



What matters most? The relative role of mentoring and career capital in career success [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study used a career capital framework to compare the relative role of mentoring and three other forms of career capital (human, agentic, and developmental network capital) in predicting career success. Using a three-wave longitudinal design we found that mentoring added value, above and beyond the other forms of career capital, in predicting promotions and advancement expectations. However, although mentoring mattered for career success, it represented just a part of a constellation of career resources that are embedded within individuals and their relationships. Implications for future research are discussed.

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There has been a groundswell of research on mentoring relationships over the past twenty years (Allen & Eby, 2007; Ragins & Kram, 2007). A finding that is central to the mentoring literature is the association between the presence of a mentor and career success. Both meta-analyses (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lenz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Underhill, 2006) and research reviews (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Ragins, 1999; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003) concur that individuals with mentors report more positive career outcomes than those lacking a mentor. Although the relationship between mentoring and career success represents a long-standing belief in the mentoring literature, mentoring scholars have come to question the relative contribution of mentoring to career success (see discussions by Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; Ragins, 1999; Wanberg et al., 2003). In particular, these scholars point out that mentoring research has failed to disentangle the effects of mentoring from other forms of career capital.

Career capital involves resources embedded within individuals and their relationships that influence career outcomes (cf., Inkson & Arthur, 2001). We extend the career capital framework to include two dimensions: individual and relational. As described below, individual forms of career capital include human capital (e.g., an individual's education, training, and work experience) and agentic capital (e.g., an individual's engagement in proactive career behaviors), while the two relational forms of career capital stem from the social capital derived from mentoring relationships and those derived from developmental networks (Ragins, 2007; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). As we discover, these four forms of career capital are intertwined in ways that can obfuscate the relationship between mentoring and career outcomes. The finding that protégés with informal mentors report more positive career outcomes than non-protégés, for example, may be due to the human capital protégés developed on their own *before* entering their mentoring relationship, or if a protégé has a history of being mentored, the social capital they accumulated as a function of their prior mentoring relationships. Different forms of career

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capital may also interact in complex ways; for example, individuals who are proactive and have strong foundations of human capital may be more likely to enter informal mentoring relationships (e.g., Allen, 2004; Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 2000; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Singh, Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009), and the relationship itself may further build individual forms of career capital (e.g., Kram, 1985).

Our ability to accurately assess the impact of mentoring on career outcomes is therefore constrained by the fact that we have not untangled or differentiated the unique impact of mentoring from other forms of career capital. Two methodological issues amplify this problem. First, mentoring research has relied on cross-sectional designs which, as Wanberg and colleagues astutely point out, prevent us from being able to ascertain whether outcomes associated with mentoring reflect the effects of having a mentor, or pre-existing differences in the protégé's human or agentic capital (Wanberg et al., 2003). This is a serious issue; in their recent review of mentoring research, for example, Allen and her colleagues found that over 90% of the studies reviewed used cross-sectional designs and concluded that this reliance on cross-sectional research "places a theoretical constraint on our understanding of mentoring" (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008; p. 349). Second, because past mentoring relationships can enhance a protégé's career capital (e.g., their human capital), an accurate assessment of outcomes associated with a current mentoring relationship must control for prior relationships (Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; Ragins, 1999). Said differently, a correlation between the presence of a current mentor and career success may not be due to the current mentoring relationship, but to the cumulative effects of other forms of career capital produced by past mentoring relationships over the course of the protégé's career. A precise and accurate comparison of the relative effects of having a current mentor and other forms of career capital therefore requires that one first select individuals who have never had a mentor and then use a longitudinal design to examine the relationship between career capital and career outcomes before the individual gains a mentor.

Accordingly, this study tested a foundational tenet of the mentoring literature by exploring whether mentoring mattered more than the three other forms of career capital in predicting career success. In particular, we used a longitudinal design to examine the impact of human, agentic, and developmental network capital on career outcomes before individuals acquired their first mentoring relationship, thus allowing us to distinguish the effects of mentoring from that of other forms of career capital. By offering a precise and comprehensive assessment of the relative contributions of mentoring and other types of career capital, our study offers a more realistic appraisal of the relative impact of mentoring on career success. In addition, our study offers a more complete conceptual platform for understanding mentoring by integrating it within the broader context of career capital. Finally, because there are important differences between informal mentoring relationships, which are spontaneously developed, and formal mentoring relationships, which are developed with organizational assistance (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Wanberg et al., 2003), we examined only informal mentoring in the present study.

1. A career capital approach to mentoring

In this section we first define career success. We then refine the idea of career capital and extend it to the mentoring arena. Career success is generally defined as the accumulation of positive work-related and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). Objective career success involves tangible and quantifiable indices of career accomplishments, such as promotion, pay, and job level/rank attained, whereas subjective career success involves affective, evaluative and attitudinal indices, such as career satisfaction, advancement expectations, and turnover intentions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby et al., 2008; Judge et al., 1995).

The construct of career capital offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the relative role of mentoring in career success in that it essentially incorporates both individual and relational career resources. We refine and extend this framework in order to provide a more fine-grained and complete approach to the construct. The original concept of career capital holds that individuals attain career success by developing distinct types of career competencies or "ways of knowing" that we believe fall along two dimensions: individual and relational (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001).

Individual career competencies involve knowledge ("knowing how") and motivation ("knowing why") (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Our analysis of this framework reveals that individual competencies involve two forms of career capital: human and agentic capital. Human capital reflects the "knowing how" competency, and involves developing and enhancing one's core capacities by engaging in education, training, and challenging work among other things (Tharenou, 1997). The "knowing why" competency (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) captures the individual's motivational state and is aligned with other career research indicating that motivation is a key individual resource that predicts career success (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). Accordingly, we offer the term "*agentic capital*" to capture this idea, and define it as the individual's proactive engagement in planned, motivated, and purposeful behaviors aimed at achieving career goals and aspirations.

Relational competencies reflect the ability to develop key relationships in the work environment ("knowing whom") (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). We propose that two types of career capital are nested within this competency: mentoring and developmental networks. Mentoring relationships are traditionally defined as a relationship between a more senior, experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé's career (Kram, 1985). However, emerging perspectives hold that individuals can acquire other developmental relationships and "career communities" that may influence career success (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Parker, Arthur, & Inkson, 2004). These relationships involve peers and senior colleagues who do not serve as mentors, but rather offer career encouragement and

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