Who's Sharing Knowledge in Your Organization?

Randy Emelo

Measuring who has information to share via mentoring programs, and where it goes, can help identify skills gaps and better direct learning investments.

The demand for hard data continues to grow in all areas of HR, and no initiative is immune. For instance, for decades mentoring has been viewed as a soft skills practice that is difficult to quantify, but that is changing. Companies are beginning to aggressively measure the value of mentoring programs so they can place a dollar amount on the return they get from this practice.

"Analytics are hot now," said Kent Barnett, CEO/founder of KnowledgeAdvisors, a learning analytics company. "We've seen this trend grow over the past few years and anticipate it will continue to grow even more as companies look for ways to cost-justify their investments in learning."

But Sheila Forte-Trammell, co-author of *Intelligent Mentoring: How IBM Creates Value Through People, Knowledge, and Relationships*, said for mentoring to be considered a serious developmental tool three things must happen. "One, the mentoring objectives must be defined. Two, the organization must express how they intend to measure success. And three, expectations must be stated along with ways to address personal responsibility and accountability."

If mentoring has an effective structure and process in place, measuring ROI is necessary to maximize the benefits. Barnett said these include increased loyalty, engagement and leadership capabilities, as well as reduced administrative burden.

Leadership capabilities: Global food and facilities management services company Sodexo is known for its mentoring program as part of a broader diversity and inclusion effort. The company's IMPACT mentoring program, which connects employees across client sites, has resulted in a demonstrable improvement in women's careers, with 30 percent of women who participated receiving a promotion. Further, the company calculated it got back two dollars for every dollar spent on mentoring.

"Our continuous commitment to diversity and inclusion drives our ability to identify and develop the best talent, create an inclusive culture where our workforce can thrive and deliver outstanding services to our clients and customers, differentiating us as an organization and establishing our competitive advantage in the marketplace," said George Chavel, president and chief executive officer at Sodexo, in a January 2012 press release.

Loyalty and retention: In *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*, author Leigh Branhan wrote: "Mentoring programs have been found to be effective in increasing employee retention in 77 percent of the companies that implemented them." The impact of that can affect companies that want to retain top talent and become an employer of choice. In knowledge-sharing software company Triple Creek's 2008 research paper "Web-Based Mentoring Positively Impacts Employee Retention and Productivity," 83 percent of Web-based mentoring participants surveyed said their mentoring

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experience positively influenced their desire to stay at their company.

Forte-Trammell said most retention issues stem from employees feeling a lack of support and connectedness to the organization and periodically experiencing some level of difficulty understanding its strategy. "In this state of confusion their tendency is to question their value to the organization," she said. "They want reassurance that learning opportunities are available to them and that there is a clear line of sight of career progression. Experienced mentors are able to provide their mentees with a support system to ensure they feel like a part of the organization, and in doing so, they are able to build employee loyalty and engagement."

Engagement: Keeping employees engaged will continue to be a critical issue, especially as workers face burnout from the intense workloads of the past several years. Companies often promote mentoring as a way for employees to connect and engage with one another and simultaneously build up their own skill levels, positioning it as a high-demand practice that many employees have come to expect. A 2011 survey by temporary staffing company Accountemps found 24 percent of companies planned to offer mentoring as a perk to employees.

In Triple Creek's 2007 research paper "Employee Engagement Research," 90 percent of Web-based mentoring participants said mentoring helped them develop a positive relationship with someone at the company, and 89 percent said it allowed them to contribute to their organization's success. These positive engagement factors can help keep employees motivated when times get tough.

Reduced administrative burden: Multinational financial services organization Wells Fargo saw a large reduction in the administrative burden associated with running its mentoring program after switching from a manual program to one driven by technology. The manually run program required five administrators, roughly 35 to 40 hours of administrative work per month, and nearly three to five months to make matches for people. After the company

Six Ways to Measure Mentoring

Mentoring program administrators often ask what the best ways are to measure the success of mentoring programs. But they ask this question after the program has been launched and their manager wants them to report results. The manager may be satisfied with qualitative information such as how many participants liked the program or how many felt that they had a good match. But what they often want to know, and to report, is program ROI.

The first question program administrators should be able to answer is "What was your business objective for mentoring?" Go back to the beginning and determine what the program was built to do — or failed to accomplish — and this information can be found in the planning stage.

What follows are some recommendations to measure the ROI for a mentoring program:

1. Identify and focus on a specific business objective. This is normally recommended when establishing any formal mentoring program.
2. Determine how this objective can be achieved through mentoring. For example, if the objective is to increase new hire retention rates, this can be achieved by giving a mentor a specific charter to support new hires in rapidly adapting to their roles and to the company culture.
3. Match mentees with qualified mentors. For example, if improving leadership development is the business objective, ensure matches are based on organizationally defined leadership skills or competencies the mentee is lacking. A mentoring software matching tool can facilitate more accurate matching.
4. Enable the mentee to define goals, and provide a tool to track progress to keep the mentoring partnership focused. Then gather data to begin producing reports. Leveraging a technology tool to create these reports will save time.
5. Gather feedback once the program has ended or when the mentoring partnerships are coming to an end. Send out surveys to stakeholders to provide data to support the stated business objective. For example, if that objective is to improve time to productivity for new hires, send a survey to the mentee's manager asking him or her to rate improvement.
6. Define the sources of data and reports needed to measure achievement. Not all data may be easily accessible. For example, if the business objective is to improve diversity within the leadership team, the mentoring program administrator will need a report from the human resources information system or an equivalent system that provides statistics on diverse employees' mobility. Then cross-reference that against those who were involved in the mentoring program.

Measuring development includes many factors; try not to focus on producing exact figures. There are so many factors that influence success when measuring mentoring that sometimes anecdotal evidence can be as valuable as hard data. For instance, ROI reports could include how many mentees achieved their goals within the program. TM

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Add It Up

When calculating ROI for broad knowledge sharing, consider the following questions:

- Who are the knowledge sources in your company?
- Who needs the knowledge?
- What are the three most common competencies people want to improve?
- Are there trends or commonalities among your top knowledge sources such as age, location, seniority or tenure?
- Are there trends or commonalities among the people who need the knowledge such as age, location, seniority or tenure?
- Where are the biggest gaps in knowledge in your company?
- Who is willing and available to share knowledge?
- Who do people go to most often when they need to learn something?
- Is there a go-to set of knowledge sources?
- How do knowledge and skill gaps impact your company?
- What could be accomplished if the gaps did not exist?
- What roadblocks to knowledge sharing exist in your company?

By answering these questions, talent leaders can better understand their talent situation and how to best connect people so they can and want to share knowledge across the enterprise.

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switched to a Web-based mentoring program, it needed one administrator who spent roughly 12 hours in the program each month, and people were matched up in a matter of minutes rather than the months it took using spreadsheets.

Leveraging technology also can facilitate measurement. Barnett said one of the keys to calculating mentoring ROI is to monetize the costs of a program. Wells Fargo used technology to ease the administrative burden of its mentoring program, which allowed the company to expand the program by 900 percent while reducing administrative time and costs by 70 percent.

Enterprise-Wide Sharing

Mentoring is often viewed as a process for just a handful of promising young employees. But companies that want to broaden their reach and impact all employees with greater access to knowledge sharing also can benefit. Technology facilitates handling an influx of participants and streamlines the matching process. This opens the door for new metrics and additional ways to measure program ROI since the focus is on knowledge sharing and not traditional mentoring.

Where traditional mentoring may focus on grooming an employee on a set career path, broad knowledge sharing focuses more on an employee's day-to-day skills and competencies. In this case, companies may want to capture metrics related to areas of productivity, skill gaps and gains, and knowledge access. These factors can show how knowledge sharing and learning engagements are impacting people and their daily work results.

The more novel of these three areas is access to knowledge, which includes knowing who the knowledge sources are in a company, who needs the knowledge, who is willing to share their knowledge, who is available at any given time and who people go to most often as a knowledge source. This is where companies continue to lack ways to measure progress. This topic was raised by The Talent Management Panel at the 2012 HR Technology Conference in October. Walmart, Motorola Solutions and Merck were among the participants that discussed diverse approaches to deploying talent management processes and technologies to help reach overall organizational goals.

The panel commented on the SystematicHR blog that the role of learning data and analytics in an organization is significant because collectively, "We want to know who is having conversations and about what at any given time. If we can figure out what our talent is talking about, how to connect others and measure the impact of quality interactions on our bottom lines, then we can also figure out how to invest in growing those specific conversations."

Technology seems to be one of the best ways for companies to connect employees, find out who is talking about what learning needs and address those needs to impact the bottom line in real time. Knowledge-sharing software, for example, can facilitate learning conversations, allowing employees to interact with and learn from one another about specific competencies on an enterprise-wide scale in real time.

Reports could be generated that track and show what learning conversations people are having and who is having them. These reports can help learning leaders identify high-potential employees who may have been overlooked, employees who may need further development or who are subject matter experts in a particular area. This information can be used to determine how to best invest time and money into learning initiatives that can improve skill gaps employees possess at any given time. Since companies could access this information in real time, talent managers could also address learning and development needs while they are still relevant and significant.

"Think of it this way. According to an October 2012 Accountemps survey, the top fear of employees is making a mistake on the job," KnowledgeAdvisors' Barnett said. "Now imagine you had mechanisms in place where your employees could talk to one another in specific learning engagements centered around competencies, share knowledge with one another specific to those topics, and help coach and guide one another to perform their jobs better. This type of hands-on, real-time employee collaboration and learning could significantly reduce the likelihood of people making mistakes."

Giving employees access to the knowledge they need when they need it creates a smarter, more dynamic and innovative workforce that can achieve greater results that positively affect a company's bottom line. "Understanding the link between the investment and business outcome offers key opportunities for improvement," said Barnett.

As knowledge sharing grows in organizations, the opportunity to impact every employee grows with it. TM

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