

Millennials and The Evolution of Online Mentoring

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The Millennials Mentor

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Abstract

Millennials are entering the workforce with a desire equal to their generational predecessors to learn from seasoned professionals, as well as their peers. However, research (Burkus, 2010; Emelo, 2011; Meister@Willyerd, 2010) indicates that this new generation of professionals prefers a more active role in a mentoring relationship, having input into both the structure and direction of the mentoring relationship. Millennials seek less traditional mentoring relationships and more spontaneous and collaborative ways to engage with mentors.

Formal mentoring relationships are perceived as antiquated, rigid, didactic, and authoritative which is no longer a fit for the more self-directed protégé. This makes Informal Mentoring (IM) relationships a better fit for millennial professionals. Leadership and mentoring expert, Lois Zachary (2012) defines IM as “unstructured, casual, and natural...They can last for a week, many months, or a lifetime. They are serendipitous, spontaneous, self-selected, and situational relationships, with each proceeding at its own pace and on its own timetable.” Informal mentoring relationships represent a more spontaneous and fluid developmental relationship.

Technology also plays a significant role in the shift in mentoring today. Online software and the growing number of mentoring and social media websites have enabled a new era of developmental relationships, known as web-based or e-mentoring. Today, mentoring relationships can be developed spontaneously and situationally online in a virtual context. These relationships vary in formality; however, e-mentoring and social media sites facilitate casual, self-selected interactions. Mentors and protégé are able to connect with one another based upon their similarities, shared interests, and availability rather than their position in the workplace.

In this paper, the author presents e-mentoring and its role in mentoring Millennials. It will discuss several e-mentoring and social media websites, and how they are being used for developmental relationships.

Introduction

Millennials, those born between 1981 and 2001, are entering the workforce at an increasingly rapid pace. A recent study conducted by the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that by 2014, 36% of the U.S. workforce will be Millennials, and 46% by 2020 (Kratz, 2013). These statistics are important because of the ways in which this generation differs from Generation X and Baby Boomers. Two important differences are their readiness for mentoring and their relationship with technology. Chris Browning (2012, ¶1) says, “the age old practice of mentoring is being redefined” which is a result of both the Millennial workforce and technology. Generational Theorists Strauss & Howe (as cited by Tooker, 2006) confirm each generation has a set of shared experiences which shape their values, beliefs and behaviors or generational culture which not only establishes common values on family, quality of life, and their overall world view, but also work (Tooker, 2006, p. 20). Millennials are open to guidance and mentoring, and because they have grown up with technology, they prefer and are more reliant on electronic communication, making the evolution of e-mentoring inevitable (Everett Community College, 2011).

Because this generation is eager to be mentored and tech savvy, e-mentoring is an accessible and practical resource for professional development through mentoring. E-mentoring and social networking sites have made it possible for mentors and protégé to access one another without the limitations of traditional workplace mentoring relationships. Mentoring online allows for “anytime, anywhere” mentoring so protégés are no longer restricted by space and time to access a mentor. Equally, protégés can seek mentors outside their existing network to develop relationships with those with whom they may not otherwise meet. Mentoring expert Randy Emelo (2009) finds, “Web-based mentoring gives people the opportunity to expand their network and interact with people whom they would not normally engage” (p. 207). While traditional workplace mentoring relationships remain popular and relevant, e-mentoring also allows protégé to side step the potential politics that arise in workplace mentoring relationships.

E-mentoring relationships give the protégé more power in the selection and matching process, in contrast to more traditional workplace relationships where protégés are often assigned a mentor. There is potential conflict if the pairing is not a suitable match, making it challenging for the protégé to withdraw from the relationship for fear that it could influence their position at work. As Emelo (2009) states, “With technology,

mentoring is becoming less isolated and political, shifting to a more democratic and open development strategy (p. 207). Protégés have a say in both the structure and direction of the e-mentoring relationship because they are not restricted by the workplace politics.

As Sosik, Lee, and Bouquillon state, “informal mentoring involves a voluntary and naturally-occurring learning relationship in which the protégé typically selects the mentor and receives career development advice through an autonomous process” (2005, p. 95). Blogger Jessica Stillman found, “Experts at HBR have also argued...the traditional mentorship as a means to advancement within a given company is as over as avocado appliances” (2011, ¶4). For these reasons e-mentoring and social networking sites are growing exponentially in popularity and membership.

Millennial Impact on Mentoring

Millennials are not responsible for the invent of online mentoring, it emerged more than 20 years ago when the oldest Millennials were still playing dodge ball on the playground; however, this generation is poised to embrace and maximize what it has to offer. Kate Schrauth, the Executive Director of ICouldBe.org, a non-profit online mentoring program which connects young people to mentors from companies like E*Trade and Monster.com, finds that e-mentoring, “has advantages for students who have grown up in the glow of a computer monitor” (Gross, 2011) . Pew Research finds that 74% of Millennials believe new technology makes life easier, 54% believe it brings them closer to friends and family, and 56% believe it allows them to use their time more efficiently (Pawar, 2013). Not only is this generation more comfortable with technology, but also with developing relationships and engaging in a virtual context.

Emelo suggests, “They [Millennials] view mentoring as a way to create learning connections with those who share their interests or know how to get things done” (2011, p. 33). E-mentoring empowers protégé to connect online with mentors having casual, self-selected interactions based upon their similarities and shared interests which may or may not result in more structured mentoring relationships over time. Social media sites allow for mentoring relationships to be developed spontaneously and situationally. The marketing firm, CMS Wires finds that 65% millennials seek out solutions to problems online (Peacock, 2013). Millennials want on-demand learning where they can “ask real time questions as issues emerge so they are learning in the moment and seeing results immediately” and connect with people they may never meet face to face (Emelo, 2012). To create those connections, Millennials are participating in the open and free exchange of information, and connecting with multiple mentors across job function and even location. Millennials are no longer limiting themselves to a single mentor in their workplace, but creating a diverse set of mentoring relationships which vary in formality, length, and modalities of communication.

While there is still significant value and great opportunity in traditional mentoring relationships, Informal Mentoring (IM) relationships online may be better suited to the on-demand, real time needs of the Millennial professional. Leadership and mentoring expert, Lois Zachary (2012) defines IM as “unstructured, casual, and natural...They can last for a week, many months, or a lifetime. They are serendipitous, spontaneous, self-selected, and situational relationships, with each proceeding at its own pace and on its own timetable” (p. 16). IM relationships allow the Millennial to be in the driver’s seat and create mentoring relationships based upon their current learning and development

needs. Author Donna Owens agrees, “Make no mistake: “Traditional” mentoring programs still reign, but online mentoring is a growing trend” (2006, p. 105) in both formal and informal mentoring.

Online Mentoring

Online mentoring can happen across various Internet platforms. Researcher Kevin Hunt states, "My definition for e-mentoring is: Utilizing technology, e-mentoring is the process by which two people assist each other to grow and learn in a safe and supportive relationship" (2005, p. 7). Online mentoring has made mentoring easier, putting the Millennial protégé in the drivers seat and created a new culture of sharing and learning among professionals. Millennials establish and manage their own mentoring relationships. Potential protégés can access mentors virtually based upon their current developmental needs, and are not limited by the constraints of formal mentoring relationships in the workplace. Social networks like LinkedIn and Facebook facilitate the mentoring process through direct networking or special interest groups. The networks and groups are used to gather information and learn from more seasoned professionals. This provides protégés access to seasoned professionals with the possibility to create lasting relationships, as well as episodic or situational mentoring.

It could be argued that these episodic encounters online are not mentoring at all, but are just simply conversations or interactions. However, expert Lois Zachary states, "IM develops when an individual offers to give advice or guidance, or asks for advice or guidance from another. There are no structured agreements or commitments, just two people committed to learning and a protégé who is motivated and open to change" (2010, p. 16). Social network sites encourage and support peer interaction and learning. A mentor and protégé relationship is established regardless of age, job function, organizational affiliation, or location. The research has found that, "Protégés in informal relationships reported higher levels of psychosocial support received than protégés in formal relationships" (Sosik, Lee, & Bouquillon, 2005, p. 94) which suggests that IM relationships can be as effective as formal mentoring relationships. But, is it possible for a serendipitous encounter to be as fruitful as a more formal mentoring relationship?

Here are two discussion threads from LinkedIn which demonstrate how mentoring occurs online and suggests there may just as much to gain.

Example 1: LinkedIn Group

A Millennial posted the following:

"Does anyone have any tips for breaking into the staffing and recruiting industry? I have some recruiting experience, I love doing it, and I am pretty good at it"

This post received immediate replies from other group members which included solid advice and resources from both Millennial and seasoned professionals.

Example 2: LinkedIn Group

A seasoned professional in the film industry was seeking to better understand how to use Facebook to promote an upcoming film. He posted a simple question on a LinkedIn social media group:

“Anyone have any suggestions on growing a FB fan page audience through Social Media? I just launched a new page recently, but once you get past friends and family it seems like a huge battle.”

Within 22 days, he had received 163 responses. The first response was from a Millennial offering him feedback and solutions, upon which he immediately acted. Exemplifying how online mentoring also levels the playing field so that mentors are not necessarily seasoned professionals, but may be anyone who has the knowledge or expertise to support another’s learning. Other responses included more detailed instructions, hyperlinks to additional resources and examples, direct contact information for 1:1 support, and lots of words of encouragement. As mentors continued to post and the protégé continued to act and learn, the discussion evolved. He was able to ask additional questions which reflected his increased knowledge of the topic and a desire to know more. And while any given mentor may have only replied once, maybe even twice, new mentors continue to respond to add their experience and expertise. As long as he continues to respond and engage, they can extend this mentoring until their learning needs have been met. The information and resources shared are now available to all members of the group, extending the process of learning and increasing the number of possible learners creating a collaborative mentoring process or community of practice.

It is also important to note that these group members may not always recognize or acknowledge these experiences as mentoring experiences, but it does not change the reality of what is happening is mentoring. In a study done to determine the extent to which a mentor and protégé were aware that their relationship was an informal mentoring relationship, they found, “There is little agreement between mentoring partners: neither potential protégés nor potential mentors were very accurate at identifying reciprocal informal mentoring partners” (Welsh, Bhave, & Kim, 2012, p. 137). For this type of mentoring to be successful, it is not necessarily required for either party to be aware that the mentoring relationship exists.

In contrast, there are a growing number of independent E-mentoring websites designed for specific target groups for those seeking a more structured informal mentoring relationships. For example, S.A.G.A.N and MentorNet are mentoring networks for Millennials interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Other sites target specific age or cultural groups such as iCouldBe which specializes in mentoring at risk youth in middle and high school or the Virtual Mentor which promotes career exploration with middle and high school students. Then there are sites the Invisible Mentor and the Millennials Mentor which emphasize leadership development in university students and young professionals.

These E-mentoring sites provide a variety of mentoring programs and services. Many of these websites offer 1:1 mentor-protégé relationships through an online matching system. They create an online community of mentors who are eager to share their personal and professional expertise who will mentor virtually. One of the longest standing mentoring organizations, Big Brothers, Big Sisters (BBBS) just launched an online mentoring program, Mentor 2.0 which they hope will be, “more convenient, time-specific and finely tuned to academic success and college preparation”. These types of online mentoring programs also create opportunity for those who wish to mentor, but do not have a lot time outside of work to meet face to face with protégé. BBBS volunteer, Chad Clark says, “The traditional mentor relationship is a big-time commitment outside of work, and a lot of people aren’t able to do that. But they still want to be involved” (Rubio, 2013, ¶17). Other sites offering a range of learning and mentoring opportunities. S.A.G.A.N offers 1:1 mentoring program, but also has public discussion groups, book clubs, and listings of ongoing learning events in the STEM communities. Sites like the Invisible Mentor and Millennials Mentor offer both free and paid learning resource for older Millennials who want to invest more time and resources into advancing their leadership and professional skills.

Conclusion

Millennials are an ambitious generation, who are highly educated, entrepreneurial, and connected online (Pew Research 2010). They are also creative and innovative and utilizing technology to advance professionally (Kratz, 2013). Technology has facilitated a new approach to mentoring that allows this generation to define their mentoring relationship. They can access mentors in real time and find solutions to challenges they are facing in the present. Online mentoring also affords this new generation the ability to have more than one mentor and custom design the mentoring relationship with each one to address their different learning needs. E-mentoring and social network sites foster these connections and create endless possibility for them to develop informal mentoring relationships virtually.

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