



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

Launching the post-college career: A study of mentoring antecedents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 August 2008

Available online 10 December 2008

Keywords:

Mentoring

Learning goal orientation

Career development

New employees

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon role-making theory, this study examines which new job market entrants, following college graduation, find informal mentors and how much mentoring they receive from these mentors using a predictive design. Our results suggest that individuals lower in negative affectivity and higher in cognitive ability as well as women, individuals who have previously had a mentor, and those who go to work for organizations with developmental climates are more likely to find informal mentors. In contrast, individuals higher in learning goal orientation and mentoring instrumentality receive more mentoring once a mentoring relationship has been established.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring has been recognized as an important process to help organizational newcomers adjust and adapt to their new organizations, as well as a process that helps employees at junior levels achieve higher levels of career success (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). Mentors provide career-related development through coaching, sponsorship, exposure, protection, and challenging assignments; psychosocial support is provided via counseling, friendship, acceptance, and role modeling (Kram, 1988). Although mentoring cannot be highlighted as the sole contributor to career success (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008), meta-analytic data suggests that having a mentor is related to higher levels of job satisfaction, career satisfaction, compensation, and promotions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004).

Given the usefulness of mentoring for individuals' careers, it is important to understand characteristics and contextual variables related to individuals becoming a protégé. Extensive research has examined gender and racial differences in having a mentor (see, for example O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, & Allen, *in press*), but broader examinations of variables associated with finding a mentor and receiving mentoring have been limited (Turban & Lee, 2007). This study examines a theoretically derived model, which is aimed at predicting the receipt of informal mentoring. Importantly, this research focuses on college graduates and studies these individuals over time to examine who finds a mentor in their new professional placements after graduation. Previous work, with only a few exceptions that examined formal or quasi-formal mentoring relationships (e.g., Green & Bauer, 1995; Wanberg, Welsh, & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007), has used cross-sectional methods (making it difficult to establish whether examined variables are truly antecedents of mentoring received or if they are actually outcomes of mentoring received) or has asked mentors what characteristics they look for in protégés. The focus of our model is on the formation of informal mentoring relationships, those that form naturally without assistance from an organization, and level of mentoring received once that relationship has begun.

The core theoretical framework for this study is role-making theory (Graen & Cashman, 1975). Role-making theory models how two individuals' roles and relationship can evolve beyond the roles and relationship that are formally defined by an organization. The framework begins in a role-finding stage (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) where two individuals interact in a

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relatively superficial way, getting to know each other through repeated interactions. At some point in this stage, either individual may extend an offer to the other to expand the relationship based upon their beliefs about the other individual's potential to become a partner in the workplace. If the second party accepts the offer, the dyad enters into a role-making stage.

We build upon insights from the role-finding stage of the theory to develop hypotheses about new employee characteristics that might “push” individuals to find mentors and/or “pull” mentors to them. The theory suggests that in order for an informal mentoring relationship to form, it will be important for the protégé to possess characteristics that motivate him or her to find a mentor *and* make them attractive to a mentor. These characteristics will also be important to the level of mentoring received once a relationship is formed. For this study we examine four central protégé individual difference variables (learning goal orientation, mentoring instrumentality, negative affectivity, and cognitive ability) that fit especially well with both the theoretical framework and the mentoring context.

1.1. Learning goal orientation

Individuals with high learning goal orientation tend to approach work with the desire to develop their knowledge, skills, and overall competence (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 1997). Conceptually, learning goal orientation is likely to facilitate activities on the part of newcomers that will stimulate the formation of a mentoring relationship. Research has found a positive relationship between learning goal orientation and motivation to learn, effort expended during training, and persistence when faced with difficulty (e.g., Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007; Vandewalle, Cron, & Slo-cum, 2001). In the mentoring literature, a cross-sectional association has been found between protégé learning goal orientation and level of mentoring received including psychosocial support, career-related mentoring, and role modeling (Egan, 2005; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). However, Turban and Lee (2007) note that because learning goal orientation might be influenced by the mentoring relationship, this construct needs to be studied as a predictor of mentoring in a longitudinal design.

Learning goal orientation also appears to be attractive to mentors. Allen (2004) asked individuals with experience as mentors to indicate the importance to them of several protégé characteristics. Willingness to learn had the highest mean rating of all of the characteristics. Based upon this discussion, we propose:

Hypothesis 1. College graduates' levels of learning goal orientation will be positively related to presence of an informal mentor and level of mentoring received from this mentor in their post-graduation job one year later.

1.2. Mentoring instrumentality

In contrast to learning goal orientation, which conceptually has both motivational and attraction components, mentoring instrumentality (i.e., how important an individual believes it is to have a mentor) is an individual difference that is primarily motivational. Mentoring instrumentality addresses why an individual might direct energies toward finding a mentor, as opposed to fulfilling developmental needs via other avenues such as training. Although no research was found in the mentoring literature examining the role of instrumentality, meta-analytic data from other contexts suggests that instrumentality is positively associated with effort and persistence toward the target of interest (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). We propose:

Hypothesis 2. College graduates' assessment of the instrumentality of having a mentor will be positively related to presence of an informal mentor and level of mentoring received from this mentor in their post-graduation job one year later.

1.3. Cognitive ability

Contrasting with mentoring instrumentality, cognitive ability is an individual difference that is more important to attraction than motivation. Relationship research suggests that people are more attracted to individuals with higher levels of cognitive ability because they have more respect for them (e.g., Rubin, 1973; Zanna & Hamilton, 1972). In addition, research has documented a positive association between general cognitive ability and performance in job training programs, job knowledge, skill acquisition, and performance in complex jobs (Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2004), all of which would be important to potential mentors who are considering investing significant time and energy in a protégé. Within the mentoring literature, research by Allen, Poteet, and Burroughs (1997) found mentors made remarks about what attracted them to their protégés such as “very smart and intelligent” (p. 80). In addition, Allen, Poteet, and Russell (2000) found that mentors choose protégés based upon their perceived potential/high ability rather than their perceived need for help and Allen (2004) found that college students in a laboratory study chose protégés with higher ability.

We found no studies that attempted to predict whether individuals with higher cognitive ability are more likely to secure informal mentors and receive more informal mentoring. However, in a longitudinal study of quasi-formal mentoring relationships between graduate students and their advisors, Green and Bauer (1995) reported individuals with higher verbal GRE scores received more career-related mentoring with mixed results for the relationship between psychosocial mentoring and quantitative versus verbal GRE scores. We propose:

Hypothesis 3. College graduates' levels of cognitive ability will be positively related to presence of an informal mentor and level of mentoring received from this mentor in their post-graduation job one year later.

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