Global, Virtual Mentoring Programs

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Introduction
Effective mentoring programs are vital to developing a strong leadership pipeline. Many current leaders can point back to one or more strong mentors who helped them develop their skills. However, effective mentoring is difficult to achieve. Getting the mentoring and coaching piece right is increasingly critical for today’s businesses, as noted in a recent Business Insider article.

The article found high-achieving young workers, around 30 years old, stayed with an employer an average of 28 months. Why the quick departures? Consultant Beth N. Carter said, ‘Sometimes changing jobs is about money. Sometimes it’s because the job isn’t what they thought it was going to be. More often, they weren’t getting the personal attention, the mentoring, the coaching, the training they wanted.”

For diverse employees, finding a mentor who can help them develop into a business leader is exponentially more challenging. As noted in a Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) study, “The formal career mentoring approach is especially salient for women employees and employees from racial/ethnic minorities who may find it more challenging to find high-level executives within their organizations with whom they can identify and from whom they can informally seek advice.”

Expanding mentoring programs globally adds another layer of complexity. How does one ensure all high performing individuals—and not just those conveniently located in western hubs or corporate offices—have an equal shot at becoming a company leader? When a company’s leadership is pulled in varying directions because leaders are scattered at locations across the globe, how can the business maintain its strong corporate culture and ensure its leadership team is moving, synchronously, in the right direction?

Global Mentoring: What Is It?
Multinational corporations routinely locate their business leaders in offices around the globe, aiming to match business concerns in a particular geography with people possessing the right skills. But when a corporation's potential pool of, say, supply-side skilled workers could exist in any of 100 offices around the globe, finding the right match is a challenge. The pursuant challenge is developing back-up talent, and cultivating individuals to fill that match three and five years down the road.
Enter global mentoring. Far from its roots in programs that matched leaders with young talent in face-to-face scenarios, mentoring today is about “connecting with people to share skills and knowledge throughout all echelons of an organization.”

As described in *Diversity Executive* magazine, “Functioning as a symbolic water cooler to catalyze intentional learning relationships built on collaboration and rich dialogue, mentoring allows colleagues around the world to share cultural understanding, experiences, critical organizational knowledge and wisdom with each other.”

When it comes to global mentoring, the overall goal shifts. Mentoring no longer is only about matching junior talent with senior leaders. A new dimension comes into play when the challenge is global. Mentoring shifts from simply skill-building to culture-building, networking and “globalizing” a company’s culture.

For some companies, the mentoring program may have traditional roots, with the goal of facilitating leadership development. But, because of the company’s far-flung locations the program may be global by default. In these circumstances, the company may focus primarily on matching talent to leaders, without putting as much emphasis into the cultural opportunities.

Take a company such as Kellogg, for example. While not downplaying cultural concerns, Kellogg sought to broaden its talent development capabilities by creating an e-mentoring program.

As stated on its website:

In late 2011, our Office of Diversity and Inclusion launched a new e-mentoring program called “Better Together.” This new online tool helps employees at all stages of their careers connect with and learn from either more-experienced employees or their peers. This new approach to mentoring matches mentors (or *Advisors*) with mentees (or *Learners*) according to a variety of factors, such as competencies, experience and job level, among others. For the pilot phase of this new program, participation was made available to 500 members of our Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and included participation across the U.S., Canada and Latin America.
“Better Together is encouraging our ERG members to interact with and learn from colleagues they may not have met in the course of their normal business day,” said Mark King, global head of diversity and inclusion.  

The power of global mentoring is not lost on non-business entities. ESPN and the U.S. State Department recently announced a global mentoring program that embraces many of the advantages a global mentoring program offer. The Global Sports Mentoring Program aims to help women and girls involved in sports “experience the benefits of participation: improved health, greater self-esteem, and greater academic success.”

According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "Our goal is to identify women worldwide who are emerging leaders in sports: coaches, managers, administrators, sports journalists, marketers, and then match them with American women who are the top leaders in these fields." By mentoring women athletes around the world, ESPN and the State Department hope to build the talent pipeline of female athletes.

**How To Mentor Globally**

Technology is likely to be a centerpiece in any global mentoring program. At Intel, a variety of mentoring programs are in place, including the IT@Intel Forum, teaming IT professionals around the world to share best practices. IT@Intel illustrates another dimension available in mentoring programs, whether global or national: cross-company opportunities. The forum electronically connects Intel's IT professionals with IT professionals from other companies anywhere else in the world.

Intel keeps pushing technology’s boundaries in service of mentoring, cross-fertilization, and culture building. In its 2012 mid-year report, Intel focused on social computing as one of the next technology horizons.

“Social computing is completely changing the way knowledge is shared, empowering people with information that was once held by only a select few,” the report states. The company explored crowdsourcing and gamification techniques last year to support collaboration, and in one instance connected 4,500 people via a crowdsourcing forum to generate more than 250 new ideas. Crowdsourcing has not found its way into the mentoring arena yet, but the potential to
connect multiple leaders with a host of developing workers in one forum—sharing not only ideas but culture and learning—hints at a powerful mentoring possibility.

The illustration below shows how technology facilitates many options and possibilities when it comes to mentoring. This graphic, from Sodexo’s website, depicts the wider set of options technology can offer. Sodexo uses the River program to let its employees connect, learn and challenge each other on a virtual basis. Sodexo’s approach lets employees create their own learning process.

Gatwiri Muthara, public relations assistant at Sodexo, confirms that the company continues to use the River program, from Triple Creek Associates, to support global mentoring in its workforce.

Technology is only one aspect of a global mentoring program. More often it is about infrastructure and facilitating the connection. The more critical components of global mentoring programs revolve around process and desired outcomes. Formal programs involve structured interactions and requirements, whereas informal programs may have a friendlier tone but less specific results. Timing considerations, approaches to creating the mentoring team, the structure of goals and outcomes and many other factors come into play.
Among the many forms of a global mentoring program are these options:

- **Pairing workers to support cross-cultural sharing and global talent development**: IBM pursued a global program that matches workers from a select handful of countries to promote knowledge sharing, collaboration and cultural intelligence. A recent partnership paired Danny Chen, a Taiwan-born worker based in Austin, Texas with David Lin, a programmer from Taiwan. Chen shared his knowledge of the patent process while Lin offered coaching around conducting business in China. One result was a 25 percent increase from 2005 to 2006 in patents awarded to IBM’s Taipei lab.\(^{11}\)

- **Supporting individuals in connecting across an organization to share knowledge**: Cisco’s European website describes its eMentorMe program as, “an intelligent global mentoring platform that automates the identification and matching of compatible mentors and mentees,” based on peoples’ unique needs.\(^{12}\)

- **Targeting diverse mentoring needs and applying them on a global scale**: Ernst & Young offers a Career Watch mentoring opportunity that targets high-potential women and visible minorities. It also offers the Ernst & Young and You (EYU) program offering learning, inclusiveness and mentoring for new professionals worldwide.

- **Creating cross-industry, cross-functional, cross-geography knowledge sharing teams that let members manage their participation and tailor their learning**: Sodexo’s approach creates knowledge sharing teams that mentor and share knowledge on an as-needed basis.

**A Closer Look**

Many leading companies have gravitated toward offering global mentoring programs. Some companies boast programs that merit a closer look.

Intel, for example, fully revamped its traditional mentoring approach to focus on intranet, e-mail and pushing boundaries. Rather than match people by job title or years of service, Intel builds matches based on hot skills that are in demand. Matches are made rapidly, via e-mail, to ensure relationships that cross state and national borders. Written contracts and tight deadlines support pairs in driving toward results.

“This is definitely not a special program for special people,” observed Lory Lanese, mentor champion for Intel based in New Mexico.\(^{13}\)
Previously, Intel’s less formal mentoring offerings served ambitious employees who took the time to connect with senior people. While it worked—for those individuals—the model favored people who were risk-takers and who possessed enough savvy to pursue and create their own mentoring relationships.

Today’s program focuses less on cultivating some individuals for leadership roles, and more on passing knowledge down to an entire new generation of workers. Three design elements ensure the mentoring relationship thrives:

1) The partner (mentee)—versus the mentor—controls the relationship, setting up meeting times and choosing projects to tackle.

2) A contract that outlines commitments ensures accountability. This is where the formality around Intel’s approach is built in.

3) The substance of the relationship, by contrast, is not tightly governed, but controlled mutually by the mentor and partner, ensuring confidentiality and candor to support the connection. “No holds barred” thinking takes place within this framework. 

IBM, too, required a mentoring program that ensured rapid knowledge transfer and better cross-country collaboration. Like Intel, IBM connects people across geographies, business units and skill sets. Also like Intel, IBM’s goal was less around grooming individuals for leadership roles, focusing more on building a skilled workforce to deliver quality products and services.

IBM’s explicit goal for its mentoring function was to make the program accessible, simple and globally pervasive. The program offers mentoring at several levels, including expert knowledge sharing to transfer specific skills, support for long-term career development and on-boarding support for new employees.

Mentoring is formally required at IBM, although requirements vary depending on roles. Some employees must mentor others to achieve certification, while other employees have minimum hourly requirements—say, 40 hours per year—to fulfill. IBM’s global directory serves as a mentor connection tool. Employees can cite the kinds of mentoring they want or need within their profiles.
Unanticipated benefits of IBM’s program abound. For example, it supports cross-generational issues such as culture and communication, via both mentoring and reverse mentoring. Meanwhile, communities of practice within IBM tap the mentoring program to better foster collaborative learning and innovation. Technology, sales and leadership skills are more easily transferred across geographies thanks to IBM’s global mentoring opportunities.15

External Providers
Offering platforms for global, cross-country mentoring is a booming business. Among providers offering these services are:

- **Acumen International (an Australia-based provider of cross-company mentoring):** Programs help individuals seeking to grow their businesses by clarifying their business goals and building strong teams and workers.16
- **Global Mentoring (an IT-based provider helping develop skills in new IT professionals):** Offers live learning assistance, coaching, and extended support such as mentoring for businesses and their IT staff.17
- **Menttium (a full-service training & mentoring provider):** Offers intra- and inter-company mentoring opportunities. Emphasizes mentee-driven guidance and knowledge sharing.18
- **Vistage (cross-company mentoring for leadership-level people):** Supports executives by connecting them to peer advisory groups for ongoing development.19

Mentoring goes beyond big business borders, too. Consider the linking of Agora Partnerships and Mercy Corps’ MicroMentor to offer global small business mentoring opportunities. Volunteer business mentors who speak Spanish, and who have a knowledge of Latin American business, can mentor small business owners in Nicaragua, El Salvador and other Latin American countries, with the goal of “dramatically increasing entrepreneurs’ access to the critical business management know-how and industry-specific expertise needed to start and grow a successful enterprise.” Beginning in May 2012 the program launched by connecting 25 bank executives, who volunteered their time and expertise to support 25 small businesses in Nicaragua. The goal was to offer targeted guidance and mentoring to the small business entrepreneurs.20

Conclusion
Global mentoring programs provide many benefits for multinational corporations seeking to transfer skills across borders and build a common business culture.
Successful efforts leverage technology to increase efficiency. Many of them balance formality—specifically, steps to ensure accountability and to shape desired outcomes—with informality, allowing individual relationships and forums to “follow the need” and flourish from candid interaction. Requirements around mentoring, and making a program ubiquitous also help ensure success.

Strong mentoring programs no longer simply seek to provide a career ladder for key individuals—although these kinds of programs still have value. Global mentoring for a multinational corporation may be more about transferring skills and developing the next generation of workers, providing skill-building and support for a wider audience of workers.

Endnotes


10 Gatwiri Muthara, public relations assistant, Sodexo, Email exchange, May 1, 2013.


12 Acumen International website (last accessed May 2, 2013) Link: http://acumen-international.com/
17 Global Mentoring website (last accessed May 2, 2013) Link: http://www.globalmentoring.com/
18 Mentium website (last accessed May 2, 2013) Link: http://www.mentium.com/Home
19 Vistage website (last accessed May 2, 2013) Link: http://www.vistage.com/