

MATCHMAKING:

**A STUDY OF MENTORING IN NEW ZEALAND LIBRARIES AND
INFORMATION CENTRES**

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The following is a précis of a research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Library and Information Studies, School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. For a copy of the full report, or any questions, please contact Katherine Clark at katherine.clark@parliament.govt.nz

INTRODUCTION

Definition

No two authors define mentoring in the same way and often there is confusion over the boundaries between mentoring and related concepts such as coaching, counselling, and instruction. The definition used in the research project on which this paper is based, was:

A relationship in which a less experienced person (mentee) aims to gain knowledge, develop competencies, and achieve insights with the help of a more experienced person (mentor). Mentoring is a process that emphasizes clarification and reflection, and focuses on the long-term.

Mentoring scenarios

Just as there are as many different definitions of mentoring as there are people, so too are there many different types of mentoring. Mentoring can be an informal relationship, or part of a structured programme. Mentoring can be a one-to-one relationship, or group or family based. Mentoring in the workplace can occur face-to-face, or virtually across the Internet. Mentoring can be in-house, or involve people across different organisations. Mentoring can take place between people who were previously strangers, or with familiar peers and colleagues. Mentoring can be aimed at increasing skills, providing support, and/or facilitating personal development and awareness. In most cases, mentoring is used to guide people through a time of change

(Mentoring Canada 2002). The focus in this research project was on one-to-one relationships that are part of a structured programme supported by a library or information centre, designed to fulfil a range of objectives.

Mentoring literature

Mentoring only emerged as a separate field of study in the late 1970s. A significant portion of the literature originates from the United States, with more recent contributions from the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and Australia. The literature is predominantly interdisciplinary with concepts and ideas taken from management and business, human resources, adult education and psychology. Despite a steady growth in the last three decades in the international literature, and more recently on the Internet in the form of mentoring programme websites, few research-based studies have emerged (Darwin, 2000).

Growth of mentoring

As with the general literature, mentoring is a growing phenomenon in libraries and information centres, with increasing numbers of formal mentoring programmes being established, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia. In New Zealand many library and information centre managers are keenly seeking guidelines, information and ideas. A number of libraries are considering, or have already implemented, small-scale pilot mentoring programmes. Indeed, mentoring is a popular topic found increasingly on library conference programmes.

Significance of this study

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on mentoring as research in this area is still in its infancy in New Zealand. The study provides relevant findings for library and information centre managers, programme co-ordinators, mentors and mentees, and seeks to assist

decision-making related to the implementation and management of mentoring programmes, and involvement in mentoring relationships. Improved and more widespread mentoring programmes should, in turn, have flow-on effects in terms of potentially attracting new recruits to the profession, and improving existing employees' job satisfaction and retention rates.

Study objective

What are the benefits, barriers, and other factors affecting mentoring relationships and mentoring programmes in New Zealand libraries and information centres?

Implementing and managing a mentoring programme is not an easy task as it raises questions, and sometimes dilemmas, at every step. For example, what is the purpose of the mentoring programme; who will be involved; will it be run in-house or will external help be necessary; how much time and how many resources should be devoted to the programme; how will mentoring partners be identified and paired; what happens if the relationship does not work; how can the success or otherwise of the programme be measured? Therefore, the objective of this study was to lay the foundations for research into mentoring by building on overseas research to discover the current nature of mentoring in New Zealand libraries and information centres, and the benefits and barriers faced by mentoring participants in these contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & SAMPLE

This research project employed a mixed methods approach, involving quantitative questionnaire responses and in-depth qualitative interviews. The questionnaires aimed to elicit data on the nature of current or recently concluded mentoring programmes and relationships in New Zealand

libraries and information centres. The interviews aimed to gain an understanding of a number of issues raised in the mentoring literature, and to determine whether certain factors had a beneficial or non-beneficial effect on mentoring relationships, according to the perceptions of the New Zealand mentoring participants. This methodology was adopted to provide rich data from a range of sources, thus producing triangulated results and allowing a largely unobservable phenomenon to be studied. Data collection took place during February and March of this year.

The participants consisted of eight women and one man, based mainly in two large New Zealand metropolitan centres, with one person drawing on their mentoring experiences in Australia. Nine participants were considered a sufficient number to provide a range of views, yet acceptable in terms of the time and resource constraints of this research project. Of the relationships under discussion, two were current and seven had concluded. Involvement in mentoring was either in the capacity of a mentor, mentee, or programme matchmaker.

DATA INTERPRETATION

Where are we now?

The following characteristics of mentoring relationships and programmes were investigated:

- Purpose of mentoring programmes
- Length of mentoring programmes
- Types of libraries and information centres supporting mentoring
- Size of libraries and information centres supporting mentoring
- Purpose of mentoring relationships
- Sectors/types of information professionals involved in mentoring
- Length of mentoring relationships

The culminated results indicated that in this sample of New Zealand libraries and information centres, the European developmental model of mentoring is more prevalent than the American hierarchical model. The developmental model places emphasis on the mentee developing their own agenda and self-reliance, and on the mentor as a facilitator and colleague rather than a top-level manager and sponsor directing the relationship. The hierarchical model by contrast, incorporates internal line manager - subordinate relationships with a focus on 'empire-building' using the next generation of employees.

The results from this sample were also characterised by programmes that had the ability to cater for a wide variety of mentees and hence had a wide variety of purposes, although relationships providing career guidance, working through workplace problems, and assisting new managers, were common themes. Programmes were found to last anywhere from one year to ten years, and predominately took place in large organisations from the public, tertiary and government sectors. There was also the suggestion that reference and management information professionals more often participated in mentoring programmes. Mentoring relationships were generally instituted for a fixed term of one year, but had the flexibility to conclude earlier or continue informally afterwards.

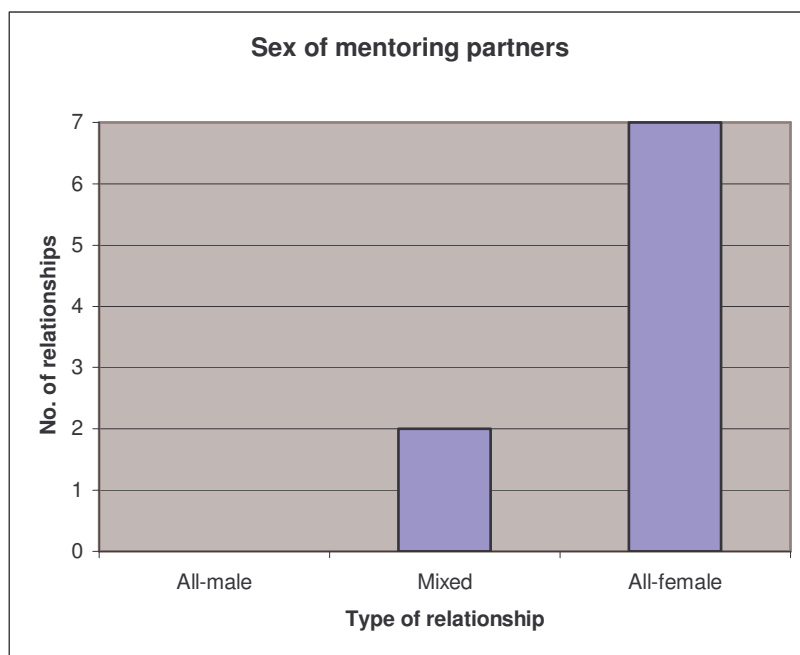
What factors should be considered to facilitate progress?

A number of factors that are raised in the literature as potential benefits or barriers to mentoring relationships and mentoring programmes were considered. Those that relate to the detail of organisational involvement are not discussed here, but additional information on these aspects is available on request or by viewing the paper presented to the LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa) 'Made in Aotearoa' Conference, September 2004, at this link:

<http://www.lianza.org.nz/conference/conference04/papers/clark.pdf>. This section will focus on factors related to the matchmaking process, comprising:

- Sex of the mentoring partners
- Participants' understanding of mentoring
- Learning styles
- Design of the matchmaking process
- Internal/external nature of the mentoring partners
- Internal/external nature of the matchmaker

a) Sex of the mentoring partners



All-female relationships dominated in this sample, no doubt because the profession is also female dominated. Most participants in this research project believed, based on their experience, that in same sex mentoring relationships rapport was easier to build and some said they would feel more comfortable, at least initially. Same sex relationships were preferred when the mentee was looking for a role model. However, most participants believed that the use of male mentors, where appropriate, was a good idea.

Male mentors could bring different perspectives to the relationship, for example.

Frequently left out of these equations are male mentees looking for male role models and career direction. A couple of participants commented on 'directionless young men' in the profession and further research is needed to ascertain whether there is demand from young male information professionals for mentoring.

It does not seem to make a lot of difference to the success of the relationship whether it is an all-female one or one matching a female mentee with a male mentor. The main point is that the mentee has a choice and is comfortable with the relationship arrangements, as well as the choice being appropriate for the purpose of the relationship.

b) Participants' understanding of mentoring

Most participants could not speak for their mentoring partner when it came to discussing their views and understanding of mentoring other than to reiterate, in line with the literature on this topic, that in most relationships the rapport-building phrase is critical for ironing out any differences in perception (Clutterbuck 2001, Jansen-Thomas 2000).

Participants thought of mentoring in its broadest sense as a mechanism for support: supporting the mentee in their current position or helping them to move to a more satisfying position. Thus, professional development and career direction were recurring themes. Mentoring could also operate on a number of different levels, from 'I just want to chat about something' to a more structured set-up of regular meetings and establishing goals. In addition, the concept that a mentoring partnership involved a more experienced person assisting a less experienced person was a commonly expressed idea, as was the reciprocity and confidentiality of the partnership, and the overlap with coaching.

The terminology used to refer to mentoring partners was straight forward with regard to the 'mentor' and nobody had any difficulty with this term. 'Protégé' and 'mentee' however were much more problematic. Most participants preferred mentee for its lack of connotations of elitism, but also remarked on the strangeness of the word and lamented that they could not think of a better alternative.

c) Learning styles

Participants were asked if they usually preferred to learn by standing back and asking why (Divergers), by reflecting on theories/models/benchmarks in order to get the right answer (Assimilators), by looking for new ideas and thinking about how to apply them (Convergers), or by active experimentation, what would happen if I did this? (Accommodators) (Sanchez 2002, Hale 2001, 2000 & no date, Mumford 1995a, 1995b).

Unfortunately, the question of whether it is better to match mentoring partners with similar or different learning styles could not be determined with any certainty. The material given to participants to help them identify their learning style was simplified to assist them to relate to it, but this also had the effect of rendering it largely meaningless because insufficient precise data was subsequently produced.

Part of the problem was that many participants did not identify with one predominant learning style. Instead they identified with aspects of all four learning styles presented. Moreover, several participants preferred personalities as an indicator of whether their mentoring relationship would be successful or not. That is, they believed that incompatible personalities, rather than incompatible learning styles, have a greater impact on the success or otherwise of mentoring relationships. Another point made by some of the mentors was that they often try to adapt their learning style or approach to suit that of the mentee.

Perhaps future studies in this area could utilise diagnostic tools to identify a person's learning style, thus avoiding the problems encountered in this study, where the onus was on the participant to identify their learning style, which many found difficult to do with any sense of precision or confidence.

d) Design of the matchmaking process

This factor relates to whether the mentee chooses the mentor, or conversely if the mentor chooses the mentee, or neither of these, if mentoring partners are matched by a third-party programme coordinator or matchmaker.

Overwhelmingly the last option was the most common practice. Typically the mentor and mentee would complete a questionnaire or application form detailing their reasons for wanting a mentoring relationship and stating their preferences with regard to their mentoring partner,

"I would prefer to be matched with a person who is either same gender/different gender, similar age/different age, working in the same sector/different sector, or don't care about any of those..."

A matchmaker or committee of mentoring programme coordinators, who match mentees to mentors, would then consider this information. The mentees' needs and wishes were the primary focus of the matching process.

If it looked as though the match was not going to work, there was the option for the mentoring participants to go back to the matchmaker and ask to be re-matched. This indicates one of the advantages of using a third-party matchmaker. Another advantage is that many matchmakers become very skilled at matching people and are more likely to create successful matches than a mentee or mentor choosing their own mentoring partner (Jansen-Thomas 2000, Jones 1998, Nankivell & Shoolbred 1996).

e) Internal/external nature of the mentoring partners

Participants highlighted many advantages and disadvantages of both internal and external mentoring relationships, this is, relationships with someone within your own library or with someone within the wider library profession working in another organisation. Although external relationships were clearly favoured, all participants recognised that internal relationships were preferable where the purpose of the relationship was to provide the mentee with a hands-on internship, for example.

Participants identified the advantages of external relationships for mentees as being an outside perspective, the ability to discuss topics freely, and having a greater pool of mentors to draw upon, thus increasing the chances of creating a better match. In addition, unlike a relationship with an internal mentor, there was no danger of role confusion, office politics interfering, or interrupting and burdening the mentor, because a set time was usually allocated for the mentoring relationship.

f) Internal/external nature of the matchmaker

Participants felt that a matchmaker (or matchmaking committee) that was well versed in the mentee's situation (more likely if internal to the mentee's library), with plenty of mentoring contacts (more likely if external to the mentee's library), was in the ideal position to enhance their success with regard to matching mentoring partners. Thus, there was no strong preference for either internal or external matchmakers, with external matchmakers able to do their homework on the mentee's situation to overcome any lack in their knowledge, and internal matchmakers able to cultivate a wide network of contacts to overcome any lack in their ability to find a suitable match. Indeed, the most vital quality expressed by participants, was for matchmakers to be independent and trustworthy.

Where to from here?

The current research project has focused on mentoring programmes at the library or information centre level. However, a number of participants called for a more co-ordinated approach at both regional and national levels. These participants believed that if the benefits of formal mentoring programmes were to be more widely experienced in New Zealand, the situation could not be left to the ad hoc initiatives of a select number of dedicated professionals. Rather, regional or national bodies such as LIANZA could become involved in a leadership capacity as part of their professional development and training focus. This would build on the work already commenced by one special interest group to implement mentoring initiatives across organisations.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is a growing phenomenon in libraries and information centres around the world, and many New Zealand libraries and information centres are showing keen interest in the concept. Unfortunately, New Zealand mentoring initiatives currently lack a sound body of relevant research literature to support decision-making. It is hoped the results from this research project have gone some way towards laying the foundations for further research into New Zealand's experiences of formal mentoring programmes in library and information centre settings, and have provided indicators of the nature of current and recent mentoring initiatives in these contexts. It is also envisaged that these findings will assist library and information centre managers, programme co-ordinators, and participating mentors and mentees, to accentuate the benefits and mitigate the barriers in current or future mentoring programmes designed for library and information professionals in New Zealand.

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