E-Mentoring Through a Network of Practice on Facebook

Hsun-Ming Lee, Texas State University-San Marcos, San Marcos, TX, USA
Mayur R. Mehta, Texas State University-San Marcos, San Marcos, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with more than 500 million active members. With its ability to easily manage multi-user social networks synchronously, it provides a fertile foundation to promote e-mentoring among the current generation of technology- and Facebook-astute students. This study reviews Network of Practice (NoP) theories to provide insights to a mentoring structure that facilitates the sharing and exchange of profession-related knowledge. A Facebook application was developed to conduct an experiment that examined factors that affect the performance of the mentoring program based on a NoP. A class of college students, which used the application to connect to recent graduates and industry experts, allowed us to observe and analyze live mentoring activities. The authors’ findings indicated that the mentor’s gender appeared to impact the relationship that developed between mentors and protégés via Facebook, and that the students were indifferent about the years of experiences of their mentors.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication, E-Mentoring, Facebook, Network of Practice, Online Social Networking, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace, allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others (Ellison et al., 2007). The benefits and amusements of online social networking have led to a tremendous increase in SNS usage in the past several years. An example is Facebook. In July 2010, Facebook was reported to have more than 500 million active users. In addition, more than one million developers and entrepreneurs from more than 180 countries engage in developing applications based on the Facebook platform. More than 550,000 applications are active on the platform. Furthermore, 70% or more of Facebook users engage with these applications each month (Facebook statistics 2011). The communication opportunities within SNSs are boundless. They present a fertile ground for initiating a mentoring program.

Researchers have emphasized the need to investigate non-traditional modes of mentoring (Byrne et al., 2008). One alternative that is gaining in popularity and usage is electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) (DiRenzo et al., 2008).
E-mentoring is the act of providing and receiving guidance and support through computer-mediated technology, such as e-mail, electronic chat, and message boards. With the improvement of technology, particularly the increased access to the Internet among all segments of society, e-mentoring has become more common in recent years (Cravens, 2003; Miller & Griffiths, 2005). Given the well-documented shortage of adults who are both capable of serving as traditional face-to-face (F2F) mentors and willing to do so, e-mentoring is likely to continue to grow in the foreseeable future (Karcher et al., 2006).

According to DiRenzo et al. (2010), most mentoring relationships today are characterized by at least some degree of computer-mediated communication (CMC). As technologies evolve, younger generation college students tend to use online social networks rather than interacting through the traditional CMC. Thus, this research is to get a better understanding of the new mentoring opportunity via Facebook. In particular, we paid special attention to the activities of professional communities on Facebook, and found that members of professional societies have used Facebook to exchange ideas important to their interests (Kaweckyj, 2009). We were motivated by the traditional and valuable role that professional societies played in mentoring members (Ritchie & Genoni, 1999; Davidson & Middleton, 2006). In such societies, mentors can be seen as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and support for their protégés’ success (Ragins, 1997).

We believe that a new hybrid mentoring structure is emerging due to the advance of online social networking. It is different from the traditional structures that include well-known one-on-one and adult-with-youth mentoring, cross-age peer mentoring, inter-generational mentoring, e-mentoring, and group mentoring (Karcher et al., 2006). This paper investigates the theoretical backgrounds of a mentoring structure that involves professional communities on Facebook, and the factors that affect the performance of the mentoring program based on the structure.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: we review the literature on e-mentoring and network-based knowledge sharing. Next, we present the research methodology. We also demonstrate a prototype system for conducting an experiment and discuss the results. Finally, we conclude the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring is associated with a wide range of favorable behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational, and career outcomes (Eby et al., 2008). E-mentoring may provide career development functions, which give the protégés the tools and skills required to advance in his/her chosen career path (Headlam-Wells, Gosland & Craig, 2006).

E-Mentoring Advantages

E-mentoring is still relatively new and under-researched (Ensher et al., 2003; Fagenson-Eland & Lu, 2004; Headlam-Wells, 2004; Headlam-Wells et al., 2005; Megginson et al., 2006), but the research that has been conducted has examined the many advantages of e-mentoring. First, e-mentoring provides flexibility and easy access that are not limited by geographical or organizational boundaries. This is especially beneficial to mentors and protégés when they are located in different geographical locations (Bierema & Hill, 2005). Second, e-mentoring can facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous communication, which adds to the richness and variety of the interactions. The flexibility offered by e-mentoring’s asynchronous communication methods also means that it would not have to interfere with other daily commitments (Headlam-Wells, Craig & Gosland, 2006). Third, e-mentoring can help support a reflective learning environment, where mentoring pairs can explore their values, feelings and objectives at their own pace and more freely than in F2F communication, which can be pressurized through the need to
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