# TECH-INFUSED

By Judy Corner

***** Online mentoring technology can offer an efficient solution for the challenges of implementing and managing a successful program.

# MENTORING

*These days, mentoring is the hot topic for organizations across all industries and sectors. But what is mentoring? For me, the best definition of mentoring is "the use of an experienced and knowledgeable individual to teach, guide, and develop an individual with less experience or knowledge in a specific area."

Mentoring has become a strategy used by training and development professionals to achieve a wide range of talent management goals, including leadership development, succession pipeline development, knowledge transfer, onboarding, diversity enhancement, and as a supplement or reinforcement to formal training and e-learning.

According to a recent survey conducted by our research team, participants reported that their most prevalent strategic uses of mentoring are for development of individuals for leadership and succession planning. Organizations view mentoring as a personalized development tool that often targets the talent pool within an organization.

Through our ongoing webinar series on strategic mentoring, we also have been able to poll hundreds of individual attendees around the globe on their perspectives

of mentoring. Those results mirror what we found from the survey—developing leaders and strengthening the succession pipeline come out on top.

When asked to list several complementary objectives of their mentoring program in the survey, 50 percent of participants indicated "skill development," 45 percent indicated "knowledge sharing," and 43 percent indicated "promoting retention"—which also mirrors what we see today in engaging with HR partners and other mentoring program stakeholders.

## Online mentoring technology

While we are already on a topic with various definitions and concepts, it's fitting to talk about another related topic—online mentoring technology. I define this term as any web-based platform that contains tools that assist in the administration of one or more activities within a mentoring program or process.

Mentoring program activities might include any number of standard as well as best-practice components of a mentoring program, and ideally would be customized to fit the needs of the specific organization in question. Such components may include, but are not limited to, a participant application process, matching and pairing, online content, mentee goal tracking and learning plans, program feedback surveys, and customized ROI reports.

Individuals could use the platform to conduct a self-matching process, or program managers could use it to identify appropriate mentor-mentee pairs through a matching algorithm and custom matching criteria. Program managers can then track and report on program success. Even at high participant volumes, platforms can enable an organization to implement and manage every aspect of the mentoring program, from enrollment and program applications to matches and the partnerships themselves.

Clearly any such platform is an investment, so training and development leaders who implement such a mentoring platform must justify it with significant ROI. Technology can add the most value to a mentoring program by supporting the program manager to conduct ongoing program implementation

and administration activities. In particular, a well-configured mentoring platform offers an efficient solution for the biggest challenges of implementing and managing a successful program.

## Addressing program challenges and incorporating best practices

After consolidating global poll results from several mentoring webinars during which we asked this question of attendees, we determined the three most common program implementation and management challenges. The good news is that by successfully executing each of these challenging yet critical activities, you are in effect incorporating best practices into your program. Online mentoring technology can help you to execute these activities successfully.

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### Ensure that consistent program information is communicated to everyone.

For high-volume mentoring programs, offering program orientation and consistent content from a central location can increase adoption, engagement, and efficiency for both participants and individuals who are considering participation in the mentoring program.

The advantage of publishing content on a separate mentoring platform instead of on a company intranet is that publishing content on the platform establishes that the content is specifically dedicated to the mentoring program and deserves focused attention. Individuals can access the company intranet to get a wide range of information and resources, but with a focused platform dedicated to mentoring, it is easy for the program to get the weight it deserves within the company.

### Generate the most suitable mentor-mentee matches.

Matching and pairing for a high-volume program can take a

program manager days or even weeks to finish. On the other hand, matching initiated by mentors and mentees themselves without a tool to assist is much more likely to be based on similarities or personality chemistry, and not based on specific criteria related to business objectives or program objectives.

With an online tool, however, matching and pairing can be done in a systematic way that maximizes the developmental compatibility of pairs based on the specific business objectives at hand—that is to say matching based on a mentor's areas of expertise and a mentee's areas of need. Many of today's matching and pairing tools enable program managers to customize one or more criteria to produce ideal matches. They can then create matches either by automatically matching large groups of participants at once, or perusing a database filled with relevant data to match and pair individuals one at a time.

In addition, self-matching capabilities, if available, enable participants to find mentors or mentees based on ideal criteria stipulated by program objectives. This provides them with a structure and a direction in their search that is hard to replicate by other means.

### Track, measure, and demonstrate program success.

Most importantly, a mentoring technology platform can provide tools for program managers to track and report on the success of the program. Program managers potentially can track mentor-mentee interactions to understand how well pairs are progressing, whether mentees are setting and achieving goals aligned with the program's purpose, and whether participants are using the platform's various tools and resources to optimize their experience in the program. Ideally, they also can run customizable reports on the specific data they need to demonstrate program success and report back to senior management, HR leaders, and key stakeholders.

## Ensure your mentoring program is a success

Implementing technology is not just about having cutting-edge tools, resources, and activities at participants' and program managers' disposal. Instead

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it's about using the technology to support other best practices to ensure that all steps and elements of program implementation are working in tandem. In my experience, companies that take the time and effort to take the following steps, prior to technology implementation, are far more likely to see both immediate and sustained success with their mentoring program.

**Define a sufficient pool of suitable participants for matching.** When considering implementation of a technology platform to support your mentoring program, about 100 participants is recommended as a minimum number to obtain the best ROI. This may vary, but it is critical to establish a pool of potentially committed participants prior to engaging technology.

It is quite easy to overestimate the amount of immediate interest and commitment in a mentoring program. It's one thing to target a group such as global female high potentials, and be confident that such a group comprises a large number of individuals. However, it's something else entirely to be confident that a high percentage and number of global female high potentials are highly receptive to, and have a need for, formalized mentoring. Be sure to ascertain interest and buy-in through surveys, interviews, and focus groups of your target audience.

**Define a way to engage mentors and mentees on an ongoing basis.** Once you have defined the core population of mentors and mentees, it is then critical to make sure they stay engaged throughout the life of the program—whether it's three months, six months, a year, or even longer.

The technology can be a big help when it comes to engaging mentors and mentees and sustaining partnerships. It is particularly helpful to communicate the program's vision and objectives, as well as specific rules of engagement for mentors and mentees, to the entire participant

audience from a single convenient location. However, that content, whether in written, video, or e-learning format, or a combination of all three, must accomplish two things: provide a compelling reason for participation either as a mentor or mentee, and suit the wide variety of learning styles and preferences that inevitably occurs within a large participant group.

From the beginning, it is important to provide training to all participants— mentors, mentees, and supporting managers—so that everyone understands their roles. It enables individuals to ask questions, voice concerns, and ensure a common and consistent understanding about program objectives and benefits. In addition, this training program can illustrate how to use technology as a tool to enhance their mentoring partnerships.

It also is helpful for program managers to release ongoing content that is valuable to participants. This content ideally provides them with additional information that not only reinforces what they learned during the training sessions, but also assists them in addressing issues or concerns as they move forward in their partnerships.

The technology platform can be a great central location where mentors and mentees can access program resources. Topics, such as tips on being a good mentor (or mentee), beginning conversations, and handling partnerships that aren't working well, help the pairs handle issues as they arise. In addition, providing a central repository of material about mentoring in general, success stories, and upcoming mentoring events, enables participants to easily and quickly access information in one location.

**Build a sufficient business case and mentoring program plan.** While implementing mentoring technology can help many organizations to realize significant benefits and ROI, the onus is on HR and procurement leaders to obtain a thorough and realistic analysis of specific

needs, requirements, and feasibilities of a mentoring program before seeking a technology solution. The prospect of time-saving technology for program managers, mentors, and mentees may be attractive at first sight, and organizations might assume that simply having mentoring technology will automatically increase program efficiency and use. However, a decision as significant as new technology implementation must be made with care, and with a complete understanding of stakeholders' objectives and requirements, both in the short and long term.

Most important is that program managers and stakeholders establish specific success measurements based on defined objectives. This critical step is what enables ongoing tracking and reporting of program success, facilitated by using the online technology platform.

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