Can e-mentoring take the “gender” out of mentoring?

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Abstract

Mentoring has been identified as a key strategy for career development and organizational advancement, and has been argued to be indispensable for women to succeed. E-mentoring has increased in popularity as a means of reducing some of the challenges associated with being mentored by men. Numerous studies conducted on formal mentoring programs have concluded that there are serious implications to consider in traditional cross-gendered mentoring schemes. A sample of six mentees and seven mentors (three female and four male) were interviewed after a year-long e-mentoring program was created to promote women to leadership roles within the Information Technology (IT) sector. The paper explores whether gender-biases encountered in traditional mentoring schemes are transcended when using an e-mentoring platform. Results from this qualitative study suggest that mentor gender still impacts the mentoring relationship even in a virtual environment. The study’s findings indicated male mentors tended to be more methodological in solving problems with their mentees, unlike female mentors who took a more indirect approach. Further, female mentors improved their mentee’s confidence through encouragement and relating to their mentee on a more personal level, a practice often avoided by their male counterparts. A summary of these findings is provided below, followed by a detailed discussion of the results and a section offering possible future research avenues to explore.

Introduction

Research has consistently documented that women are disproportionately represented in upper management and in positions of power and still continue to dominate traditionally “female” occupations, such as administrative support and service workers (Burke, 2002; Hsieh, & Winslow 2006; Jacobs, 1999; Leck, 2002; MacRae, 2005; Shein, Vueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Catalyst, a non-profit organization whose mission is to work with organizations to expand opportunities for women, reported in 2011 that women are underrepresented as heads of Financial Post 500 organizations (5.6% in Canada, 3.2% in the U.S.), board directors (14% in Canada, 15.7% in the U.S.) and senior officers (17.7% in Canada, 14.4% in the U.S.), and generally in management occupations (36.5% in Canada, 51.5% in the U.S.) although they represent almost 47% of the labor force in both countries (Catalyst, 2011a, 2011b). Further, women represent only 6.2% of the FP500 top earners in Canada and 7.6% in the U.S. (Catalyst, 2011a, 2011b).

Recognizing that concerted efforts need to be made to assist women in their career development, many organizations have adopted mentoring programs; now the most frequently cited organizational practice offered to address gender differences in advancement (Catalyst, 2009a, 2009b; Finkelstein & Poteet, 2007; MacRae, 2005; Orser, 2000). Mentoring is generally thought of as a relationship between a younger, less experienced individual (i.e., the mentee) and an older, more experienced individual (i.e., the mentor). Mentors provide mentees with psychosocial support, such as friendship and acceptance, as well as career development support, such as helping the mentee advance in the organization, providing sponsorship and coaching, setting up challenging assignments, fostering positive visibility, and protecting the mentee from adverse forces (Kram, 1983, 1985).

Women who are mentored enjoy career benefits such as greater compensation, more promotions, higher career satisfaction, greater career and organizational commitment and better work-life balance (Allen, Poteet, Eby, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Forret & de Janasz, 2005). Mentoring has been argued to be indispensable for women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) in that it provides them with guidance on how to gain information and insight, seize power, understand organizational politics, obtain feedback and gain access to resources (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Collins, 1983; Headlam-Valls, 2004; Lineham & Walsh, 1999; Ragins, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Research has also demonstrated that mentoring is most effective for women when they are mentored by women. Female mentors can act as role models and have experienced the difficulties and challenges their mentees face (Cooper & Hingley, 1983; Tharenou, 2005). Female mentees have less difficulty mirroring “female behaviors” than the “male behaviors” exhibited by their mentors (Cooper & Hingley, 1983). Women mentored by women report greater interpersonal comfort than do women with male mentors (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005; Maccoby, 1990) and receive more psychosocial support and career-development support than do women mentored by men (Fowler, Gudmundsson, & O’Gorman, 2007; Okurame, 2007; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Williams, 2001; Tharenou, 2005; Thomas, 1990).
Unfortunately, the paucity of women in senior roles makes it difficult to guarantee that female mentees will find or have access to female mentors. As a consequence, male mentors may be the only option. However, both male mentors and female mentees may be reluctant to enter into a cross-gender mentoring relationship in case it is misconstrued as a sexual advance or involvement, to avoid office gossip and to appease jealous spouses (Bowen, 1985; Fitt & Newton, 1981; Harden, Clark, Johnson, & Larson, 2009; Hurley, 1996; Morgan & Davidson, 2008; Ragins, 1996; Young, Cady, & Foxon, 2006). In fact, Morgan and Davidson (2008) argue that since a good mentoring relationship comes dangerously close to what characterizes a romantic relationship, cross-gender mentorships should be avoided so as to limit the number of opportunities for the mentoring relationship to go wrong. Even when women elect to be mentored by men, finding a male mentor may be problematic because women have fewer informal and formal opportunities (e.g., having a beer after work, networking on the golf course) to access and interact with male mentors (Kram, 1985; Lunding, Clements, & Perkins, 1978; O'Brien, Biga, Keslser, & Allen, 2010; Ragins, 1996; Wanberg, Welsch, & Heslett, 2003).

In addition to the challenges in accessing mentors, women face other obstacles that result in a sub-optimal mentoring experience. For instance, research has found that gender-role stereotypes can either consciously or unconsciously cause male mentors to assume that their female proteges lack the skills to grasp complex problems; further, when women do succeed, it is frequently attributed more to luck rather than competency (Deux & Emswiller, 1974; Noe, 1988). Gender-role stereotypes may also prevent male mentors from getting too acquainted with their female proteges (Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005). Different socialization practices can also cause dysfunction in the mentoring relationship; female proteges are socialized to use relationship practices (e.g., dependency, nurturing, accommodation), while male mentors are frequently over-protective and paternalistic (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988). Finally, although trust is an essential component of successful mentoring, research has found that male mentors are less likely to trust their female mentees than their male counterparts (Elliott, Leck, Orser, & Mossop, 2007).

E-Mentoring

Both the shortage of female mentors and the difficulties associated with cross-gender mentoring have driven the increasing popularity of e-mentoring. Similarly to traditional mentoring, e-mentoring is a computer/technology mediated relationship between a senior individual, the mentor, and a less skilled individual, the mentee, with the goal of furthering the mentee in his or her career (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Participation in an e-mentoring relationship requires computer technology in addition to a basic level of computer literacy (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Potential mentees search the internet or a mentor database for a mentor or are introduced by a program administrator to potential matches. Administered e-mentoring programs often have forms to complete that are posted online to provide information about participants to assist in creating optimal matches (An & Lipscomb, 2010). Mentors and mentees interact with one another using one or more web tools and means of communication such as email, online discussion groups, instant messaging, chats, video conferencing, skype, blogs, wikis and document sharing (Purcell, 2004).

E-mentoring differs from traditional face-to-face mentoring in three important respects. First, with e-mentoring the pool of potential mentors is global, allowing women to establish mentoring relationships with senior women and female role models that would otherwise be unavailable to them locally (An & Lipscomb, 2010; Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Second, e-mentoring is argued to diminish the effects of social status, age, gender and race (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005) as physical characteristics are “less visible in electronic communication, thus rendering them less important to the overall exchange” (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 221). As a consequence, female mentees can be mentored by men without the negative ramifications that challenge cross-gender mentoring relationships. Third, e-mentoring allows both mentors and mentees to access more than one mentor or mentee at a time, thereby broadening professional networks and providing participants with multiple perspectives on any given situation (An & Lipscomb, 2010).

Although access to mentors and mentoring is considerably superior in an e-mentoring environment, it is unclear if the quality and effectiveness of e-mentoring matches traditional mentoring. The research examining the quality of the e-mentoring experience is mixed. For instance, Purcell (2004) argues that e-mentoring relationships may be harder to develop than traditional face-to-face mentoring relationships given that the majority of the communication lacks nonverbal cues such as pitch of voice, flow of speech, facial expression, and body language, thereby making it easy for participants to misinterpret meanings and feelings conveyed in communications. Trust, an essential element of mentoring success (Elliott, Leck, Orser, & Mossop, 2007), is unlikely to form when misinterpretations occur. Further, participants may also be overwhelmed with the amount of information that can be exchanged, or with the frequency and different means of communications employed (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Conversely, An and Liscomb (2010) argue that the quality of communication increases with e-mentoring in that participants become more intentional in their communications and spend more time collaborating and reflecting rather than merely exchanging information with one another. E-mentoring also provides a record of correspondence allowing both the mentor and mentee to keep track of their interactions and refer to them when needed (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005).

Are women trading mentor access with mentoring effectiveness? It is yet unclear if e-mentoring succeeds in addressing the difficulties encountered by female mentees in terms of receipt of mentorship support, both career and psychosocial, and trust building that they encounter in face to face mentoring.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to assess if e-mentoring diminishes the negative aspects of traditional cross-gender mentoring and if it increases the effectiveness of the mentoring experience. The use of technology in mentoring has been considered to be a tool that can transcend various obstacles traditionally seen in mentoring, such as location, hierarchical barriers, gender-biases, etc. However, the body of research that addresses whether technology does in fact alleviate gender-bias in mentoring is scarce. With this in mind, the researchers hope to explore whether biases typically seen in traditional mentoring apply to the technological environment as well. An exploratory qualitative approach was chosen due to the paucity of research in this area.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of individuals working in the technology sector who had participated in a one year cross-
organizational pilot e-mentorship program, administered by Canadian Women in Technology (CanWIT), an organization dedicated to support the career development of women in technology. The mentors were both male and female and were recruited through the Chief Information Officer Association of Canada, a self-managed, not-for-profit community of IT leaders whose mission is to facilitate networking, sharing of best practices and executive development, and to drive advocacy on issues facing IT Executives/CIOs (CIOCAN, 2011). Mentees, all of whom were female, were selected by an application review process conducted by the project directors. The applicants submitted a request to be mentored by a CIO and were subsequently notified upon their acceptance with the contact information of their new mentor. In all, nine mentoring dyads were formed for the pilot program. Some participants declined to participate in the evaluation of the pilot program, leaving a sample of six mentees and seven mentors (three female and four male). Of the mentors who declined to participate, one was male and the other female. Five of the six mentees had been mentored previously; however, it is unknown whether their mentor was a male or female and whether the relationship was entirely face-to-face, over e-channels, or a hybrid of the two. As for the mentor group, all interviewed mentors had mentorship experience; however, it is again unknown whether the relationship was entirely face-to-face, over e-channels, or a hybrid of the two. This lack of information is important to note because research has documented a link between gender-based expectations from past mentoring experiences and the manner in which participants recall and interpret their e-mentoring experiences (Smith-Jentsch, Schielzo, & Weichert, 2007). This component will be further addressed in the limitations section.

Procedure
Mentors and mentees were informed by the project director that they would be contacted by telephone and asked questions about the e-mentoring experience as part of the pilot's evaluation process. Mentors and mentees were subsequently contacted by email and requested to participate in the evaluation; if they agreed to participate, a mutually agreed on time for the telephone interview was established. Semi-structured interviews lasted about forty five minutes each. Participants were told that their responses would be kept confidential. Telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by an independent interviewer.

Survey Instrument
Subjects were asked questions (see Appendix 1) about the goal of the program (question 1), the challenges faced before entering the program (questions 2-4), the career-related support provided/received (questions 5-7), the psycho-social support provided/received (question 8), the impact of the mentee/mentor match (questions 9-13), the level of trust in the mentoring relationship (questions 14-15) and the overall evaluation of the e-mentoring pilot program (questions 16-19).

Data Analysis
Answers provided by male mentors were analyzed separately from those provided by female mentors. Lists of answers were compiled for each question. When two or more mentors' answers were similar, they were included in the list only once. The lists of the male mentor answers were then compared to the lists of female mentor answers. When female mentor answers were similar to the male mentor answers, they were rated as 'similar.' When female mentor answers were different from the male mentor answers, they were rated 'different.' Two researchers examined the data independently to ensure reliability. Agreement was reached on all comparisons. The differences and similarities are discussed in the results section.

Although the survey measured various aspects of the e-mentoring program's effectiveness, this paper concentrates on three major facets critical to the success of the relationship between mentors and female mentees: 1) trust, 2) career-related support, and 3) psycho-social support. The analysis begins with a comparison of how trust is established in e-mentoring depending on the gender of the mentor. It then explores the impact of gender on the career-related support provided by the mentor and the psycho-social support experienced by the mentee. In evaluating the implications of these three facets, conclusions are drawn on whether e-mentoring has helped alleviate gender-bias.

Results
Qualitative analysis of the interviews demonstrated that male and female mentors differed in their e-mentoring approach in three primary areas: level of trust, career-development support and psychosocial support.

Trust
Female Mentors. When asked to comment on the level of trust between the pair, mentees with female mentors often stated that trust was established the moment their personal lives were discussed with their mentors. They claimed that they often spoke of non-career related topics and felt closer to their female mentors when discussing the challenges of work/life balance. Mentees reported an increase in confidence with respect to their own career aspirations when given the opportunity to share their life challenges with accomplished women in their field. Many mentees concluded that having a female mentor enabled them to feel more confident in their ability to express themselves with male superiors. In general, female mentors played a very supportive role in mentees' confidence-building. However, one mentee commented on her mentor being overly nurturing. In this particular situation, the mentee would have liked to have had a mentor that challenged her more frequently as opposed to being overly agreeable.

Mentees also reported that trust was built by sharing personal values with their female mentors. This is consistent with Cohen and Light's (2000) theory that successful mentoring relationships are often reported as those where mentees felt they shared their mentors' personal values. Both female mentees and female mentors mentioned that they considered their mutual values to be family and work/life balance. When they related on common personal stressors and challenges, they often grew to trust each other. Because the personal stressors were often non-work related, constructive career-development conversation often only began later on in the conversation. This is a considerable amount of time taken from career-development topics given that the frequency of conversation was on average every two weeks and conversations lasted anywhere between thirty minutes to an hour. For illustrative comments, see Table 1.

Male Mentors. Oftentimes, in pairs with male mentors, the question of whether an atmosphere of trust had been created left the mentors seemingly uncomfortable. Both the mentor and mentee often insisted that the relationship was results driven and was a comfortable working arrangement. When asked how trust had been established within the pairing, mentors and mentees commonly said that expectations of the program and the matching had been discussed and
Table 1 - Answers to Trust Related Questions with Mentees and Female Mentors

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Mentor</th>
<th>Mentee Paired with Female Mentor</th>
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<tr>
<td>“We had a friendship. We could share stories that had nothing to do about work, but about the others’ kids. It makes you feel more comfortable when approaching the more difficult topics; such as career-coaching.”</td>
<td>“We always began discussions by asking each other how the others’ kids were doing. It makes you feel more comfortable.”</td>
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<td>“She wanted to know how to get ahead while keeping her work and life balanced. She didn’t know how to manage that.”</td>
<td>“I believe having a female mentor prepared me for male encounters when expressing my ideas.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“She [mentee] shared many personal stories and past mistakes. It made me feel more comfortable when drawing on my own tough experiences.”</td>
<td>“When I realized it was a nurturing relationship, I didn’t put enough into the program as I could have. I needed to be challenged.”</td>
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agreed upon. The pairs had created a structure that would allow for tangible goals to be attained regardless of the mentee’s personal environment. For results-oriented and assertive mentees, this approach allowed for the pairing to thrive. Because trust had been established when the mentee was asked to communicate her expectations of the program, the mentor was made aware of the mentee’s standards. This allowed for a high rate of commitment and participation on the part of both parties. By having a relationship where both parties were committed, trust was established much earlier and the pairings began to be more honest with one another. One mentor commented on trust by saying that knowing the mentee’s expectations allowed for him to constructively share his past career mistakes with the hope of helping her make better decisions. Further, the male-female pairings communicated more frequently because of the pre-established expectations; and this also contributed to a heightened level of trust. For illustrative comments, see Table 2.

Table 2 - Answers to Trust Related Questions with Mentees and Male Mentors

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Mentors</th>
<th>Mentees with Male Mentors</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Deep is an overstatement. It was a comfortable working arrangement.” (When asked if there was a deep level of connection)</td>
<td>“It was kept at a very professional level. Most discussions revolved around work related topics.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“When trust was established, I could be honest about past mistakes and difficulties. [...] you can’t have trust when you only expose your successes.”</td>
<td>“You have to be committed. You need to exchange information and goals. Expectations must be clear in order to establish trust.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Trust was established when she [mentee] asked me questions about her career direction.”</td>
<td>“It was very structured. I learned boundaries and it communicated this initially.”</td>
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Comparisons. These findings are congruent with other research indicating decreased reports of social interaction with women in cross-gender mentoring relationships (Ragins & Mcfarlin, 1990). One explanation for these findings is that female mentees in cross-gender relationships may be reluctant to engage in after work, social activities with their male mentors for fear that the interaction would be misconstrued as sexual in nature (Clawson & Kram, 1984; Hurley & Fagenson-Eland, 1996). Although this comparatively higher sense of structure and career-focus with male mentors seemed to be beneficial to the mentee, it needs to be recognized that establishing trust for female mentees relies on a personal-value approach.

Career-development Support

Female Mentors. In the design of the e-mentoring program, CanWIT had provided a fairly open-ended structure for both groups to follow. The female mentors in the program began their coaching with asking the mentees about themselves and had referred to a few guidelines set out by the program organizers. The guidelines provided for discussion regarding the mentees’ strengths and weaknesses as well as what they felt they needed to advance in their careers. Through the results of the mentee’s self-analysis, the mentor could then tailor her approach. In every situation, mentees indicated that they lacked the confidence and ability to communicate their ideas with higher management. For this reason,
mentors often recommended role playing in order to boost the mentee’s self-confidence. One female mentor asked her mentee to approach her superiors for feedback regarding her performance, a useful exercise that the mentee otherwise would not have done. Mentees often commented on how much more confidence they had in themselves after doing these exercises with their mentors. Again, in every situation, mentees and mentors both agreed that the mentee’s career would not have been as successful five years later if the mentee had not participated in the program. Although confidence building was considered to be very beneficial to the mentees’ ability to approach upper-management, the amount of time spent on discussing one another’s shared personal values often took away from the mentee reaching actual tangible advancement.

In general, the mentees with female mentors felt better about themselves upon completing the program, but rarely discussed any concrete advancement in their careers. When asked where the mentees saw themselves 5 years from when the interviews were conducted, they said they could now entertain the idea that they could hold a more leadership-oriented position. For illustrative comments, refer to Table 3.

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<th>Table 3 - Answers to Career-development Support Questions with Mentees and Female Mentors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Female Mentors</strong></td>
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<td>“I asked her to do a self-analysis of herself. Then we discussed what she needed to do to move forward. I provided her with reading material and books. We went over how she could utilize that information.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The problem was not that she lacked knowledge; it was her lack of direction and lack of confidence.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Risk taking is very difficult for women; we tend to be more self-conscious.”</td>
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**Male Mentors.** When asked about their approach to career development, male mentors expressed a more methodological approach to achieving positive results. Many mentees referred to their mentors as career coaches. The mentees would express their expectation of the program, the mentor would then provide them with material to read or concrete suggestions on how to deal with career challenges, and afterwards the pair would evaluate the outcome. Because this methodology had not been incorporated in the CanWIT program, pairs rarely went on to speak of personal challenges. This career-focused approach was adopted by all male mentors. The lack of social interaction supports Ragins’ (1999) claim that female mentees with female mentors are significantly more likely than female mentees with male mentors to engage in after-work, social activities with their mentors. Most pairs with male mentors had scheduled time on a regular basis for these “coaching sessions”. For example, one mentee wanted to know the best process to launch her start-up company. The mentor then held a two hour session on how to get her business off the ground. They then went on to evaluate how this session had helped her. Career-development support revolved less around confidence building and more around attaining tangible goals. For illustrative comments, see Table 4.

**Comparisons.** These results are consistent with past research, namely O’Brien, Biga, Kessler and Allen(2010), who claimed that “it seems likely that male mentors will provide more assistance in career development” (p.543). However, although research suggests that male mentors typically provide more career-development support to their female mentees, female mentees experience more role modeling from their female mentors than they did from male mentors (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000).

**Psychosocial Support**

**Female Mentors.** Female mentors were often very encouraging and supportive of their mentees. Mentees often had to have their opinions and ideas validated in order to make very important decisions. One particular situation called for the mentor to consistently reassure her mentee that she should not feel guilty for having a career while being a mother. Certain mentors put additional emphasis on the need to commit fully to a mentorship program in order to get the best out their mentee. Female mentors largely played a role that required them to actively listen to their mentee’s challenges. One mentor felt she had to frequently calm her mentee down when she was frustrated with both personal and professional issues. One mentee said that it was essential to be given positive feedback to improve her confidence, while another felt her mentor was overly agreeable and supportive and that this hindered the mentor’s ability to offer perspective. For illustrative comments, see Table 5.

**Male Mentors.** When asked if there was emotional and/or psychological support provided by the mentor, both mentees and mentors rarely addressed emotional support. A few insisted there was none. Mentees often said there was frequently a gain in perspective which allowed the mentors to bring clarity to challenges that mentees were being faced with in their careers. Male mentors often provided their mentees with advice on how to be more approachable by others. This allowed the mentees to realize how they were being perceived by others which in turn helped to build their confidence. One mentor personally liked the idea of building his mentee’s “personal brand.” Male mentors tended to put additional
emphasis on how their mentees possessed the technical knowledge but often lacked the “business savvy” attitude required to excel in management roles (this could be otherwise translated into a lack of confidence in management roles). Male mentors coached their mentees to utilize their networks, to become more approachable, and to communicate their vision more effectively. For illustrative comments, see Table 6.

Table 4 - Answers to Career-development Support Questions with Mentees and Male Mentors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Mentors</th>
<th>Mentees with Male Mentors</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I wanted to teach her how to harness a network for a particular purpose. She wanted help in her start-up, so we had a two hour session on how to build a business model for a start-up. I gave her words of encouragement.”</td>
<td>“I was involved in a project and didn’t get as much support or attention as I had wanted. I took it very personally. He told me it was most likely a scheduling problem and that I should ask top-management to coffee. I would have never thought of doing this and I quickly realized I should have never taken it personally.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wanted to help her become someone who can articulate a vision and engage their customers. I believe she’s more business savvy now.”</td>
<td>“He’s a great coach naturally. We had weekly phones calls lasting anywhere from half an hour to an hour. He was able to provide perspective on how to approach things strategically.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I tried to be as much of a coach as possible. I was willing to answer whatever questions she had related to work. It was a progression of her skills set.”</td>
<td>“I had access to a lot of connections through him. He was my greatest fan. He would not hesitate to brag about me. He boosted my confidence this way and helped me.”</td>
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Table 5 - Answers to Psycho-social Related Questions with Mentees and Female Mentors

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<tr>
<th>Female Mentors</th>
<th>Mentees with Female Mentors</th>
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<tr>
<td>“It was very important that I listened to her in the beginning and that I tried to understand her challenges. I needed to calm her down often when she became frustrated with various issues.”</td>
<td>“My mentor often sent words of encouragement. I was making a big career move so it made that transition much easier.”</td>
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<td>“I allowed her to “think-out-loud” with me. It engrained her beliefs and validated her opinions.”</td>
<td>“I was matched with a mother of a similar age so we shared very similar challenges. Our commonalities helped me cope.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“My mentee felt very guilty about being a mom and having these ambitions. She felt bad about having to split-up her time.”</td>
<td>“My confidence dramatically improved when she provided me with positive feedback.”</td>
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Comparisons. This supports Eagly and Crowley’s (1986) social role theory that males communicate in a more instrumental manner, whereas females focus more on the nurturing and emotional aspects of relationships. This also explains O’Brien et al.’s (2010) theory that “it seems likely that male mentors will provide more assistance in career development, whereas female mentors will provide more psychosocial support” (page 543). While psychosocial support is crucial in a mentoring relationship, results from the pilot suggest that it hinders the career development of the mentee when done in excess.
Discussion of Findings

Despite the small sample size, mentor gender differences were observed. In comparison, pairs with female mentors felt they could trust one another when they discussed non-work-related topics, such as each other’s children. Pairs with male mentors felt they could trust one another when the expectations of the program were laid out prior to commencing the program. As past research has suggested, many pairs with male mentors felt uncomfortable discussing non-work-related topics.

Based on the observed gender tendencies, if program goals or expectations are not established in the beginning, it permits for an unstructured relationship. This may have hindered the potential for mentees to experience a significant advancement in their careers. Further, many female mentors commented on how their mentees had considerable difficulty in taking risks, however, female mentees were less likely to challenge their mentees in overcoming this fear. The results from the study support Weber, Blais, and Betz’s (2002) theory that women are less likely to adopt behaviours related to risk than their male counterparts.

Female mentors were more likely to build confidence through encouragement and relating to the mentee on a personal level. This nurturing relationship hindered the pair’s ability to move passed the “building of trust” phase and into the “career-development” phase. This type of approach created a comfortable environment for the mentee but did not push them to take on behaviours they otherwise would not exhibit in their careers. It is important to note, however, that there was no mention of how the relative lack of emotional support negatively or positively affected the bond between the cross-gendered pairings. Although none of the responding mentees suggested that more emotional support would have been appreciated, there are many possible explanations for this. Perhaps psychosocial support is not as necessary in e-mentoring for the purpose of career development as we once believed, or perhaps mentees felt emotional support in a professional relationship with an older man could be construed as unnecessary or sexualized (Clawson & Kram, 1984; Hurley & Pagerson-Elend, 1996). Although the reason for this is unknown, additional research on the topic could shed light on our understanding of why and how gender impacts the outcome of e-mentoring relationships.

The leniency in structure proved to impact the outcome of the mentees’ career growth because pairs with female mentees frequently spent time discussing non-work related activities, whereas male mentors had performance markers and an agenda in mind when organizing a meeting with the mentee. Further, the lack of participation in the evaluative interview was significantly higher in the female mentor group in relation to the male mentor group. One mentee claimed that this was due to the overly nurturing nature of the relationship which hindered her gaining challenging career development experiences.

When discussing the differences in approach, male mentors tended to be more methodological in solving a problem which their mentees were facing. This phenomenon further solidifies past research previously mentioned in the paper, where cross-gender relationships tend to avoid any non-work related discussion possibly out of fear the relationship could be considered sexual in nature (Clawson & Kram, 1984) and that male mentors tend to adopt a more instrumental approach to mentoring (Eagly & Crowley,1986). Further, female mentors seemingly played a more encouraging and supportive role for their mentee. Although male mentors had the tendency to challenge their mentee’s ideologies more, both male and female mentors managed to increase the mentees’ confidence over the course of the year.

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**Table 6 - Answers to Psycho-social Related Questions with Mentees and Male Mentors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Mentors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I certainly challenged how she was thinking about things. I allowed her to</td>
<td>“I became more approachable by people. He taught me that you</td>
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<td>view her thoughts from a different angle. I supported her and gave</td>
<td>work with people all the time, and that</td>
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<td>her confidence by telling her she could overcome her challenges.”</td>
<td>I should look at what I like in people and learn how</td>
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<td>to develop those qualities in myself.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I helped her understand what influencing people really meant. I also</td>
<td>“It gave me a lot of perspective. It never developed</td>
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<td>explained how she could build her personal brand. I asked her how she</td>
<td>emotionally.”</td>
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<td>would want to be seen, and how she is actually being seen.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“When she was at a fork in the road, I helped her by providing with</td>
<td>“He is a great communicator. He’s a natural coach and a</td>
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<td>her experience and support.”</td>
<td>direct person.”</td>
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Future Research Directions

Although e-mentoring is a relatively new area of research, assessing whether it transcends obstacles typically encountered in traditional mentoring is pivotal in gauging a program’s effectiveness. If organizations are increasingly looking to reduce training costs while providing the benefits of e-mentoring, additional research should be conducted in regards to testing whether gender in fact does influence the overall success of a program.

Self-efficacy is an important factor to address when analyzing the dynamics of e-mentorship. DiPenza, Linnehan, Shao, and Rosenberg (2010) noted that the mentee’s general self-efficacy prior to the commencement of an e-mentorship program may significantly influence the rate of interaction and the overall outcome of the relationship. In assessing self-efficacy and prior experience in mentorship programs, researchers may be able to determine the extent to which gender impacts the e-mentoring experience. Further, Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, and Weichert (2007) noted that mentees might have gender-based expectations that affect the manner in which they interpret and recall their e-mentoring experiences. For this reason, future research could investigate the influence of self-efficacy on the success of an e-mentoring relationship as well as the impact of pre-conceived notions of gender in a technology-based environment. In addition to examining these components, future research should be made on the effects of simultaneous mentorship in an e-mentorship environment. Subsequently, strategies may be developed to assist organizations and program coordinators to overcome such obstacles, if any exist.

Study Limitations

Self-efficacy, pre-conceived notions of gender in mentorships, types of past mentoring experience, and whether the individual was involved in other mentoring relationships at the time of this program were not discussed during the interview. The study is limited in that it was not able to control for the effects of past mentoring experience. If pre-conceived notions of mentorship/e-mentorship were present among mentees or mentors, the success of the relationship could have been affected. Additionally, the mentee’s self-efficacy was not examined prior to the study. As DiPenza, Linnehan, Shao, and Rosenberg (2010) reported, prior experience of mentoring might influence the manner in which mentees utilize their e-mentoring relationships and this information could help explain some of the results exhibited by some of the pairs. Furthermore, although the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire lasting between 30-75 minutes, they were not held with all participants of the program. Out of the nine mentees, six answered overall (four of which had male mentors and two of which had female mentors). Of the nine mentors, two did not participate (one of which was female and the other male). Although the length and nature of the questions allowed for rich qualitative data, follow-up quantitative research is recommended with a much larger sample size in order to draw conclusions that might be more generalizable.

Conclusion

When an e-mentorship program does not foster the structured environment (i.e., clear guidelines around career development, timeframe, and training for participants) necessary for the mentee to advance, the relationship tends to dissipate quickly. However, if a program can assess these differences in approach and adjust accordingly, the mentee’s career can advance dramatically, regardless of the gender of the mentor. This, if successfully accomplished, could in fact transcend gender-biases typically seen in traditional formal mentoring schemes. Past research has shown that technology ultimately is not the central factor in e-mentoring; it is the quality of the mentoring and the mentoring relationships that are the most important. (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005). This could be the central reason why this e-mentoring program did not succeed in completely removing gender differences. Future research should examine how e-mentoring programs should be designed to accomplish this goal. It is through the analysis of the pilot that a very prominent conclusion can be drawn: the mentor’s gender or the form of technology used is secondary to an effective relationship in order to strike the right balance between career advancement and trust.

References


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Appendix 1

Pilot Evaluation - Mentees / Mentor Interview Questions

1. For you, what was the goal of the program?
2. What sort of mentoring did you receive before this program? / What sort of mentoring did you provide before this program? How did it compare to eMentoring?
3. What were the issues and challenges of finding an appropriate mentor before the program? / What issues and challenges do you think your mentee faced before entering the program?
4. Was gender an issue in finding an appropriate mentor and why? / Was your mentee's gender an issue in being able to find an appropriate mentor and why?
5. What did your mentor do to support you in managing and developing your career? / What sort of support did you offer your mentee to help her manage and develop her career?
6. How did the mentoring experience make a positive difference to you and your career? / How did the mentoring experience make a positive difference to your mentee and her career?
7. What do you see yourself/your mentee doing five years from now? How would this five year plan be different had you/she not participated in the mentorship program?
8. What did your mentor do to provide you with emotional and psychological support? / What emotional and psychological support did you provide your mentee?
9. On what dimensions would you say you were very different from your mentor / mentee? (Probe for 3). For each dimension: a) how did this help or hinder the relationship? b) when did the influence of this difference become apparent? c) can you recall a specific event that brought this to your attention?

10. On what dimension would you say you were very similar to your mentor / mentee? (Probe for 3). For each dimension: a) how did this help or hinder the relationship? b) when did the influence of this difference become apparent? c) can you recall a specific event that brought this to your attention?

11. Describe yourself as a mentee / mentor.

12. Describe the perfect mentor / mentee.

13. On what dimensions would you like your next mentor / mentee to be different?

14. What created an atmosphere of trust between you and your mentor / mentee? Can you give specific examples?

15. Did you feel you had a deep level of connection with your mentor / mentee? How would you describe the connection? Give an example of an exemplifies the connection. What occurred to establish this connection? OR What prevented a deep level of connection from occurring?

16. What difficulties did you face in your mentoring relationship? How did you resolve them?

17. What were the advantages of eMentoring vs. face-to-face mentoring?

18. What were the disadvantages of eMentoring vs. face-to-face mentoring?

19. What could have been done to improve the quality of the eMentoring experience?

About author(s)

Brittany V. Rockwell (University of Ottawa) has been a research associate under the supervision of Dr. Leck since 2010. Holding a Bachelor of Commerce in Finance from the Telfer School of Management, she has conducted research on topics pertaining to social capital, executive-level e-mentoring, and corporate governance. She has worked alongside organizations, such as Canadian Women in Technology (CANWIT) and the CIO Association of Canada (CIOCAN), to aid in the development and evaluation of programs designed to advance women to leadership roles within the IT sector. Since 2012, she has focused on various topics, such as the accessibility of social capital to executive-level advice for marginalized groups. Rockwell(at)telfer.uottawa.ca

Dr. Joanne D. Leck, PhD. (McGill University) joined the Telfer School of Management in 2000 as a professor of human resource management and organizational behavior. Dr. Leck obtained a B.Math from the University of Waterloo in 1980, an MBA from McGill University in 1987 and a Ph.D. from the same university in 1992. Her thesis examined the effectiveness of employment equity programs and issues related to managing diversity. Dr. Leck's earliest work was an extension of her dissertation, where she continued to research employment and pay equity. After interviewing women who broke the glass-ceiling, she became increasingly aware of another problem women face in the workplace, namely bullying and harassment. As these working conditions may dissuade women from advancing in their careers, she turned her attention to this area of research. Most recently, she has been investigating how mentoring can not only protect women from any adverse forces but also provide them with the psycho-social and career support they need to advance. Dr. Leck is currently the Principal Investigator of two SSHRC grants supporting this mentoring research. In addition to her academic experience, Dr. Leck worked for several years at Air Canada in Information Technology and has provided training in negotiation skills and managing diversity for a variety of organizations, including Canada Post, Hydro Quebec, le Cirque du Soleil and the University of Havana. E-mail: leck(at)telfer.uottawa.ca (Corresponding author)

Dr. Catherine J. Elliott, Ph.D. (University of Ottawa) has focused her research on improving organizational performance in three main areas: human resources, performance management, and women's entrepreneurship. In the area of human resources, she has conducted research on mentoring and trust, adult learning, e-mentoring, and career development. In performance management (PM), she has been involved in the Interis Research cluster, investigating PM in the federal public sector. In women's entrepreneurship, she has co-authored several academic articles about gender and entrepreneurial identity. Professor Elliott teaches Organizational Behaviour, Human Resources Management and Organization Design in the undergraduate and MBA programs. Over the last 20 years, she has also worked as a human resource manager and management consultant. As an HR manager, she worked in a variety of corporate roles, across many functions, from executive recruiting to staffing. As a consultant, she provided services to federal government clients in training and education, career development, and change management. E-mail: elliott.young(at)sympatico.ca
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