

# Business to Business Mentoring: A Qualitative Investigation of an Unexplored Phenomenon

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## Abstract

Using interview and survey data from 16 mentor and 17 protégé companies participating in an ongoing three-year program facilitated by a United States municipal Chamber of Commerce, this qualitative study examined inter-organizational mentoring. The study's primary aims were to ascertain mentor and protégé benefits of participation, dyad challenges, and suggestions for program improvement. While some of the study's findings are consistent with the extant literature—which emphasizes mentoring at the interpersonal level of analysis—others suggest unique benefits (e.g., increased protégé company revenues and contracts, enhanced protégé business models), challenges (e.g., business/industry dissimilarity that impedes the formation of meaningful partnerships), and unique suggestions for program improvement (e.g., more social networking opportunities for mentors) that result from inter-organizational mentoring program structures that differ from traditionally studied intra-organizational ones. Numerous avenues for future research are offered, as mentoring between and among organizations, although relatively abundant in practice, has not been explored – beyond this study – to date. Practical implications, including best practices for third party organizations – e.g., governmental organizations – that facilitate inter-organizational programs, are offered. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that practice has outpaced research in this area of mentoring, as industries like environmental and defense have undertaken third-party facilitated and informal mentoring partnerships underpinned by varying motivations, including enhanced supplier relationships and industry reputation, while no research attention has been given to these arrangements. As the mentoring literature, spawned over 25 years ago, has focused on interpersonal relationships and formal organizational mentoring programs in which mentor and protégé matching occurs within organizations, this study furthers the literature by introducing a new level of analysis.

## Introduction

*“As an entrepreneur, you may not have the money to surround yourself with expertise. The mentoring program is a cost effective way to help small businesses get over the hump. These **mentors** are basically unpaid consultants. That's probably the beauty of the program.”*

Over the past 30 years, an impressive body of mentoring studies has examined mentoring functions, outcomes, types of alternative relationships, formal programs, diversified relationships, antecedents, negative experiences, among other mentoring topics (e.g., see Chandler, Yip & Kram, 2011, Allen & Eby, 2007, Ragins & Kram, 2007, Noe, Greenberg & Wang,

2003, Underhill, 2006; Wanberg, Welsh & Hezlett, 2003 for reviews). Most of the field's studies occur at the interpersonal level of analysis – that is, between individuals. And, while there is research on formal mentoring programs, which has examined organization-level characteristics associated with mentoring (e.g., Allen, Eby & Lentz, 2006) even in these studies, the outcome of interest lies at the individual level.

### **Research Problem, Objectives, and Plan**

Practice, however, is outpacing researchers' efforts to understand mentoring phenomena. The organizational landscape is littered with learning partnerships between organizations of greater and lesser knowledge and capability with the intention of furthering one or more organizations' capabilities. Intra-organizational mentoring arrangements are occurring in such industries as environmental and defense contracting (Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, 2002; Department of Defense Mentor Protégé Program, 2011). To date, a handful of practitioner writings, either in the form of conference proceedings (White House Council on Environmental Quality & The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation Conference Proceedings, 1998) or online anecdotes associated with programs (Department of Defense Mentor-Protégé Program, <http://www.acq.osd.mil>, 2011) have made their way online, yet no scholarly research has considered these alliances.

Toward a better understanding of these mentoring alliances, our principal objectives are to examine: (1) benefits as perceived by business-to-business mentoring partners; (2) challenges experienced by partners; and (3) recommendations for program improvement.

To explore the phenomenon of interorganizational mentoring with these objectives as focal points of the study, we embarked on a qualitative study that involved an examination of 16 mentor and 17 protégé participants in an ongoing three-year "business-to-business" mentoring program facilitated by a Tennessee Chamber of Commerce. We collected and analyzed survey data (39 surveys) gathered from participants and conducted 25 interviews with mentor and protégé representatives specifically aimed at the principal objectives.

With the foregoing objectives in mind, the paper proceeds as follows: further literature is overviewed to help frame the study's intentions; an overview of the methods is provided; findings are discussed; and limitations, practical/managerial implications, and directions for future research are provided.

### **Literature Review**

What is inter-organizational mentoring and what are its benefits? According to the Institute for Corporate Environmental Mentoring (1998), inter-organizational ("business-to-business") mentoring is an application of the traditional mentoring relationship involving the senior mentor and junior protégé. Under inter-organizational environmental mentoring, organizations benefit from other organizations with greater expertise by gaining greater access to resource and experience in developing and pursuing environmental strategies (9). In "Environmental Mentoring: Business to Business, Peer to Peer," the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality describes environmental mentoring as "...a tool that can help a company achieve environmental results, with benefits to both the mentor and mentee and the industry sector. Various websites and a few practitioner papers, namely conference proceedings, assert that the benefits of mentoring include: greater efficiency in achieving solutions; networking; and

enhanced public image” (2: 2002). In a similar mentoring arrangement not aimed at the environmental industry, the Department of Defense (2011) “assists small businesses (Protégés) to successfully compete for prime contract and subcontract awards by partnering with large companies (Mentors) under individual, project-based Agreements” (<http://www.acq.osd.mil>).

Common among these inter-organizational mentoring applications is a partnership between an organization or group of organizations as mentors and as protégés. The partnerships can be structurally arranged in various ways, including as associations, in which a larger facility organizes its smaller-sized competitors into an industry network (association members mentor each other) with the goal of helping the industry’s image and overall capability, or as supply chain mentoring, in which a larger company with few peers chooses to mentor its suppliers on best practices. We assert that inter-organizational mentoring is a tool that can help a company achieve enhanced strategic and technical results, with benefits to both the mentor and protégé and the industry sector. We define inter-organizational mentoring (“business-to-business mentoring”) as a developmental relationship between two or more organizations contributing to business enhancement. Table 1 distinguishes inter-organizational mentoring from the traditionally explored interpersonal mentoring.

Again, notably, to our knowledge, no studies have examined this type of mentoring and thus a qualitative design is most appropriate to examine it as a phenomenon.

### **Methods (Participants, Procedures for Data Collection, Analysis)**

The site of our study is the Knoxville (Tennessee) Chamber of Commerce’s Mentor/Protégé Program, which is named PROPEL. The Chamber represents one such business-to-business structural arrangement. The program director, one of the authors of this paper, helped to spearhead the program, which is aimed at the growth of startups, microenterprises, rural, women, veteran, and minority firms. Each year, 12 mentor and 12 protégé companies matriculate into the program. During the first two years of the program, protégés are paired with a mentor organization and in year three they become mentors for another firm. The mentoring firms in this sample represent industries such as real estate development, information technology, regional hospitals, engineering, construction, public relations, dry cleaning, cellular phone, and financial services. The combined 2009 revenues of the mentors was over \$2.6B. Protégés businesses represent such industries as restaurants, reverse pharmacy distribution, project management, trucking, military staff augmentation, manufacturing, accounting, janitorial, nuclear and equipment testing, and safety consulting. The protégé organization representatives are diverse in ethnic and gender backgrounds with nine of the owners being women, nine being minorities, four veteran owned firms, and one of the owners being from India.

We conducted 25 phone interviews with 11 mentor companies and 13 protégé companies across cohorts. In addition, we spoke with another Tennessee Chamber of Commerce’s program administrator regarding her perception of benefits, challenges and areas for program improvement, as one more source of data. We administered surveys with open-ended questions aimed at unearthing data related to the three objectives. Questions included What benefits have you gained from working with your protégé (or mentor)?, What challenges have you experienced in working together?, and What do you recommend as areas for program improvement? Surveys were collected from mentor and protégé companies at 6 months for initial cohort (9 mentor & 10 protégé respondents = 79% response rate) & another from both cohorts at 1.5 years (7 mentors & 13 protégés = 41% response rate).

Table 1 – “Interpersonal” Versus Inter-Organizational Mentoring

|                               | <b>“Interpersonal” (<i>Between Individuals</i>)</b>  | <b>Inter-Organizational (<i>Between Organizations</i>)</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Key Features</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dyadic, network, team or organizational mentoring vehicles that aid a focal person’s (protégé’s) development.</li> <li>• Mentoring functions imparted to protégé drive personal and professional growth</li> <li>• Developmental relationships offer varying types of and amount of functions</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An organization or group of organizations as mentors and as protégés</li> <li>• Varying types of support based on the structural arrangement (type of relationship)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Types of Relationships</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional mentoring relationship</li> <li>• Developmental network</li> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• Intra-team</li> <li>• Professional group association</li> <li>• Family members</li> <li>• Friends</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supply chain</li> <li>• Association</li> <li>• Government,</li> <li>• Business-to-business (larger to smaller)</li> <li>• Peer</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>Benefits*</b>              | <p><b>Protégé</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heightened job satisfaction</li> <li>• Heightened job commitment</li> <li>• Enhanced personal learning</li> <li>• Greater career advancement</li> <li>• Heightened compensation</li> </ul> <p><b>Organizational</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater employee retention</li> <li>• Improved employee training</li> <li>• Greater employee commitment</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved industry image</li> <li>• Lowered costs</li> <li>• Expanded networking opportunities</li> <li>• Widened knowledge base</li> </ul>                                     |

Survey and interview data, collected between the first six months to a year into the program were content analyzed – each author independently coded the data for “meaningful thoughts” - for themes related to each objective specified earlier. Afterward, we discussed our data coding to ensure reliability between us.

## Findings

The study’s findings show that inter-organizational mentoring offers some of the same benefits and challenges as inter-personal mentoring does, and that some of the program design factors for business-to-business programs mirror those of “traditional” formal programs that match individual mentors and protégés. Importantly, however, inter-organizational relationships also offer *unique “properties”* that will be discussed shortly.

The content analysis revealed 136 “meaningful thoughts” related to *benefits*, 73 from protégé responses and 63 from mentor responses. An “*individual benefits*” theme emerged across groups (47 protégé thoughts and 41 mentor thoughts) that predominantly mirror benefits of interpersonal relationships, including friendship (1 thought), role modeling (2), support and encouragement (7 thoughts) (protégés) and friendship (9), personal gratification (21), and reinforcement of knowledge (2) (mentors). Learning, for both groups, emerged as the most dominant theme (35 comments for protégés and 9 more mentors). Interestingly, while personal learning is an established outcome for inter-personal relationships (Lankau&Scandura, 2002), the texture of protégé learning involving in inter-organizational relationships differs in that its content is focused on knowledge relevant to building a business, including business plan, marketing, financial and client interaction knowledge. Similarly, the texture of “*business benefits*,” a theme across groups, differs from interpersonal relationship. For example, protégés experiences increased or potential revenues/contracts (7) as well as enhanced business networks (the rough equivalent of this benefit for interpersonal relationships is sponsorship and visibility in relation to senior employees). Mentors, too, experienced enhanced business networks (9); gained a new supplier relationship in that the mentoring experience resulted in enhanced capability on the part of the protégé (11); and strategic/cultural consistency in that the mentor company’s strategy included philanthropic efforts or supplier diversity sourcing, and participation in the program was consistent with it.

In relation to the study’s second objective, a number of inter-organizational challenges somewhat mirror those involving inter-personal relationships (e.g., Eby& McManus, 2004) but, like mentor and protégé benefits, differ in their texture. 56 meaningful thoughts emerged from the data, 29 from protégés and 27 from mentors. Time constraints was the most frequently mentioned challenge (19 protégé thoughts and 17 mentor thoughts), which mirrors that experienced in the context of interpersonal relationships. Lack of partner commitment was another challenge mirroring interpersonal relationships (4 protégé thoughts and 3 mentor thoughts). The interpersonal literature discusses the importance of similarity on some dimension in nurturing a relationship (Ensher& Murphy, 1997); while lack of commonality emerged with inter-organizational relationships (2 protégé thoughts and 4 mentor thoughts), the texture differed; the dissimilarity that posed a challenge was that related to operating in different industries (e.g., a lack of knowledge of the protégé’s industry hindered the mentor’s ability to provide valuable assistance). Matching emerged as a unique protégé challenge (8 thoughts), suggesting that an inability to provide assistance on the part of the mentor can seriously hinder a relationship. Lack of ability to partner was a challenge perceived by both groups (2 protégés and

3 mentors); protégés noted that a paucity of revenue or contractual opportunities between the two partners was a challenge, and mentors commented that an inability to provide “leads” was a challenge.

55 thoughts related to *suggestions for protégé improvement* (33 from protégés and 22 from mentors), including *matching suggestions* (8 protégé thoughts), the *value of adding peer mentoring* to the program (2 protégé and 1 mentor thought), *a formal business assessment for protégé companies* (2 protégés and 1 mentor thought), *more networking events* (4 protégé and 3 mentor), and *program structure and training suggestions* (18 protégé and 17 mentor thoughts). Improved matching techniques, including matching on the basis of personalities and similarity, has been noted as relevant to formal mentoring programs involving protégés and mentoring working for the same company. However, inter-organizational mentoring differs slightly in that the suggestions were for matching on the basis of industry similarity. Given the unique nature of this inter-organizational mentoring program involving strong facilitation by the Chamber of Commerce, the networking, business assessment and peer mentoring suggestions all differ from suggestions made in relation to “traditional” intra-organizational programs. Some program structure and training suggestions were consistent with the existing literature (e.g., need for clarification of expectations for working as protégé and mentor partners as well as roles that could be served by either party); others had not been identified in previous studies on inter-personal relationships (e.g., involvement of the country or city to establish incentives for working together; a mediation procedure; use of social media to facilitate meetings).

### **Limitations**

The primary limitations of this study relate to those traditionally related to qualitative research, including potential retrospective and social desirability biases on the part of the participants. While the intention of a qualitative research design is a “rich description” of a particular context – in this case, a Chamber of Commerce-facilitated business-to-business mentoring program – it cannot be assumed to generalize to other inter-organizational settings (Creswell, 1994). Another limitation of this study involves the relatively small size of mentor and protégé teams involved in the partnerships, which ranged from one to four representatives per company. For example, most of the protégé companies were sole proprietorships, which limits company participation to the entrepreneur.

### **Practical/Managerial Implications**

Popular press and scholarly discussions have more recently emphasized ways in which the United States can remain competitive amidst globalization and the rise of BRIC and other countries (e.g., Porter & Rivkin, 2012). Kanter (2012) and others have asserted that one critical way to enhance competitiveness is through developing partnerships across sectors in various regions intended to foster “local assets” and to “attract new investment,” mentoring of small businesses being one such example (8). Also, this study suggests that informal and formal relationships that emerge in various industries and often led by governmental organizations indeed have enrich local and regional ecosystems, leading to more robust economies and employment and attractive investment sites. In fact, the study, while limited to a United States setting may be replicable and beneficial across national settings. Lastly, the study has implications for the design of third-party facilitated inter-organizational programs.

## Directions for Future Research

As this was the first study of its kind to explore this mentoring level of analysis, numerous avenues for future research exist. First, conceptual work aimed at integrating the mentoring and inter-organizational relationships (IOR) literatures (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011 for meta-review on IORs) can bridge mentoring and more macro-perspectives. Continued exploration of various structural arrangements, including businesses at different stages of development, different sizes, and industries, can aid a broader understanding of the antecedents, processes, outcomes of inter-organizational mentoring. Due to the nature of the Chamber's objectives in aiding small and diversity-owned businesses, this study explores "traditional" (more advanced mentor and junior protégé company) matched mentoring. Some relationships arise between peers and involve self-selected partnerships (e.g., DoD programs), and thus warrant their own scholarly attention. To redress one of the limitations above, partnerships involving larger teams representing the mentor and protégé companies would also enhance an understanding of how business-to-business mentoring works in practice. These are among three areas ripe for further exploration.

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