Chapter 8
Virtual Speed Mentoring in the Workplace – Current Approaches to Personal Informal Learning in the Workplace: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Informal learning is the biggest undiscovered treasure in today’s workplace. Marcia Conner, author and often-cited voice for workplace learning, suggests that “Informal learning accounts for over 75% of the learning taking place in organizations today” (1997). IBM understands the value of the hyper-connected informal workplace and informal learning that comes through mentoring. This case study examines a novel approach to mentoring that is shaped only by virtual space and the participants who inhabit it. The authors found that virtual social environments can bridge distances in a way that is effective, creative and inexpensive. Eighty-five percent of virtual speed mentoring attendees reported that this approach achieved their learning objectives. Participants also reported that virtual social spaces like Second Life® are suitable delivery vehicles for mentoring, and that connecting with people was much easier than via telephone or web conferencing.

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INTRODUCTION

IBM Virtual Speed Mentoring has been developed in Second Life to provide an online forum for employees to discuss issues relating to their careers with an expert. Speed Mentoring is an informal meeting in which mentors and protégés from every corner of the world dialogue in fifteen-minute bursts. In these calendared events, protégés, industry experts, managers and executives from all levels of the business converge in a virtual mentoring space. This intensity of skill mixing rarely occurs in day-to-day work, making such encounters both career and life changing for many participants.

Corporations have understood for many years that mentoring ensures experience and knowledge is shared and helps employees feel connected to one another. IBM employs approximately 398,000 worldwide (IBM, 2009), and in large companies it is difficult to create and maintain mentoring connections. IBM understands how this practice can impact career growth. But with increased travel costs and productivity demands, mentoring has become both more difficult and more important to sustain. An approach like virtual speed mentoring can reduce workplace connection barriers and increase productivity with a minimal investment (IBM, 2005).

BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL SPEED MENTORING

In October 2008, 50 IBM Canada and a few IBM global employees met in Second Life in the first IBM virtual speed mentoring event. An internal career planning website promoted the program, inviting participants to join based on either a manager recommendation or request generated from the site. About 20 experienced business leaders acted as mentors to roughly 30 more junior, less tenured employees. Participants included IT Specialists, IT Architects, Project Managers and Consultants.

The approach to mentoring was simple: protégés could ask career planning questions of different mentors in a series of fifteen minute rotations.

Each speed mentoring session began with a main tent event offering an overview of the objectives and a description of mentoring at IBM program. The introduction was followed by two guest speakers who shared their mentoring and work life experiences with the group. Participants chose “mentoring pods” where up to three protégés could sit and speak with a mentor. After 15 minutes at one pod, the mentor moved to a different pod and continued to dialogue, through a 12-pod rotation. This rotation of pods gave protégés a variety of perspectives on career planning questions and opportunities across IBM.

Typically, participants described their current role and position to the group, highlighting latest directions, observations on their progress and their hopes for the future. Each mentor offered feedback, connections and possible new directions to the group based on his or her own experience in the company. Participants also exchanged ideas with each other, quickly expanding the mentoring options for each protégé. The 15-minute rotation allowed for many exchanges, while mentors quickly gained a feel for the concerns and career planning tactics applied across the company. Mentors often recommended connections to other protégés who shared concerns or career paths. This approach built new connections across the company and helped protégés to share best practices.

Speed mentoring is not intended to circumvent deeper, longer-term mentoring relationships. Instead, speed mentoring rapidly connected concerns and people in an informal manner. Although speed and breadth of topic outweighed depth of relationship in this application, virtual speed mentoring sessions often became the starting point for greater depth and longer-term mentor/protégé relationships. As an additional benefit, every participant learned more about the value of and practice of mentoring.
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