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Online mentoring and computer-mediated communication: New directions in research

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Abstract

While there has been a veritable explosion of online mentoring websites and opportunities within a wide variety of professions, very few academic articles to date have addressed this phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to remedy this gap in our knowledge by: (a) suggesting that the Internet can provide a viable context for mentoring within defined roles, (b) presenting a new typology of mentoring based on the computer-mediated-communication (CMC) literature, and in doing so suggest new opportunities and challenges, and (c) providing recommendations for researchers and practitioners to explore online mentoring. Past research has found that within the three functions of mentoring (psychosocial, vocational, and role modeling), a mentor can play a number of roles such as business coach, friend, counselor, and/or teacher to a protégé. We extend past research by assessing the major issues applicable to these mentor roles through an examination of CMC literature. We provide specific research propositions to inspire future research into online mentoring and its related contexts, roles, opportunities, and challenges.
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1. Online mentoring and computer-mediated communication: New directions in research

The world of work has changed dramatically. The advances in technology, particularly the pervasiveness of the Internet, has facilitated globalization, spawned new businesses, and created a wide variety of innovative work practices and positions. Current estimates indicate that there are approximately 228 million people who access the Internet in English alone (Global Reach, 2002). The Internet has given rise to a variety of venues, including chat rooms, newsgroups, mailing lists, interactive websites, and text-based virtual environments (Parks & Roberts, 1998). These media, collectively known as computer-mediated communication (CMC), and other forms of technology have contributed to greater career mobility, an increasing emphasis on project work, virtual organizations, and boundaryless careers (Sullivan, 1999). Within this changing career environment, knowledge workers have found that relying on a network of mentors to navigate organizational and career complexities can be a significant strategic advantage (Kram & Hall, 1996).

There has been a marked increase in the number of articles written on mentoring in the last five years, indicative of the keen interest of both scholars and business leaders (Russell & Adams, 1997). Similarly, there has also been an increase in the number of formal mentoring programs sponsored by organizations in the last decade (Douglas, 1997). This increased interest in mentoring has been influenced by the well-touted benefits of mentoring that accrue both to individuals and organizations and include: increased socialization (Chao, 1997), organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000), higher pay (Dreher & Cox, 1996), and more promotions (Dreher & Ash, 1990).

It is surprising that while there has been a veritable explosion of online mentoring websites and opportunities within a wide variety of professions, very few academic articles to date have addressed this phenomenon with a few notable exceptions in the education literature (Single & Muller, 2001). A recent (August, 2002) search for information on "online mentoring," "online mentoring programs," "online mentoring services," and "e-mentoring" on common search engines (e.g., AltaVista, Google, and MSN) indicated that the number of hits in the last two years has increased tremendously. After taking into consideration that the number of unique sites is about a third of the total hits, the incidence of the aforementioned search terms increased up to five times. Examples of online mentoring sites are presented in Table 1. While online mentoring is thriving, little is known about the successes and unique challenges of this phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to remedy this gap in our knowledge by: (a) suggesting that the Internet can provide a viable context for mentoring within defined roles, (b) presenting a new typology of mentoring based on computer-mediated-communication (CMC) literature; in doing so assess opportunities and challenges, and (c) providing recommendations for researchers and practitioners to explore online mentoring by suggesting specific propositions for future study.