Organizational E-Mentoring and Learning: An Exploratory Study

Vidya V. Haran, University of Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, USA
Anand Jeyaraj, Wright State University, Dayton, USA

ABSTRACT

This article explores the process by which e-mentoring unfolds in organizational settings, emphasizing the crucial role of learning that acts as the intermediate step between mentoring functions and organizational outcomes. Specifically, the authors investigate how e-mentoring functions—career support, psycho-social, and role modeling—support the protégé’s learning, and how learning increases organizational commitment of the protégés. Data was collected through an online survey of 59 individuals in two multinational organizations that had mentoring programs. Analysis using SmartPLS 3.0 showed that career and role modeling support are statistically significant predictors of learning, and learning predicts organizational commitment as expected. Contrary to face-to-face mentoring literature, the direct link between the mentoring functions and organizational commitment is not supported. The authors conclude with implications for research and practice.

KEYWORDS

E-Mentoring, Mentoring, Organizational Commitment, Protégé Learning

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is an influential tool within organizations. It involves a mentor, typically an influential individual possessing advanced knowledge, committed to providing upward support and mobility to the protégé’s career (Kram, 1985). With the increase in globalization and rapid technological advances, mentoring relationships spanning national and cultural boundaries have increased, and mentoring dynamics are being re-shaped by new forms of work, technology and learning (Maitland and Thomson, 2011). Alternative forms of mentoring have been proposed as a mechanism for developing employee skills in response to a changing workplace (Williams et al. 2009). E-mentoring is a recent social construction of mentoring using computer mediated communication (CMC) tools and has received considerable attention in the recent literature (e.g., DiRenzo et al., 2010; Scandura and Pellegrini, 2007; Enscher and Murphy, 2007; Hamilton and Scandura, 2003).

Mentoring research has typically examined traditional face-to-face (f2f) interactions (e.g., Schunk and Muller, 2013) in academic contexts. Our study examines the impact of e-mentoring in organizational settings. For this purpose, we use the dynamic model of mentoring, which provides

DOI: 10.4018/IRMJ.2019010104

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insights into the process by which e-mentoring unfolds rather than treat mentoring as a black box and focuses on the protégés’ final outcomes such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Lankau and Scandura, 2007). Prior literature has generally not examined the processes that occur during mentor–protégé interactions. One such key process is protégé learning, which has gained increasing importance at workplace, with organizations investing millions of dollars in workplace learning programs to develop human capital for competitive advantage (Noe et al., 2010). Although links between learning and positive work outcomes have often been assumed, there is little empirical evidence for its role in e-mentoring processes. Specifically, our study examines the research question: Do e-mentoring functions lead to learning and commitment in organizations?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next sections describe the theoretical framework and research methods. The discussion and conclusion sections complete the paper.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

E-Mentoring

E-mentoring primarily utilizes electronic mechanisms as the channel of communication between mentors and protégés. It is a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé, which provides new learning as well as career and emotional support, primarily through electronic mail (i.e., e-mail) but also through other electronic means (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms, and social networking spaces) (e.g., Ensher and Murphy, 2007; Rowland, 2012). Alternatively known as online mentoring, virtual mentoring, or tele-mentoring, e-mentoring has spawned off from the traditional mentoring and relies on internet technologies which provide a broader and a more flexible platform for communication and networking (Panopoulos and Sarri, 2012). It allows to overcome time and space constraints on the number, type, or purpose of mentoring relationships, and improves opportunities for oversight and research (Single and Muller 2001). Further, e-mentoring can boost the likelihood of initiating developmental relationships by increasing accessibility of mentors, equalizing salient differences of partners, and decreasing emphasis on demographics (e.g., race, age) that may be identifiable in f2f meetings (Ensher and Murphy, 2007), thereby reducing stereotyping and bias (Merritt and Havill, 2016). It is considered boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different from f2f mentoring (Bierema and Merriam, 2002) independent of geographical and scheduling constraints, transcending functional, hierarchical and cultural boundaries (Headlam-Wells et al., 2006) and available when f2f mentoring would be impractical.

Mentoring relationships exist in organizational/workplace settings (Ragins and Kram, 2007) and is traditionally described as a relationship between two individuals, usually a senior and junior employee, whereby the senior employee takes the junior employee “under his or her wing” to teach the junior employee about his or her job, introduce the junior employee to contacts, orient the employee to the industry and organization, and address social and personal issues that may arise on the job, which could also provide visibility for the junior employee (Allen and O’Brien, 2006). Mentoring in organizations is mostly formal. In formal mentoring, the organization monitors and evaluates the effects of a mentoring relationship to realize organizational goals (Malota, 2017).

Research Model

Our research model is based on the process model of mentoring (Lankau and Scandura, 2007) and incorporates learning as the critical intermediate step leading to organizational commitment. The model argues that learning by protégés partially mediates the relationship between the support mentors provide and the career choices made by protégés (Hezlett, 2005). Figure 1 presents the research model that outlines the hypothesis examined in our study between the mentoring functions and learning and between learning and organizational commitment.
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