

Research Question

What evidence is there that mentoring works to retain and promote employees, especially diverse employees, within a single company?

Introduction

Mentoring programs are increasingly prevalent in corporate America. Research has shown that 70% of Fortune 500 companies have some form of mentoring program.¹ While mentoring programs can have a variety of objectives – such as promoting and improving diversity, helping new hires adjust to new roles, or developing high potential employees – it is not always clear that mentoring programs achieve their objectives, particularly those related to promotion and retention.² In reviewing relevant research and company initiatives, we can see that mentorship programs – when properly implemented – do offer benefits for diverse populations.³

Key success factors for diversity-focused mentoring programs include (1) the seniority of the mentor, (2) whether the mentor and protégé match in certain key personality attributes and (3) whether a mentee's direct supervisor is involved in the program.

Evidence and Limitations of Mentoring for Diversity

Benefits of Mentoring for Diversity

Research since the 1980s has shown that mentoring continues to be a successful approach to retaining and promoting employees, including diverse employees, within an organization.⁴ Specific benefits that have been shown include:

Mentoring is more effective than other diversity initiatives. Large companies implement a variety of diversity initiatives, including voluntary training, targeted recruitment, cross-training as well as mentorship. Mentorship programs can boost the representation of black, Hispanic, and Asian-American women, and Hispanic and Asian-American men at manager levels by 9% to 24%, as compared to the other initiatives which have lower results ranging from -2% to 18% (Appendix 1).⁵

Mentoring improves both promotion and retention of diverse groups. In fact, they help increase promotion and retention rates of minority men and women by 15%-38% compared to non-mentored minorities.⁶ It has been inferred that this is due to innate biases that influence people to help those who are similar to themselves; therefore, the lower number of minorities in upper management means that those who do not have a mentor, either organic or assigned, will not benefit due to a lack of access.

Other Benefits of Mentorship Programs

Mentoring programs not specifically focused on diversity have demonstrated other positive outcomes. For example, mentees that reported a high number of promotions also reported higher intentions to remain with that company. One longitudinal study of a law firm that sought to discover the benefits mentoring had on lawyers showed positive returns on investment, measured through higher reported intentions to stay with that firm.⁷

Limitations and Negative Outcomes

While mentoring programs have positive outcomes for diversity, mentoring programs do not benefit all diverse populations equally, have other drawbacks. For example:

Men benefit more. Often through the efforts of “sponsors” – special mentors who go beyond providing the traditional feedback and advice-giving to the mentee- who use his or her influence to actively advocate for the mentee.⁸

High performers and white women benefit least. Data from a Sun Microsystems case indicates that high performers benefit least from mentorship programs, which suggests that mentorship resources are better spent on improving low performers.⁹ Several studies also show that white women don’t benefit from mentoring programs as much as other minority groups in terms of promotion and retention.¹⁰

Ineffective mentors may do more harm than good. Several studies found that mentees can suffer from disillusionment and stifled careers if ineffectively mentored. Furthermore, feelings of isolation due to extreme dependence on the mentor was another negative side effect associated with mentorships with poor matches.¹¹

Best Practices

To successfully implement a mentoring program targeted at diversity, companies should consider the following best practices:

Engage senior mentors. Female mentees who had more senior level mentors experienced higher promotion and retention rates than those with more junior mentors. For example, after experiencing issues with promoting women to senior levels, Goldman Sachs launched an initiative that assigned each of its senior-most members to mentor groups of five women. Within five years, 70% of those women had advanced to managing director roles.¹²

Assess for shared values and personalities. Several studies not specifically focused on diversity have shown that where the mentor and mentee genuinely value the relationship with each other, and where they are similar along two key “Big Five” personality traits – conscientiousness and openness to experience – they experienced average promotion rates 25% higher as compared to a control.¹³

Involve direct managers. Mentorship programs that do not involve mentee supervisors communicates that diversity is an “HR problem” that does not require manager support. To combat this, Deutsche Bank involved supervisors in a comprehensive diversity initiative that included leadership evaluations, external coaching, and leadership workshops – all closely coordinated with a mentorship program – which resulted in promotion rates of 33% after one year.¹⁴

Conclusion

Mentoring has been proven to be more successful at promoting workplace diversity than diversity training programs alone. One key challenge is structuring the program so that it benefits all diverse groups. Mentorship programs are most likely to improve promotion and retention of diverse groups if senior level executives act as mentors, if potential mentors and mentees are assessed and matched on Big Five personality traits, and if direct managers of mentees are engaged and involved with the mentorship program.

Appendix 1**Diversity Programs That Get Results**

Companies do a better job of increasing diversity when they forgo the control tactics and frame their efforts more positively. The most effective programs spark engagement, increase contact among different groups, or draw on people's strong desire to look good to others.

% CHANGE OVER FIVE YEARS IN REPRESENTATION AMONG MANAGERS

Type of program	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Voluntary training			+13.3		+9.1		+9.3	+12.6
Self-managed teams	-2.8	+5.6	+3.4	+3.9				+3.6
Cross-training	-1.4	+3.0	+2.7	+3.0	-3.9		+6.5	+4.1
College recruitment: women*	-2.0	+10.2	+7.9	+8.7		+10.0	+18.3	+8.6
College recruitment: minorities**			+7.7	+8.9				
Mentoring				+18.0	+9.1	+23.7	+18.0	+24.0
Diversity task forces	-3.3	+11.6	+8.7	+22.7	+12.0	+16.2	+30.2	+24.2
Diversity managers		+7.5	+17.0	+11.1		+18.2	+10.9	+13.6

*College recruitment targeting women turns recruiting managers into diversity champions, so it also helps boost the numbers for black and Asian-American men.

**College recruitment targeting minorities often focuses on historically black schools, which lifts the numbers of African-American men and women.

NOTE GRAY INDICATES NO STATISTICAL CERTAINTY OF A PROGRAM'S EFFECT.

SOURCE AUTHORS' STUDY OF 829 MIDSIZE AND LARGE U.S. FIRMS. THE ANALYSIS ISOLATED THE EFFECTS OF DIVERSITY PROGRAMS FROM EVERYTHING ELSE GOING ON IN THE COMPANIES AND IN THE ECONOMY.

FROM "WHY DIVERSITY PROGRAMS FAIL," BY FRANK DOBBIN AND ALEXANDRA KALEV, JULY-AUGUST 2016

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Appendix 2

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Mentor experience	—										
2. Salary	.34**	—									
3. Promotion rate	.27**	.31**	—								
4. Career success	.33**	.27**	.23**	—							
5. Job satisfaction	.03	.03	.21**	.39**	—						
6. Gender	.07	-.22**	-.05	-.03	-.06	—					
7. Age	-.02	.39**	.12	.06	.07	-.10	—				
8. Race	.10	-.03	.06	.07	.13	.06	-.05	—			
9. Education	.14	.45**	.07	.11	.05	-.03	.08	.04	—		
10. Organizational tenure	.16	.42**	.32**	.05	.10	-.01	.37**	.03	.21**	—	
11. Hours worked	.17*	.57**	.03	.11	.05	-.27**	.09	.12	.18*	.05	—
<i>M</i>	NA	50,665	1.53	3.70	4.00	NA	42.49	NA	NA	8.98	42.87
<i>SD</i>	NA	16,902	2.28	.61	.64	NA	9.17	NA	NA	7.22	11.09

Note: Pairwise *N* ranges from 127 to 157.
p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Table 2
Regression Results

Independent Variable	Standardized Regression Weights			
	Salary	Promotion	Career Success	Job Satisfaction
Step 1				
Gender	-.08	-.08	-.04	-.06
Age	.23***	.03	.08	.04
Race	-.11	.05	.04	.13
Education	.28***	-.02	.06	.02
Organizational tenure	.23***	.27**	-.05	.08
Hours worked	.45***	-.05	.03	.01
<i>R</i> ² Δ	.62***	.11*	.03	.03
Step 2				
Mentor experience	.21***	.24**	.32**	.01
<i>R</i> ² Δ	.04***	.05**	.09**	.00
<i>R</i> ² total	.66	.16	.12	.03
<i>F</i>	31.87***	3.19**	2.32*	.57

Note: Beta weights are from the final equation.
p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

<i>Group</i>	Career mobility/ opportunity		Recognition		Satisfaction		Promotions	
	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Mentored	4.6	1.1	5.2	1.4	5.5	1.3	1.3	0.8
Non-mentored	3.4	1.4	4.4	1.4	4.6	0.9	0.7	0.8
High-level	4.1	1.4			5.0	1.2		
Low-level	3.2	1.3			4.6	1.3		

Table 2. Summary of career/job scales' univariate tests' findings

Effect	Career mobility/opportunity		Recognition		Satisfaction		Security		Promotions	
	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Mentor	36.08	26.65*	11.75	7.23†	13.30	10.83*	6.36	2.88	10.42	16.32*
Mentor × sex	0.74	0.55	0.27	0.17	0.08	0.07	0.29	0.13	0.07	0.12
Mentor × level	1.09	0.81	0.02	0.01	0.15	0.12	1.00	0.46	0.63	0.99
Mentor × sex × level	4.33	3.20	0.22	0.13	0.63	0.51	0.53	0.24	0.29	0.45
Sex	2.01	1.48	1.51	0.93	2.63	2.14‡	0.13	0.06	0.85	1.33
Level	27.42	20.25*	4.04	2.49	6.92	5.64	0.80	0.36	2.13	3.34
Sex × level§	4.91	3.63	5.07	3.12	8.53	6.95†	6.95	3.15	0.07	0.11
Error					0.83					

* $p < 0.001$; † $p < 0.01$; ‡ $p < 0.05$.
 Univariate *F*-tests = (1,209).
 §Multivariate *F* = N.S.

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