanisms intervening in the relationship between mentoring alternatives and career success were examined, including the moderating effect of individual differences (e.g., proactive personality, career motivation, and career stage) and the mediating role of employees' career self-efficacy. We discuss how our results continue the examination of alternative sources of mentoring and contribute to existing theory. Finally, we elaborate on the practical importance of our results for situations where alternatives to traditional mentoring are needed.

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Mentoring works; protégés experience more positive career outcomes than those who are not mentored (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Underhill, 2006). Mentorship traditionally refers to a collaboration between two individuals (not necessarily in a hierarchical relationship), where one facilitates the professional development of the other, with the effect of optimizing work performance and enhancing career progress (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Scandura, 1992). However, not all employees have access to traditional mentors. Today's work environment is increasingly diverse with the structure of work in constant fluctuation due to increases in downsizing and outsourcing, participative work arrangements, and autonomous teams. Such changes prompt unorthodox career paths that often make traditional mentoring relationships weak, infeasible, or unavailable. Furthermore, women and people of color have long experienced limited access to traditional mentoring relationships (Dreher & Dougherty, 1997). These realities highlight the need for

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alternative sources of mentoring, factors that might promote positive career development in the absence of, or in addition to, traditional mentoring.

This study investigates alternative sources to traditional mentoring that may suggest useful applications for career counselors, human resource professionals, leaders, and individual employees. We examine three sets of predictors: (a) personal and work factors, (b) leadership [leader–member exchange (LMX), supervisory mentoring and career support], and (c) career management directed toward career-related outcomes (subjective and objective measures of career success); we also examined the relationships between these predictors. The study further seeks to establish a connection of personal and work factors with career outcomes, suggesting that leaders as mentors (leaders are not by default mentors) can be supplemented by specific personal and work components such as ability or organizational formalization. This connection is consistent with calls for alternative sources of mentoring (e.g., Allen & Finkelstein, 2003; Dreher & Dougherty, 1997; McManus & Russell, 1997), in which alternatives are conceptualized not as replacements for mentoring, but as factors that explain variance in the same outcomes that mentoring typically promotes. Additionally, by examining leadership (LMX, supervisory career mentoring, and support), this study may help resolve conflicts regarding the influence of leader-related behavior on career outcomes (Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). Finally, we examine dispositional factors (i.e., proactive personality, career motivation) that may influence the effectiveness of the mentorship process.

1. Alternatives for mentoring

Employees without traditional mentors report using alternate sources, such as building networks and developing alliances, to achieve outcomes typically associated with traditional mentoring (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003). Researchers (e.g., Dreher & Dougherty, 1997) have called for the examination of work-related variables, such as leadership, personality, and career development stage that may predict such outcomes. Such an effort would assist career development professionals, organizations, and employees by highlighting factors that may supplement traditional mentoring or provide options where traditional mentoring is unavailable.

1.1. Leadership and substitutes as mentoring

McManus and Russell (1997) proposed that leader–member exchange (LMX) may have similar effects as traditional mentoring. LMX is a relationship based on mutual trust between a leader and follower, where non-economic benefits (e.g., information, work commitment) given from one partner to the other are reciprocated at some future time. Though LMX is an exchange relationship like mentoring, LMX is driven by the need for employee productivity, whereas traditional mentoring typically lacks overtly transactional motives. LMX relationships involve leaders providing information beyond that expected from a regular employment contract, with the expectation that followers reciprocate with organizational commitment and high job performance. Some have suggested and shown that LMX relationships involve career support and supervisory career mentoring (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) that serve as alternatives to traditional mentoring. Supervisory career mentoring is a long-term commitment by the supervisor to the career development of the subordinate, within an LMX relationship (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994).

Other factors, such as characteristics of the subordinate, the task, and the organization (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997), influence subordinate behavior and may neutralize the leader's direct ability to influence the subordinate. These factors may function in place of, or in addition to, a formal supervisor. Research demonstrates that these characteristics contribute uniquely to the prediction of outcomes beyond specific leader behaviors such as supportiveness, assignment of work, and contingent reward behavior (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996).

1.2. Career management and mentoring

Gould and Penley (1984) found that employees who pursued career strategies such as maintaining career flexibility and building networks, reported higher and faster salary progressions than those who did not. Also job type, career mobility, and gender predicted the use of these career management strategies (Gould & Pen-

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