

# MENTORING FOR A DISPERSED WORKFORCE

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When the Australian Women in Resources Alliance (AWRA) wanted to provide mentoring for women working in remote locations, the first problem they faced was the absence of suitable mentors available on site. Their only viable option was a virtual approach.

Virtual mentoring simply refers to any mentoring activity that does not take place face-to-face. With today's technology there is a suite of communication tools open to this style of mentoring, including Skype, telephone, email and text messaging.

When your workforce is widely dispersed, virtual mentoring can be your only option. If you are working in a fast moving high-tech environment, virtual mentoring may seem more appropriate to your culture. But is it effective? The answer is yes - so long as you have a

plan to make it work.

The AWRA virtual mentoring program is now in its third year and has successfully matched and managed over 300 program participants. The satisfaction levels have been similar to those in face-to-face mentoring programs and AWRA have discovered some distinct advantages to the virtual approach.

Participants enjoy the flexibility that virtual mentoring offers. There is no need to travel and interactions can be more immediate and faster. Operating by long distance tends to minimise the effect of age, gender or social status differences between mentor and mentee. This fact and the ability to match across broad geographic boundaries, significantly widens the pool of available mentors and mentees, making it easier to find genuinely

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suitable matches.

However, there are distinct disadvantages to virtual mentoring. It is much harder to provide online training in the interpersonal skills critical to a successful mentoring relationship. With no opportunity for face-to-face interaction, it can be difficult to establish a personal rapport. And of course it is nearly impossible to teach by doing, as a mentee cannot shadow their mentor or observe their behaviour if they are physically separated.

There is some evidence globally that a virtual approach reduces participants' commitment and persistence. It seems that it is easier to walk away from a 'virtual' relationship than a face-to-face one. These disadvantages do not preclude a successful mentoring program - but they do mean that the program manager has to work harder to ensure success. Let's look at the key steps necessary to make virtual mentoring work.

### Plan Your Program and Don't Underinvest

This is true for any mentoring program, but virtual programs have less margin for error, requiring more administrative time to check on relationship progress.

### Use a Mentoring Administrative Platform

There are a number of administrative platforms specifically designed to manage mentoring programs such as *Chronus*, *Mutual Force*, *MentorCore* and *MentorLoop*.

It is recommended that all virtual mentoring programs utilise an online platform, because once you get beyond

25 pairs of mentors/mentees it becomes difficult to manage things manually.

Each administrative platform operates differently, but all manage participant registrations, provide a centralised repository for training materials and meeting tools and some offer a built-in matching algorithm.

### Training Materials and Meeting Tools

It is up to the program manager to populate the platform with training materials and meeting tools. Training is essential for any successful mentoring program, but it is particularly critical for virtual programs. Remember that virtual mentoring is more vulnerable to loss of commitment. So it is critical that participants know what they are doing from the start.

Some thought needs to be put into the type of communication that will be most effective in a virtual environment. From our experience, allowing participants access to demonstrations and interviews online is more effective than a slide-by-slide webinar approach.

### Manage Your Matching

Some companies choose to set up virtual mentoring programs by hosting a range of mentor profiles and then allowing mentees to choose their own mentor, with little or no support for the mentoring pair.

If the program is designed simply to facilitate a short-term knowledge exchange then this approach can be effective. However, this is a poor approach if you are looking for participants to establish developmental mentoring relationships - one in which

there is an exchange of knowledge, experience and goodwill, and the mentor helps someone less experienced gain confidence, clearer purpose, insight, and wisdom.

Fostering the mentee's personal and career development requires a more structured program, with guidance provided to participants on how to create the open, trusting relationship between mentoring partners that developmental mentoring requires.

It can be beneficial to allow mentees some choice in their mentoring partner, but in that case clear guidance on choosing a mentor is critical. Potential mentees sometimes choose mentors that are too much like themselves, who cannot offer the degree of 'stretch' in the relationship that would help them achieve their goals.

The speed, accessibility and lower cost of virtual mentoring, make it the way of the future for corporates and associations. Ensure that your virtual mentoring experience is not marred by poor planning. As with any mentoring program, effective planning needs to address the four key issues above and ensure that mentors and mentees get the support they deserve. Designed well, a virtual program can make for an impactful mentoring experience for everyone involved.

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