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Role of Age in Workplace Mentoring

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Synonyms

Developmental relationships in the workplace; Intergenerational contact; Learning and social support at work

Definition

Workplace mentoring occurs when a member of an organization with advanced experience and knowledge (the mentor), either as part of a formal mentoring program or informally, supports the psychosocial and career development of a less experienced member (the protégé).

Background

As the number of older workers is rising in industrialized countries and a great proportion of experienced workers is approaching retirement, two issues become increasingly important for organizational success: (1) to recognize and utilize older workers' potentials and (2) to retain older workers while keeping them engaged (Calo 2005). One effective organizational practice that can capitalize on older workers' knowledge and keep them motivated is workplace mentoring. Workplace mentoring occurs when a member of an organization with advanced experience and knowledge (the mentor), either as part of a formal mentoring program or informally, supports the psychosocial and career development of a less experienced member (the protégé; Kram 1985). Usually, this means that an older employee serves the role of a mentor for a younger employee (Finkelstein et al. 2003), but the reverse age constellation is also possible in cases where a younger employee is more experienced in a certain work domain than an older employee (Murphy 2012).

In general, mentors provide two types of support, namely, career and psychosocial support (Kram 1985). Career support focuses on the protégé's career advancement and involves behaviors such as enhancing the protégé's visibility, sponsorship, and providing assignments that are challenging for the protégé. Psychosocial support focuses on the personal development of the protégé including a higher sense of competence and self-esteem and involves behaviors such as counseling or role modeling. Another important distinction in mentoring is between informal and formal mentoring relationships. While informal mentoring relationships evolve naturally in organizations, formal relationships are initiated by the organization such that the organization matches mentor and protégé.

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Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring, and informal mentoring in particular, has been associated with numerous benefits for mentors, protégés, and organizations (Tong and Kram 2013). The somewhat smaller benefits derived from formal relative to informal mentoring have been attributed to the stronger focus on career-related support than psychosocial support in formal mentoring programs and the potential lack of mutual identification as these relationships do not develop naturally (Ragins et al. 2000). Despite the difference in the magnitude of gains depending on type of mentoring, a considerable amount of research has documented benefits of both forms of mentoring.

Regarding *protégé benefits*, cross-sectional research has found positive relationships between receiving mentoring and protégé's job performance, salary, and promotion for both formal and informal mentoring (for a review, see Allen et al. 2004). Moreover, receiving mentoring has been associated with higher levels of job and career satisfaction (for a review, see Tong and Kram 2013). There is also some longitudinal evidence for the gains of mentoring for protégés. Specifically, receiving career-related support has been positively associated with affective well-being and organizational commitment at the end of a 7-month formal mentoring program, controlling for initial levels in both variables (Chun et al. 2012).

Regarding *mentor benefits*, a meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies on formal and informal mentoring indicates that providing mentoring can be beneficial for mentors' perceived career success, their organizational commitment, and job performance (Ghosh and Reio 2013). Moreover, cross-sectional research has found that proximal benefits of mentoring such as a sense of fulfillment for mentors predict more global work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the willingness to serve as a mentor in the future. Interestingly, proximal instrumental benefits for mentors such as increased recognition appear to be particularly important for mentor's job satisfaction, whereas relational benefits such as personal gratification might be more influential for intentions to become a mentor again (Eby et al. 2006). Noteworthy, proximal benefits for mentors appear to be unrelated to some more objective post-mentoring career outcomes such as salary and promotion (for a review, see Tong and Kram 2013). A likely reason is that these career outcomes are influenced by many factors beyond mentoring, such as general job performance or position.

Regarding *organizational benefits*, cross-sectional research has shown that mentoring is associated with decreased turnover rates, increased performance, and organizational learning, though quantitative studies are scarce (Tong and Kram 2013). So far, there are no empirical studies that investigate the long-term benefits for organizations. However, since studies have generally shown that job satisfaction, affective well-being, and organizational commitment positively predict job performance, it is likely that organizations profit as well from the long-term benefits of mentoring.

Negative Consequences of Mentoring

Despite the well-documented benefits of mentoring, mentoring relationships do not guarantee success and may even have harmful consequences (Tong and Kram 2013). Although the prevalence of negative mentoring experiences has been assumed to be rather low, they nevertheless occur according to researchers and practitioners and often have adverse effects (Eby and McManus 2004). A growing body of literature has therefore made an effort to identify common reasons why mentoring relationships may become dysfunctional. More specifically, studies have revealed that negative mentoring experiences are frequently due to the mentor's deficits in the required mentoring skills, the protégé's egocentrism or exploitative behavior, and, more generally, dysfunctional relationship dynamics between mentor and protégé (Tong and Kram 2013).

The consequences of these negative mentoring experiences compared to positive experiences for protégés include decreased job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions. While less is known about the negative effects for mentors, the available research has found that mentors who had dysfunctional relationships with their protégés had decreased intentions to become a mentor in the future (for a review, see Tong and Kram 2013). Given the potential of mentoring to have negative effects on protégés and mentors, it is crucial to determine factors that predict who is suited to become an effective mentor. Moreover, it is important to identify characteristics of the protégé and the dyad that contribute to mentoring success, such as the protégé's personality or the fit between mentor and protégé regarding their personality. One important individual difference variable that is likely to affect mentoring effectiveness is *age*, as a characteristic of the mentor, the protégé, or in terms of the age composition of the dyad.

The Role of Age in Mentoring

To date, research systematically examining the role of age in mentoring is limited and studies have yielded mixed results. In the following, dyads composed of an older mentor and a younger protégé and dyads composed of a younger mentor and an older protégé will be compared. Subsequently, zooming in on age of each party of the dyad, literature on the role of mentors' and protégés' absolute age for mentoring will be discussed.

Age Composition of the Mentoring Dyad

Traditionally, mentoring involves an older employee supporting a younger employee. However, this relationship can also reverse such that a younger employee with more experience in a certain work domain provides mentoring to an older employee with less experience in that domain (*reverse mentoring*; Finkelstein et al. 2003). Both traditional mentoring and reverse mentoring involve career support, encompassing, for example, knowledge sharing or networking, and psychosocial support, encompassing friendship or stimulating personal development. Noteworthy, it has been assumed that reverse mentoring is best initiated through formal mentoring programs, since informal mentoring relationships rarely develop between younger mentors and older protégés (Murphy 2012).

Traditional and reverse mentoring relationships are thought to be associated with unique benefits. Specifically, traditional mentoring has the potential to fulfill *generativity motives* that become more salient with age (Parise and Forret 2008). The concept of generativity was first introduced by the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) and refers to establishing and guiding the next generation. Generativity motivation has predominantly been associated with middle age, falling into the second half of the working lifespan (i.e., 40–65 years; Erikson 1963). Organizational psychology research has demonstrated that age is associated with an increase in generative work motives across the working lifespan (for a meta-analysis, see Kooij et al. 2011). Scholars have suggested that mentoring represents an excellent way to express generativity at work (Parise and Forret 2008). Specifically, by mentoring co-workers, the mentor can meaningfully contribute to the protégé's development and thereby provide guidance to someone from the next generation.

Giving older workers mentoring opportunities, which allow fulfilling their generativity motives through mentoring, could also be an effective retention strategy as it addresses age-related changes in motivation. Specifically, work motivation tends to become more intrinsic with age and older workers' work motivation appears to be more strongly affected by a sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment gained from work than that of young workers (Kooij et al. 2011). Being a mentor may add meaning to older workers' work by addressing age-related increases in generativity motivation and thereby fostering older workers' motivation to continue working.

Reverse mentoring also likely has unique benefits although empirical research on reverse mentoring is absent to date. While reverse mentoring has initially been introduced to transfer technological knowledge from the younger generation to older workers (Murphy 2012), the benefits are thought to go beyond novel skill acquisition. Specifically, reverse mentoring may eliminate negative stereotypes that generations hold about each other (Murphy 2012) and enhance sensitivity for workplace diversity (Chaudhuri and Ghosh 2012). Furthermore, theoretical work suggests that younger mentors perceive the special opportunity to mentor senior colleagues as a sign of recognition and organizational support, increasing their organizational commitment (Chaudhuri and Ghosh 2012). Older protégés, in turn, perceive the opportunity for learning and development, which they often lack, as a sign of organizational support, increasing their work engagement.

At the same time, reverse mentoring may also have unique threats. Specifically, reverse mentoring is in stark contrast to age norms in mentoring, in which an older worker offers mentoring to a younger co-worker (Chaudhuri and Ghosh 2012). Violating these norms might be perceived as threatening, impeding the mentoring process. However, it is yet unclear where the age cutoff lies, thus, when the age distance between a younger mentor and older protégé violates norms and has adverse consequence for mentoring effectiveness.

Absolute Age of the Mentor

Regardless of whether traditional or reversed mentoring relationships are concerned, mentor's age likely affects mentoring outcomes. Among the mentor characteristics that have been associated with effective mentoring relationships are emotional abilities, which are subject to age-related increases. *Emotional abilities* refer to the capacity to handle one's own as well as others' emotions effectively. Specifically, research has identified three core emotional abilities: emotion regulation, emotion understanding, and emotion perception (Joseph and Newman 2010). *Emotion perception* pertains to the ability to correctly identify one's own and other people's emotions, while *emotion understanding* refers to insight into the development of emotions, the ability to differentiate between them and to identify appropriate emotions for a specific context. *Emotion regulation* encompasses cognitive or behavioral strategies used to influence the way emotions are experienced and expressed.

Together, these abilities are particularly important for mentors, as they help establish a trustful relationship with protégés (Chun et al. 2010) and represent important job skills that mentors can pass on to their protégés through role modeling (Cherniss 2007). Emotion perception might be crucial for the mentor to identify the protégé's difficulties and react appropriately. Emotion understanding should be a critical skill for mentors to help the protégé gain insight and select effective coping strategies. Emotion regulation should help the mentor to establish a trustful relationship through authenticity, consistency, and reliability in emotional displays. Moreover, mentors may teach their protégés how to regulate their emotions effectively in critical work situations.

Interestingly, mounting evidence suggests age-related improvements in two of the three emotional abilities and maintenance in the other (for a review, see Walter and Scheibe 2013). These improvements are attributed to accumulating knowledge in dealing with affective events throughout life. Regarding emotion perception, evidence has been mixed but recently has pointed to minimal age differences. Older adults have further been found to have an enhanced emotional understanding relative to younger adults (Kafetsios 2004). They use adaptive emotion regulation strategies (e.g., reappraisal, deep acting) more often and maladaptive strategies (e.g., suppression, surface acting) less often and are also better at implementing many emotion regulation strategies (Scheibe and Carstensen 2010). These overall improvements in core emotional abilities may make older adults well suited for mentoring roles.

Another mentor characteristic, which is thought to be associated with effective mentoring relationships in traditional mentoring dyads (older mentor, younger protégé) and increases with age, is mentors'

generativity motivation, as discussed above. Generativity motivation should facilitate mentoring effectiveness by leading mentors to invest their time and energy in mentoring relationships and at the same time increase protégé trust in the mentor. Though studies on generativity and mentoring are scarce, the available research has found that generativity is beneficial for mentoring such that generativity is positively associated with mentors' number of protégés and mentors' perceived effectiveness of mentoring training in a formal mentoring program (Parise and Forret 2008).

Absolute Age of the Protégé

Cutting across both traditional and reverse mentoring relationships, some empirical research has examined relations of protégé's age to characteristics of the mentoring relationship and associated outcomes. For example, protégé age has been found to be negatively related to the duration of the mentoring relationship and positively to mentors' hierarchical level in the organization (Finkelstein et al. 2003). This suggests that older protégés in both formal and informal mentoring relationships have more short-lived mentoring relationships and are closer to the mentor's hierarchical level. Moreover, age of protégé is positively related with informal mentoring relationships, such that older protégés were more often part of informal mentoring relationships, whereas younger protégés were more often part of formal mentoring relationships (Finkelstein et al. 2003). Furthermore, while some studies have found that protégé age is unrelated to the type of mentoring support received, there is some evidence that older protégés, compared to younger protégés, receive less career-related mentoring, but experience higher levels of mutual learning and relationship quality in formal and informal mentoring relationships (Finkelstein et al. 2003).

One important characteristic of protégés are their emotional abilities, which tend to increase with age, as discussed above. Specifically, protégés' emotional abilities are predictive of trust in the mentor, which is an essential ingredient of a good mentoring relationship (Chun et al. 2010). Moreover, protégés' high emotional abilities can compensate for possible low emotional abilities of the mentor. As older adults overall tend to have higher emotional abilities compared to younger, this might be particularly relevant in the context of reverse mentoring. That is, older protégés' emotional abilities may buffer against low emotional abilities of the younger mentor.

Future Directions

Evidence on the influence of age on mentoring processes and outcomes is only recently beginning to emerge. Future research should examine additional age-related variables that may play a role in the mentoring process. In addition, the available research has some methodological limitations. In the following, a number of promising avenues for future research will be suggested.

Considering Age-Related Variables

To date, previous research has only investigated linkages between age and mentoring, largely ignoring potential mediators. As discussed, emotional abilities and generativity might be two potentially important mediators to consider. A large body of research has demonstrated age-related improvements in emotional abilities (Walter and Scheibe 2013), and the relevance of these abilities of mentors for mentoring has been acknowledged (Chun et al. 2010). However, it remains to be tested whether emotional abilities mediate relationships between mentor's age and mentoring outcomes. Moreover, future studies should explore the dyadic composition of age, emotional abilities, and mentoring outcomes such as relationship quality, in more depth. Taken together, studies should combine research on age and emotional abilities with mentoring to gain a better understanding of the role of emotional abilities in the age-mentoring

effectiveness link for both mentor and protégé. This might also shed light on the general mechanisms underlying effective mentoring processes.

Similarly, although scholars have highlighted that mentoring is an expression of generativity (Calo 2005), the generativity motivation of mentors as predictor of mentoring benefits has not yet received attention in the literature. Generativity may not only make older workers well suited for providing effective mentoring by leading them to invest their time and energy in mentoring relationships, it may also enhance their work motivation. More specifically, by fulfilling older workers' generativity motives through mentoring, they might become more motivated to continue working. In light of the demographic shift, the retention of older workers has become crucial for organizations to retain their accumulated knowledge and to prevent shortage of qualified workers.

Furthermore, a relatively small amount of research has investigated mentoring outcomes for mentors, although it has been widely acknowledged that mentoring is beneficial for both mentors and protégés (Tong and Kram 2013). Future research should consider outcomes for mentors that gain importance with age, including fulfilling one's generativity motive, motivation to continue working, and affective well-being, which may subsequently positively affect desired organizational outcomes, including low absenteeism rates, commitment, and productivity. In addition, establishing mentoring programs with older workers serving the role of a mentor for a younger worker might contribute to an age-friendly organizational climate.

Investigate Effects of Reverse Mentoring

Although reverse mentoring has been assumed to confer extensive benefits for all parties involved, there is no empirical evidence supporting this statement (Murphy 2012). Therefore, future research needs to carefully test the proposed benefits of reverse mentoring and the mentor, protégé, and dyad characteristics that support or hinder effective reverse mentoring. Another important task for future research would be to investigate the potential threats to mentoring success that may accompany reverse mentoring as it contradicts age norms in mentoring.

Relatedly, researchers could examine potential moderators that help to specify under which circumstances reverse mentoring is likely to be successful. For example, it would be important to test whether reverse mentoring is more successful when it is initiated formally as compared to informally (Murphy 2012). Moreover, it might well be that the effectiveness of reverse mentoring depends on organizational age norms such that reverse mentoring in organizations with strong age norms might be less effective than reverse mentoring in organizations with weak age norms (Chaudhuri and Ghosh 2012).

Extending Methodology

With regard to methodology, research on age and mentoring has so far mainly relied on cross-sectional self-report data (Tong and Kram 2013). Therefore, longitudinal, multi-source studies are needed to uncover the mechanisms underlying the relationship between age and mentoring and to evaluate long-term benefits of mentoring for younger and older workers. In addition, intervention studies might test whether high generativity in combination with emotional abilities training leads to better mentoring outcomes, or examine older workers' motivation to continue working when they receive the opportunity to mentor versus no opportunity to mentor, which might shed more light on the potential of mentoring as a valuable retention strategy. Finally, experience-sampling studies may focus on mentors' and protégés' changes in affect, cognitions, and behaviors during periods with versus without mentoring.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Age and Blended Working](#)
- ▶ [Age Diversity at Work](#)
- ▶ [Affect and Emotion Regulation in Aging Workers](#)
- ▶ [Intergenerational Relationships](#)
- ▶ [Job Crafting in Aging Employees](#)
- ▶ [Organizational Strategies for Attracting, Utilizing, and Retaining Older Workers](#)
- ▶ [Work Motivation and Aging](#)

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