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## A moderated mediation model of e-mentoring

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### ABSTRACT

Based on a longitudinal sample of 1381, this study develops and tests a moderated mediation model of electronic mentoring (e-mentoring). Results show evidence that frequency of interaction between protégés and mentors mediates the relationships between program antecedents (the protégé's previous internet experience and initial motivation to participate) and program outcomes of general self-efficacy and task-efficacy. In addition, the protégé's general self-efficacy prior to starting the program was found to moderate the relationships between protégé and mentor interaction frequency and program outcomes of task and general self-efficacy. Unexpectedly, having mentors in the past was not significantly related to program outcomes. Practical implications and future areas of research are identified and discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Since Kram's (1983) seminal work identifying the common phases and characteristics of mentoring relationships, significant progress has been made in our understanding of the outcomes associated with mentoring. Mentoring research has spanned a variety of research streams, with much of this work focusing on youth programs (Blinn-Pike, 2007; DuBois & Karcher, 2005), academic mentoring (Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 2007), and career development (Payne & Huffman, 2005; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Recent meta-analyses and quantitative reviews have drawn similar conclusions about the state of mentoring research, that while it is clear that mentoring is associated with an assortment of positive outcomes for protégés and mentors, as of yet comparatively little research has focused on the intricacies of the mentoring process itself (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008). The present study addresses this need by developing and testing a model of electronic mentoring.

It is important to develop models using non-traditional modes of mentoring not only because scholars have emphasized the need to investigate alternative mentoring sources (Byrne, Dik, & Chiaburu, 2008; Eby, 1997), but also because conventional mentoring opportunities are likely to be available to fewer of today's workers than those in the past. This is due to the proliferation of flat organizational hierarchies, increasingly diverse work structures, and the decline of traditional organizational career paths (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). One alternative relatively new mentoring mechanism that is gaining in popularity and usage is electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) which has not been the focus of extensive research to date. E-mentoring is the act of providing and receiving guidance and support through computer-mediated technology, i.e. e-mail, electronic chat, message boards, etc. While it is plausible that most mentoring relationships today are characterized by at least some degree of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the present study focuses on a mentoring program in which mentor-mentee association is conducted entirely online (that is, CMC-only).

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## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Antecedents of e-mentoring outcomes

The majority of mentoring research has focused on either the characteristics of mentoring programs and/or their associated outcomes. Although some researchers have addressed individual protégé attributes, such as the influence of demographic characteristics (Ragins, 1997; Ragins et al., 1999; Scandura & Ragins, 1993; Scandura & Williams, 2001), protégé personality (Turban & Dougherty, 1994), and goal orientations (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003), there remains a number of unexplored questions as to how protégé differences might impact mentoring relationships. Our model of electronic mentoring (shown in Fig. 1) addresses this gap, by testing the model with longitudinal data, as suggested by past research (Allen et al., 2004; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008), and sheds light on how e-mentoring relationships are likely to unfold over time.

As shown in the model, we examine the relation between mentoring outcomes such as program satisfaction, general, career and fiscal self-efficacy with the protégés' pre-program attitudes and experience. The model proposes three antecedents of electronic mentoring, the protégé's (1) prior use of the internet, (2) previous experience with mentoring and (3) motivation to participate in the program.

When considering the e-mentoring environment, two forms of knowledge or experience are particularly relevant. First, since all communication takes place entirely online, one's fluency with this form of communication is likely to be directly related to positive program outcomes. As language barriers may impede a face-to-face mentoring relationship, e-conversations and communication can be hampered by an individual's capacity to communicate effectively online. For instance, in a recent call for scholarly investigations of e-mentoring relationships, Ensher, Heun, and Blanchard (2003) proposed that individuals with strong computer and written communication skills are likely to have better online mentoring experiences than those who do not. Supporting his notion, Eby, McManus, Simon, and Russell (2000) suggest that mentor "interpersonal incompetency", i.e. lacking the ability to relate with protégés on a personal level due to inadequate communication skills, is likely to diminish the effectiveness of any mentoring relationship. It is reasonable to conclude that protégé communication skills will have a similar effect in impeding the effectiveness of the mentor–protégé dyad. Therefore, in an e-mentoring program, proficiency in the online environment will be extremely important given that the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings through text-based messaging will be fundamental to a constructive relationship (Segall, 2000). As such, it is likely that the quality of a one's e-mentoring relationship is predicated on the level of experience that he or she has with e-communication and the internet prior to the start of the program.

The computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature, specifically channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999), offers theoretical support for the important role that fluency in an online environment may play in an e-mentoring program. This theory identifies four types of experiences which form knowledge bases that sharpen media richness perceptions (belief in a media channel's ability to successfully convey messages and communicate rich information). These are experience with: (1) the communication channel, (2) the messaging topic, (3) organizational context, and (4) communication participants. Previous experience with a particular communication channel, i.e. e-mail or online chat, should lead an individual to both send and receive information via this channel more effectively. Support for the application of this theory is demonstrated by the deleterious effects that computer incompetency has on the effectiveness of online training courses (Dobbs, 2000; Kiser, 1999). Hence, it is probable that protégés with more online experience prior to an e-mentoring program will not only possess greater ability to communicate complex thoughts and feelings through online communication, but also will be better equipped to interpret and react to informational feedback more accurately as well. As such, we hypothesize:

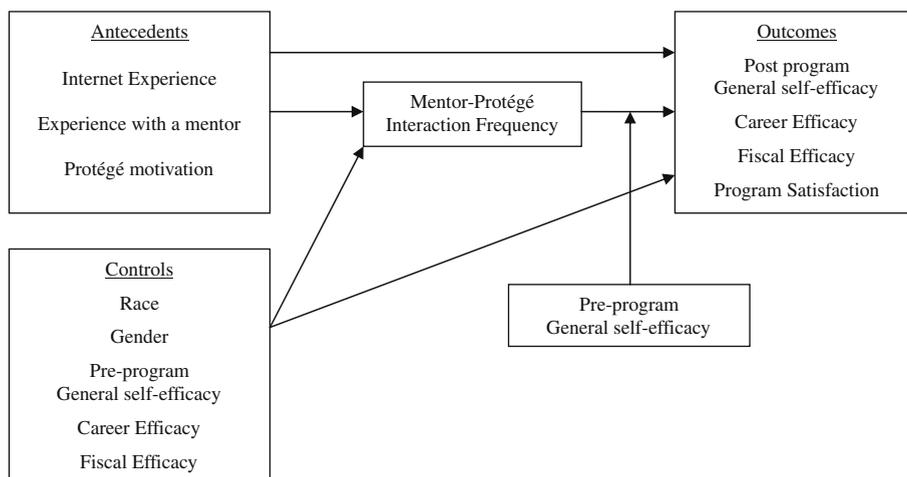


Fig. 1. A moderated mediation model of electronic mentoring.

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