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The mentoring edge

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The mentoring edge

How to use mentoring to support your reputation as an employer of choice

Most large employers in the UK have experimented – with varying levels of benefit – with mentoring for their talent pool, or as part of their diversity management programmes. A few have become engaged with community mentoring – for example, encouraging employees to mentor schoolchildren, who may not otherwise fulfil their potential. But it's rare to see a joined up approach between these two applications of mentoring and even rarer, one that leverages mentoring experience elsewhere in the recruitment process.

Yet mentoring can be one of the most powerful influences on retention of existing staff and attraction of potential staff. An effective mentoring programme typically leads to a minimum of 30% higher retention of staff, and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this effect is heightened amongst new, young recruits. In terms of attracting employees, research into the thinking patterns of millennials (people born after 1986) finds that they expect to have a mentor and find it one of the most valuable resources an employer can offer them.

So what does an intelligent approach to recruitment mentoring look like?

Professor David Clutterbuck, the world's leading expert on mentoring and practice leader at specialist consultancy Clutterbuck Associates, gives his top six pieces of advice. Here is what he says:

When well-planned and administered, mentoring delivers remarkable benefits to mentees, mentors and to organisations. Mentees acquire a clearer sense of direction in their careers, greater self-confidence, and self-insight. Mentors have a chance to practice developmental behaviours and typically report an increase in their own self-efficacy. Organisations gain in terms of employee commitment/engagement, retention, knowledge transfer and the development of a more questioning culture.



Practical ways companies can harness the power of mentoring in recruitment include:

- **Building mentoring relationships between existing staff and young people at school or university**

Particularly among Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) young people, staying the course in sixth form or university can be difficult. Programmes such as 100 Black Men have shown how a role model a decade or so older than themselves can help young people challenge their stereotypes about themselves, encourage them to believe in themselves and to develop wider horizons. Staff in local branches can become highly effective role models for young people, helping to reshape their perceptions about work and career possibilities. It's important here that both mentors and mentees receive some training for their roles. Mentors, so they can be most helpful; mentees, so that they understand how to make effective use of a mentor. Some "pre-mentoring" training can also help young people, who have low self-esteem and difficulties in articulating their thoughts and emotions, to enter the mentoring relationship with positive expectations.

The link here with work experience is evident. Experience suggests that continuity – having the same mentor before, during and after work experience – pays dividends.

- **Offer mentoring to all new young staff**

The greatest risk period for losing staff is typically within the first six months. Having a mentor helps the newly recruited employee significantly in acclimatising to the new culture, and in feeling that they are valued by the organisation. Experience shows that the best time to create the mentoring relationship is about 3 months into the appointment – up till then, a buddy can be most useful. Buddies tend to focus on practical, here and now issues; mentors on longer term issues of career and personal development.

- **Make sure the mentoring you offer meets ISMPE standards**

Just having a mentoring programme is no longer enough: it's the quality of mentoring that counts. A poorly designed and administered mentoring programme may actually damage your employer branding. The International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment provide a basic framework for designing and benchmarking mentoring. It's not essential to go for the ISMPE award – a lot of programmes simply use the standards to ensure they adhere to good practice – but being accredited against the standards is a strong indication that an organisation is serious about looking after the careers and welfare of the people it recruits.



- **Create a positive cycle by expecting employees, who have been mentored, to become mentors in turn**

Exposure to mentoring, whether as mentor or mentee, builds positive habits of reflection, constructive challenge and self-discipline. Once your young recruits have been with the company for two or three years, they may be ideal role models for potential employees. This recognition also helps them feel valued by the company, reinforcing their own engagement.

- **Provide learning resources**

Good practice includes both providing training (typically initial and follow up after, say three and six months) and online resources, where both mentors and mentees can seek specific guidance on managing the learning relationship. An intriguing possibility here is for companies to offer young people in school or university access to on-line guidance on how to find and use a mentor within their chosen profession/area of career interest.

- **Use social networking to link mentors and mentees**

The simplest way to do this is through Linked-In or similar resources that host discussion groups. However, if your target audience for mentees is under 16, it is advisable to use a system that includes some form of moderator. Issues faced by mentors tend to have common themes; and the same is true for mentees. The moderator or programme manager can respond to generic issues by posting advice. Social network sites also help the mentor/mentee pairs feel less isolated.

- **Manage mentoring**

While too much bureaucracy kills the informal, personalised spirit of mentoring, there needs to be enough management for people to feel supported in their roles. It's important to appoint and train a mentoring coordinator, for example, and to measure what is happening, at the levels of both the programme and individual relationships.

There is also considerable room for collaboration between employers. In Denmark, for example, the trade union for lawyers and accountants manages an extensive mentoring programme that links people between employers. So, perhaps, other companies can find common ground in educating young people about mentoring. An exciting vision I hold is for a programme to encourage and support sixteen to eighteen year olds in becoming mentors for people younger than themselves. They would learn the value of mentoring in a very direct way, and thus get more out of being mentored in turn themselves. For the companies mentoring these "junior mentors" there would be a much deeper connection with youth in their local communities.