

Are facilitated mentoring programs beneficial? A randomized experimental field study

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Abstract

Results from a pretest–posttest randomized field experiment study with a control group comparing the impact of high- and low-level-facilitated mentoring programs on new employees' performance and perceptions about their jobs and organization were reported in this paper. Results indicated increases in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, person-organization fit and performance by participants in both mentoring programs with larger gains made by the high-level-facilitated group. These results suggest that a formal mentoring program can have positive effects on employee's work-related attitudes, cognition and behavior with significantly greater gains made by formal mentoring programs with higher levels of facilitation.

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1. Introduction

An increasing amount of attention has been given to mentoring over the past decade. Findings from studies on mentoring participation indicate that up to two-thirds of employees have engaged in some type of mentoring relationship (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Involvement in mentoring relationships has been found to have a variety of benefits for participants (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003) and for organizations (Allen & O'Brian, 2006). Some of the most highlighted benefits have been psychosocial and career advancement (Kram, 1985). Other studies have highlighted related important benefits for employees and organizations including: career success, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, competence, affiliation, autonomy, achievement, self-esteem, retention, and diversity (Allen et al., 2004; Noe et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003).

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A key distinction in the mentoring literature is the examination of formal versus informal mentoring relationships. Informal mentoring relationships are most frequently identified as having emerged largely through mutual initiation and ongoing connections between protégé and mentor (Ragins & Cotton, 1991). The development of informal mentoring relationships occurs over time without external intervention or planning. Conversely, formal mentoring relationships are most often instigated by organizational representatives and involve a process for assigning employees or managers to mentor–protégé pairings. While informal mentoring relationships are not guided by external expectations, formal mentoring relationships are often led by internal organizational facilitators who may set expectations for involvement such as: participation in mandatory introductory sessions or ongoing training, number of meeting times, discussion topics and goal setting.

Despite the increasing popularity of formal mentoring programs in public and private organizations, few empirical studies have been performed which examine outcomes of formal mentoring programs (Wanberg et al., 2003). Additionally, the value of formal mentoring programs overall, has been questioned for some time and seen as less valuable than informal (or naturalistically occurring) mentoring relationships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). This gap between mentoring practice and research calls for empirical study to clarify the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs.

Furthermore, formal mentoring program facilitation may vary from a single intervention by the organization in which participants are simply provided a mentor–protégé match and asked to engage one another for a given period of time, to programs that provide additional ongoing group facilitation or training to protégés (e.g., Chao et al., 1992; Fagan & Ayers, 1985; Klauss, 1981; Noe, 1988; Phillips-Jones, 1983; Wilson & Elman, 1990). The handful of rigorously implemented and analyzed studies has largely failed to differentiate formal mentoring programs in terms of a variety of facilitation approaches, such as quality, content or high versus low program facilitation (Wanberg et al., 2003). Such studies lump all mentoring programs into one group whether the formal mentoring effort is painstakingly organized or involves a haphazard pairing of mentors with protégés without thoughtful attention to program elements that may support the development of the mentoring relationship. This lack of attention on the formal mentoring specifications represents a significant limitation in the mentoring literature (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). Because of the considerable investment of time and energy on the part of organizations and mentoring participants, a better understanding of the benefits of formal mentoring programs would be an important contribution (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

The purposes of the current study are twofold. First, the question of whether participation in formal mentoring programs will make a difference in protégés' work-related outcomes was explored. Besides protégés' self report of attitudinal outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, we included supervisor performance rating as an effectiveness index. Second, the issue regarding whether the change of one key formal mentoring specification, the level of third party facilitation during the mentoring process, will lead to different mentoring outcomes was examined. A randomized pretest and posttest experimental design with three levels of intervention (high-level-facilitated mentoring, low-level-facilitated mentoring and no formal mentoring) was adopted for this study. This study is the first known randomized experimental examination of formal mentoring and the only identified using managerial performance ratings as outcome measures for protégés.

1.1. Features of formal mentoring programs

Most often in formal mentoring, organizations deliberately pair employees or managers with moderate to high levels of experience (mentors) with employees who have less experience (protégés or mentees). Typical formal mentoring program duration is 6–12 months (Single & Muller, 2001). Common goals for mentoring programs include socialization of employees into the organizational culture, provision of support for career development, or as part of a protégé promotion or succession planning effort by the organization. As is the case with the organizational practices explored in this study, organizations may use mentoring programs in an effort to support new hires in the development of task and relationship effectiveness as well as in efforts aimed toward the retention and promotion of women and minorities (Douglas & McCauley, 1999).

According to Single and Muller (2001), protocols used in the implementation of formal mentoring programs may vary widely from single meetings for mentor–protégé pairs in hopes that a relationship emerges,

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