

# Mentoring in an increasingly global workplace: facing the realities and challenges

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Faced with burgeoning globalization, organizations are creating global mentoring programs as a means of improving organizational effectiveness, but guidance on the theory of global mentoring is sparse. This paper examines mentoring within the framework of globalization, offering insight into the utilization of this powerful tool in an increasingly global environment.

## Mentoring and organizational effectiveness

Mentors are leaders who, by example, socialize individuals to organizational culture and organizational mores, as well as organizational expectations through direct demonstration and observation. Mentors also serve a valuable liaison function between the organization and the developing employee (protégé). Mentors essentially become interpreters of everything from organizational policy and procedures to politics for the novice employee. Frequently, mentors cross a “generational” gap that occurs within the organization as new employees are moved into or through the organization. Individuals serving as mentors help develop competence and skills that might otherwise remain underdeveloped, operating in a capacity similar to an apprentice. In effect, mentors help the protégé’ to become more confident in their workplace behaviors. Developing employees are expected to become more competent and effective. Specifically, they are expected to become proficient in their handling of various tasks and contexts within the organization.

One particular benefit of mentoring in the context of globalization relates to expatriates who may actually experience enhanced learning as a result of working directly with a mentor. Ideally, the mentor would be in the same geographic area as the protégé. However, advances in technology make it possible for mentors to communicate electronically with protégés through e-mail and even video links.

## Challenges to face

### *Proximity*

Those familiar with working in sports involving children, or as coaches attempting to teach them how to play the particular sport know well that mentoring is a very personal interaction between the mentor and the “protégé. Technical guidance, such as directing the young protégé in which way to run, how to stand, proper techniques for kicking, for example, require the physical presence of the mentor as he or she strives to instill the right beliefs, attitudes and behaviors in the protégé.

In an organizational context, it would be ideal for the mentor and protégé to be at the same physical location. Unfortunately, in the global workplace, the physical presence of a mentor is not always possible and is often impractical.

The “noise” or barriers to effective communication that naturally arise impeding understanding by the sender and receiver of information becomes more significant in impact as physical distance increases. For example, if the delivery of knowledge relies on the internet, whether via streaming video, email, or internet telephony, the reliability and quality of service become a significant barrier to communication. Time, as related to distance, becomes a communication barrier if the sender and receiver of knowledge are separated by multiple time zones. The act of mentoring typically includes a very rich form of communication, because it is delivered in a face-to-face environment. Face-to-face communication is rich, because the receiver hears not only the words, but also hears the voice tone of the sender, and observes the non-verbal behavior of the sender. In an environment separated by distance, and time as related to distance, the words are there, but may only be in writing. If the connection is via telephone, still, the non-verbal part of communication is missing. Even in situations where interaction by satellite is possible, reliability and quality issues of information transmission continue to be a challenge – and, not every organization can afford the cost of this form of communication, just to enable a protégé to have the mentoring experience.

### *Language*

It is important to acknowledge that language differences may make mentoring a greater challenge. Indeed, it is quite common for individuals in European and Asian countries to learn second languages, making them more versatile in communicating with workers of other ethnic origins. However, in some countries, such as the USA, only a small portion of the population speaks a language other than English, thus creating a barrier to effective communication with individuals of other ethnic origins.

### *Cultural differences*

An additional issue relates to the psychological nature of the mentoring relationship. Individuals process and interpret information in different ways, based on our personalities, our life experiences, national culture, and educational level. Often, in the traditional organizational environment, the mentor and protégé share, by virtue of being in the same location, certain similarities that are the result of absorbing local values and norms, even if the mentor and protégé come from very different backgrounds. When the mentor and protégé are thousands of miles apart, even though they may work for the same corporation, there is no monolithic culture. Rather, there is a series of sub-cultures. Thus, if these barriers of differing values and norms hamper effective feedback, the likelihood of confusion or misinterpretation of information is increased.

Further challenges may also be associated with an individualistic versus collective orientation. Specifically, it is well known that Asian culture values the team and emphasizes the value of consensus, while the USA tend to place more emphasis on individual performance. It is particularly important for cross-cultural mentors to be aware of, and sensitive to the potential differences in beliefs, making necessary adjustments to avoid possible pitfalls in the mentoring process.



### *Credibility of the mentor*

The act of mentoring involves a relationship between mentor and protégé built on trust. When people do not trust each other, communication can be distorted, or the protégé can choose to ignore the mentor’s efforts to teach. While the credibility of the mentor is always important, when the distance spans thousands of miles, the lack of physical interaction, as well as the possibility that the protégé has not previously known, or knows little of the mentor beyond the supplied résumé, increases the difficulty of mentoring and, correspondingly, of learning from the mentor. Without the opportunity to observe the mentor on an ongoing basis, the protégé is likely to have little beyond that resume to determine if the mentor is truly competent and can be trusted.

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### *Credibility of the protégé*

Appointing a mentor creates little value if the protégé is disinterested or unable to use information from the mentor, so operating in a global environment challenges the organization to assess the willingness of the protégé to participate in a mentoring relationship. Protégé unwillingness to change or to communicate with a mentor creates barriers that are difficult for any mentor to overcome.

### **Conclusion**

This article provides valuable insight into some of the realities associated with mentoring in a global workplace. Specific emphasis is placed on challenges associated with communication between the mentor and protégé in a multinational environment. While there are obvious benefits associated with mentoring programs, organizations must be cognizant of some of the nuances associated with mentoring across national borders.

To maximize overall effectiveness, mentoring initiatives and programs should be grounded in solid learning and training theory rather than “words of wisdom” passed along from a mentor. Indeed, organizations need to clearly determine what “mentoring” means and the role it is intended to serve for the organization.

Effectiveness of global mentoring programs can also be enhanced by moving away from a one size fits all mentality, acknowledging the unique characteristics, strengths, and developmental level of each protégé. The mentor can determine the protégé’s developmental level through informal conversations or dialogues, direct questions, and observation, both formal and informal, adjusting the specific methodology to match the communication and cultural needs of the protégé.

Finally, the organization must begin by assessing the willingness of both mentor and protégé to work together to meet organizational goals and stakeholder needs. At its heart, a strong mentoring relationship exemplifies organizational effectiveness from a systems perspective by helping the system to become interactive and cohesive as it works toward becoming more effective.

**Keywords:**  
Mentoring,  
Communication,  
Globalization

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