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Benefits and Barriers

Case study of a government technology-mediated group mentoring program

Technology-mediated group mentoring

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to describe the design of a provincial government ministry group mentoring program and examine mentees' and mentors' experiences in the program.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 151 mentees rated their satisfaction in a post-program survey. The survey was followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 mentees and 11 mentors.

Findings – In all, 87 per cent of mentees rated their learning as effective. Benefits to mentees were relevance of the learning, and senior leader/mentors use of current issues, events and personal stories. Delivery through a combination of Web conferencing and collaboration technologies was most effective. Mentors learned from mentees and other mentors. Regular and full mentee participation was an identified issue. In addition, not all mentoring teams worked well together.

Research limitations/implications – The selection criteria favored participants who had a positive experience. Including more participants who were disengaged or less active may have revealed what inhibited full engagement. Complex underlying systemic and cultural issues negatively affected mentee participation and mentoring team effectiveness. It is unclear whether this was caused by intrinsic or extrinsic barriers. Further study could shed light on how to address participation issues.

Practical implications – Selection criteria favored highly active participants who had a positive experience. Including more disengaged or less active participants may have revealed barriers to full engagement.

Social implications – Despite a context of extreme organizational churn, this program delivered cost-effective and engaging learning to a large number of employees. Recommendations are made to further strengthen the program.

Originality/value – This contextually grounded case study will be useful to those who plan to implement a group mentoring program.

Keywords Design and development, Mentoring, Communication technologies, Organizational learning, Employee development, Learning processes

Paper type Case study



Introduction

This case study examines a group mentoring program that took place in a provincial government ministry in British Columbia, Canada. The program aimed to address staff, team and organizational learning needs to break down divisional barriers and foster knowledge sharing across the organization. Program delivery was through meeting, communications and collaboration technologies already in use in the organization. The research question asked how mentors' and mentees' experiences and perceptions could identify strengths and areas for improvements to the program.

The case study approach allowed the researchers to explore the "phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources" which allowed us to examine "multiple facets of the phenomenon" (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 544). The context was one of extreme organizational churn, including a major reorganization, and severe budgetary constraints, which resulted in changes in organizational structure and relationships, business processes and delivery of services. This article describes the design of the program, including selection of topics, mentors and mentees, and the use of delivery technologies, which provides insights into the intent of program developers. The findings describe mentors' and mentees' experiences, which demonstrate how intentions played out in the organizational context. This contextually grounded case study will be useful to those considering implementation of a group mentoring program.

Group mentoring definitions and benefits

Mentoring can be a relationship between a mentor and mentee, or it can be a group experience. Like individual mentoring, group mentoring fosters individual development, but it also brings together multiple experts (mentors) and multiple learners (mentees), often in a group setting (Carvin, 2011), and usually "to achieve specific learning goals" (Zasloff and Okurowski, 2012, p. 53). This study examined a "many-to-many" group mentoring program, in which a group of mentors guides a group of mentees (Huizing, 2012, p. 38), with 91 mentors and 285 mentees.

Because of rapid, ongoing change and tight budgets in public and private sector organizations, group mentoring provides an effective alternative to traditional training techniques (Carvin, 2011; Emelo, 2011a, 2011b). First, many-to-many group mentoring programs can address the challenge of having too few mentors to implement a one-to-one mentoring program (Zasloff and Okurowski, 2012). Second, multiple mentors in each group keep the mentoring on track if one mentor leaves and provides a "broader network of collaborative input into the mentees' personal and professional needs" (Huizing, 2012, p. 51) than do other forms of group mentoring. Third, although it is not resource intensive, group mentoring allows for ample interaction and feedback (Meister and Willyerd, 2010).

The benefits of group mentoring are well-documented. In Emelo's (2011a) study, all mentees reported that their effectiveness increased to some extent as a result of group mentoring. Like team teaching, group mentoring creates a setting in which mentors can learn from other mentors with different expertise and experience, develop and enhance instructional methods and share and debrief experiences (Laughlin *et al.*, 2011). This supportive, collaborative learning environment allows mentors and mentees to access the collective knowledge and wisdom of the group (Economides, 2008) and for mentors to learn from mentees (Zasloff and Okurowski, 2012). Group mentoring also supports creative

thinking, team building, knowledge sharing, relationship building and exposure to others' skills and cultures (Economides, 2008; Friday and Friday, 2002).

Group mentoring can change social dynamics. It can reduce or eliminate personality clashes that can occur in one-on-one mentoring relationships (Carvin, 2011). Moreover, mentees may be less intimidated to meet with senior leaders in a group mentoring setting than meeting one-on-one (Carvin, 2011). Thus, group mentoring can bridge differences in employees' hierarchical levels (Zasloff and Okurowski, 2012).

Efficacy of technology in group mentoring

Group mentoring programs can be delivered using communications and collaboration technologies (Carvin, 2011; Emelo, 2011b), proprietary mentoring software (Francis, 2009; Primack *et al.*, 2012) and teleconferencing and video conferencing (Economides, 2008). Communications technology facilitates interaction among people with different cultural backgrounds (Carvin, 2011), from different parts of an organization or in different locations (Emelo, 2011b).

Although Emelo (2011a) found no significant differences in mentees' evaluations of effectiveness of face-to-face and virtual mentoring groups, he noted that technology-mediated mentoring is far more cost-effective. In all, 69 per cent of mentees in a virtual mentoring program rated the program as effective or very effective in developing relationships and contacts, and 89 per cent rated the experience as effective or very effective in supporting career advancement (Primack *et al.*, 2012). Francis (2009) identified the top three ways a group e-mentoring program allowed mentees to contribute to organizational success:

- (1) gaining valuable knowledge, skills or experience from another person;
- (2) building or expanding their network; and
- (3) helping them understand different points of view.

These findings speak to knowledge transfer – a primary learning and development objective – building useful relationships within the organization, and gaining a deeper understanding of how others perceive or experience issues.

Program design

Selection of topics

Selecting relevant topics is vital to the success of a group mentoring program. The right topics attract mentors and mentees, and topics that support an organization's priorities will gain the program executive support (Emelo, 2011b; Francis, 2009). Francis (2009, p. 38) observed, "Executive leadership support proved invaluable not only in the success of the pilot [...] but also in reaching large participation numbers in the years since". Moreover, organizational consultation regarding the aims and structure of the program should be as inclusive as possible to ensure the program meets the needs of all stakeholders (Ramalho, 2014).

Based on the organization's priorities, the group mentoring program was organized in three streams with distinct target audiences, goals and mentor backgrounds: *leadership development*, *performance development* and *personal development*. These streams were developed with 17 program topics (e.g. *leadership for service delivery* and *coaching for performance*). Topics for the *leadership development* stream were identified through analyzing potential upcoming vacant leadership positions. Topics for the

performance development and *personal development* streams were identified through stakeholder consultation. The streams and topics were endorsed by the executive.

Selection of mentors and mentees

Mentors' ability to create a collaborative environment, keep the group focused and provide appropriate resources is critical to creating a successful group mentoring program (Emelo, 2011b). To maximize benefit, it was also important to select the right mentees for each group. Consequently, the program support team implemented a selection process for mentors and mentees. Potential mentors were nominated by supervisors and invited to mentor in a particular stream and topic based on their knowledge and experience. Mentees were admitted through blind review of their applications in the *leadership* and *performance development* streams; those in the *personal development* stream were accepted into the program on a first-come, first-served basis. The program support team organized 23 groups of 6-23 mentees with 2-4 lead (full-time) mentors per group.

Selection of delivery technologies

As ministry staff was located in centers across the province, and budgetary constraints resulted in travel restrictions, delivering through technology was essential. To keep costs down, this program was delivered through technologies already in use in the organization. The technologies available were teleconferencing, Web conferencing and collaboration software. Although the program support team encouraged mentors to utilize all of these technologies, not all teams did so. Rather, they selected technologies based on their comfort level and the time they had to prepare. For example, learning to use or to prepare materials for Web conferencing would increase mentors' time commitment. The time commitment required of mentors is a significant challenge for mentoring program implementation (Clutterbuck, 2008).

Research methods

Data were gathered through a post-program survey and interviews. All mentees were sent an email invitation to participate in an anonymous online survey. The survey asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with their group mentoring experience. Following the survey, interviews were held with selected mentors and mentees to gain an understanding of their experiences. The interviews were semi-structured, 35-60 minutes long, conducted by telephone and audiotaped. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data.

To gain insights into the motivations and perceptions of engaged mentors, we identified potential mentor interviewees based on those who were most active in the program and were recognized by peers as highly effective. We sought a representation of male and female, executive and front-line staff and positive and negative perspectives, resulting in the recruitment of 11 participants. The mentor interviewees were asked about personal and organizational benefits of the program, rewards and challenges of joint mentoring and supports they required to mentor well.

We asked mentors to nominate mentees who could provide perceptions about their experiences in the program, whether positive or negative, resulting in the recruitment of ten mentee participants. We asked mentees about their experiences in and satisfaction with the program, motivations for entering the program, participation level, perceptions of good mentoring and the effects of technology on their learning experiences.

Survey findings

Of the 285 mentees, 151 responded to the survey (53 per cent response rate). In all, 87 per cent of mentees rated their learning experience as slightly effective to very effective, and 87 per cent of respondents found that their learning was enhanced by the interactions with mentors. Interestingly, respondents rated their interactions with other mentees as almost as important to their learning (83 per cent), which suggests that a supportive and collaborative learning environment was established (Economides, 2008).

Only 54 per cent of respondents indicated they were able to participate in most or all sessions, which may indicate a lack of engagement or systemic issues that prevented full participation. Despite this, 71 per cent of respondents rated their learning experience in this program as “about the same as” to “much more effective than” other work-related virtual courses. Barriers to participation and the influence of technology on mentees’ learning are further explored in the following section.

Mentee interview findings

Benefits of group mentoring

Learning in a workplace setting and from senior leaders were important benefits of the program. For example, June (all names are pseudonyms) said:

I love learning and so I thought what a great opportunity to have it with the employer and actually have some learning linked directly to your work as opposed to doing a degree or taking courses.

Mentors, who were senior leaders in the organization, used their current projects and events as case studies for mentoring discussions. The mentees were particularly engaged by mentors’ personal stories, which related senior leaders’ struggles, failures and successes. For example, Katie observed:

I really enjoyed learning about other people’s experiences, where they had come from in terms of their personal lives, how they were able to overcome certain obstacles [...] how they were passionate enough to learn more about leadership and then [...] [obtained] a position of leadership. It was quite inspiring to hear those personal stories.

Mentors’ ability to share current cases and personal stories was a significant advantage to group mentoring over the use of generic case studies.

Mentees also valued opportunities to network with colleagues from elsewhere in the organization, which accords with Economides’ (2008) and Friday and Friday’s (2002) work. This networking increased awareness and understanding of jobs across the organization. For example, Susan, a long-time front-line employee, participated in the program to explore potential career options with the organization. Exploring careers within a large organization can be challenging, especially when departments are siloed or geographically dispersed. Providing opportunities for such exploration can increase employee retention (Higgins, 2000; Johnson, 2010; May, 2003; Payne and Huffman, 2005).

Organizational barriers to full participation

Despite strategies to ensure relevance of topics and buy-in across the organization, only 54 per cent of survey respondents participated in most or all sessions, which could reduce learning transfer (Brown and McCracken, 2009) as well as impede formation of a collaborative learning environment (Hammer *et al.*, 2014). Mentees described heavy

workloads and lack of supervisor and team support as barriers to attendance. For example, Kailyn said:

[The beginning of the year] was a good time to start this [program] but the latter part was just like disaster in the scheduling because everyone was being pulled in 16 directions [...] I had an hour a month to consider optional extras like mentoring meetings. I was really grateful for the team members for picking up where I needed to be picked up and the leadership that allowed us to do it when we applied.

Kailyn's team acted as both a support to free her up to attend sessions and a barrier when her feelings of responsibility to them prevented her from doing so.

Kailyn's experience shows systemic issues, like unanticipated directives and changes in priorities, and cultural issues, like a supportive team environment, can outweigh a mentee's intention to participate. Moreover, the organizational demands supervisors experience may make it difficult to free up staff, despite initial approval. Consequently, staff may perceive supervisors as not being supportive of their attendance. For example, another mentee, Sally, suggested, "Supervisors [should] allocate work such that participants have the time away from their regular duties to focus on the mentoring program calls", implying lack of supervisor support. However, although this may account for some cases, in others, supervisors' intentions may have been trumped by the exigencies of the moment.

Mentees' participation was a challenge in this program. The extreme churn within the organization and the priority demands of doing business negatively impacted mentees' ability to attend sessions. Lack of time and support, being "swamped by other responsibilities" and organizational culture are barriers to participation in training (Brown and McCracken, 2009); similar issues affected participation in mentoring meetings.

Qualities of a good mentor

Mentees described good mentors through attributes, specific activities and teaching approach. Good mentors were characterized as helpful, respectful, prepared and authentic. They were engaged and organized, listened closely, led discussions and meetings well, and their extensive experience and knowledge was apparent in their mentoring. These attributes are similar to those identified for mentor teachers: knowledgeable, honest, respectful, fair, flexible, organized, understanding and sympathetic (Heeralal, 2014).

Good mentors set a schedule in advance, allowing mentees to put aside time in their schedules. For example, Susan contrasted her experience in a previous group mentoring program without a pre-set schedule with her experience in this program, observing that the mentors in this study "prepared well and, at the beginning, they gave us a timetable. We could feel they really had a heart for it". Determining and communicating meeting dates at the outset enabled mentees to work with their supervisors to free up time for scheduled meetings, supporting their participation.

Kelly described how one mentor motivated mentees to participate:

[He] started with a good email with the basics and what the topic was for the session and [asked] if we had additional questions and comments each time so that we had a reason to go. There was no expectation that you would possibly not go. There was an expectation of participation.

This mentor's pre-meeting communication engaged mentees, increasing their intrinsic motivation to participate. Inviting mentees to ask questions and make comments encouraged them to be active learners. Kelly noted, at the beginning of a meeting, the mentor "would keep us busy with puzzles or something like that while he and the other mentors were getting their papers together [...] people would always sign on early". Kelly's mentor engaged the mentees before the meeting began and encouraged participants to interact with each other, which helped to create "an engaging atmosphere of collaboration" (Emelo, 2011b, p. 224).

As stated earlier, an effective mentoring practice was the sharing of personal stories. Parkin (2004) noted that mentors could use relevant stories to pass on organizational culture and standards to mentees. However, in our study, mentees spoke of stories as creating connection and engagement. For example, Brenda observed:

[My mentor's experiences] were really quite fascinating because he was new to government and I really connected to [his] shared stories. [...] He was really honest. That personal aspect of him was very helpful. The agenda was quite diverse and covered lots of different areas. You actually left kind of feeling that it would be good to get to know him more.

Mentors who shared experiences and candid insights created an emotional connection beyond passing on organizational culture and knowledge transfer.

Being approachable also fostered the creation of an emotional bond. Keith said:

I felt that [my mentor] was amazing, very friendly, very approachable, super knowledgeable, and in fact since the program has ended I have contacted him several times with questions, or I emailed my resume and asked what he thought [...] He gave me feedback.

The bond of Keith, a junior-level employee, with his mentor was so strong that it evolved into one-to-one mentoring after the program ended. Keith's experience demonstrates the power of such a relationship to positively impact a mentoring relationship. Thus, expanding mentor selection criteria beyond credentials and job performance is critical to selecting good mentors. Moreover, orientation of new mentors should include fostering an understanding of what mentees value.

Effects on technology learning

Many mentees expressed benefits of technology enabling staff across the province to learn together in this program. However, some saw it as a hindrance to their own learning. The mentoring groups used different technologies, which provided an opportunity for us to gain some insights into how different combinations impacted the learning experience.

As one might expect, technical glitches or awkwardness in the use of technology negatively affected learning. For example, when using teleconferencing, mentees had to mute their phones to minimize background noise and unmute to speak, which created unnatural pauses that made conversation awkward. Using teleconferencing only to host meetings hampered interaction and encouraged lurking (i.e. listening without contributing to discussions), which could eventually lead to mentee attrition. For example, Joanne observed of using teleconferencing only:

I gave it my best but I found myself starting to wander [and] disengaged to the extent of falling asleep. It wasn't working for me and I just decided not [to] continue [in the program].

In contrast, using both teleconferencing and Web conferencing to host meetings allowed participants to see as well as to hear each other and to see presentation material to support learning. For example, Sam described a “supportive” environment, in which he “felt comfortable to speak openly and freely, no judgments”. In general, mentees described the learning environment as more engaging when the technology enabled visual elements, consistent with Economides (2008).

Using collaboration software provided opportunities for more in-depth learning than did videoconferencing and Web conferencing alone. For example, this technology provided a place for a mentor to post a case study video clip and follow-up questions for group discussion. Collaboration software also facilitated sharing assignments, allowing mentors and mentees across the province to create a shared learning experience. Laurel said:

We used [collaboration software] to post our examples [so] we could look at [other mentees’] examples and compare. [Our mentors] would go through [our work] and make notes on each one. Then we all went in [and] were able to see a bigger picture.

The collaboration software helped to engage mentees between sessions and facilitated individual and collaborative activities that reinforced and deepened their learning. Delivering a group mentoring program through technology can be effective but should use a combination of communication, Web conferencing and collaboration technologies to engage participants.

Mentor interview findings

Personal and organizational benefits

People characterized as nurturing, authentic and approachable may be more inclined to become mentors (Darwin, 2004). As the mentors in this program received no financial remuneration and mentored in addition to their regular duties, these characteristics may have influenced at least some to become mentors. However, mentor interviewees also revealed that they also saw mentoring as a two-way act of giving, benefitting mentees and themselves. Similarly, Potter *et al.* (2009) described mentors benefitting from learning from mentees, gaining better understanding of mentee needs and the having the opportunity to contribute to another’s success.

Mentoring allowed some mentors to enhance existing skills or develop new ones. For example, Martin observed:

I gained a lot of experience [through group mentoring]. It [was] all leadership and facilitation skills. Working in a virtual environment was a new activity to us and I [got to] conduct [province-wide] meetings [and] facilitate plans and conference calls.

At the time, the organization was introducing Web conferencing to replace in-person with virtual meetings. As a mentor, Martin, a front-line employee, learned to use the new technology, providing leadership in adopting the corporate technology objectives. He believes that this mentoring experience contributed to his promotion to team lead after the program. While group mentoring facilitates the development of skills and confidence that prepare mentees for promotion (Emelo, 2011a), in this case a mentor experienced this benefit.

Gary, a long-serving manager, admitted that mentoring others helped to reengage him:

As a mentor, you can learn a lot from the people that you are mentoring. I think, as the time goes by, especially after 32 years, it is difficult to maintain your own engagement or enthusiasm and being a mentor certainly helps with that.

Gary renewed his engagement through participating in learning conversations with younger mentees who were enthusiastic and engaged. [Zasloff and Okurowski \(2012\)](#) noted group mentoring helped bridge the generation gap between the mentor and mentees and legitimized mutually beneficial learning conversations among them.

Mentors readily identified benefits to the organization. The program was cost-effective, used in-house talent effectively and promoted the exchange of organizational knowledge. For example, Ben observed:

[Helping] people learn in a way that doesn't necessarily cost outright budget dollars but rather time, effort, and energy, which by and large we have, I thought was pretty exciting and a pretty neat opportunity to keep learning and training available for people.

Ben, a seasoned executive director, valued continuously investing in people. He and other mentors saw great benefit in using in-house talent to deliver the program. Ben was so committed that when his division was transferred to another ministry because of reorganization, he remained in the program until the end.

Group mentoring contributed to the development of a more skilled workforce as well as to increased job satisfaction. It facilitated informal discussions between mentors who were management and mentees who were on the front line, bridging the hierarchical divide between supervisors and staff. In addition, in a time of budget constraints, the group mentoring program demonstrated the organization's commitment to staff development, which could help reduce employee turnover and increase retention ([Higgins, 2000](#); [Johnson, 2010](#); [May, 2003](#); [Payne and Huffman, 2005](#)).

Rewards and challenges of joint mentoring

Most of the interviewees valued the opportunity to work in teams with other mentors. They described gaining and enhancing facilitation skills and learning new teaching approaches from more experienced mentors. Mentors also spoke of being able to share mentoring responsibilities (e.g. team members taking turns in leading sessions), which helped newer mentors feel more confident. In addition, as Gary noted, "We could divide up some responsibilities, [which] to some extent allowed me to sit back almost as if I was one of the participants". Mentors benefitted from learning from other mentors' expertise and experience, as team teachers do ([Laughlin et al., 2011](#)).

In large organizations, leaders may face challenges to developing cross-divisional awareness. Joint mentoring helped broaden awareness. For example, Gary observed that having "4 mentors in the group was a good opportunity to get the perspectives of the other mentors who were directors in very different areas". These mentors used their own real-time projects as case studies, which helped all team members gain an understanding of the organization's operations. This learning could inform the mentors' subsequent business decisions and identify improvement opportunities in cross-division processes. Group mentoring creates opportunities for mentors to gain deeper understanding of the organization overall ([Carvin, 2011](#)).

Co-mentoring did not work well for all mentors. When mentors on a team did not pull their weight, they became liabilities to others, as, Aniston, a senior leader and highly regarded mentor, argued:

Having joint mentors doesn't work. I had two other mentors in the group [who] didn't do very much. I did the bulk of the work. I would prefer to just be the mentor [and] wouldn't have had to corral the other mentors.

Aniston's co-mentors were also senior leaders whose availability was limited and often changed on short notice. In these circumstances, scheduling preparation and mentoring meetings was virtually impossible. This situation created extra work for Aniston as she tried to work around their schedules. In the end, she delivered the program largely without their help.

Lack of full participation by all mentors on a team may be attributable to extrinsic barriers like heavy workloads or shifting priorities in work assignments, or by intrinsic barriers like lack of commitment (Brown and McCracken, 2009). Joint mentoring requires additional preparation time (Billett, 2003). Because mentors were nominated by their supervisors, they may not have felt free to refuse the assignment and, thus, may not have been fully committed.

Program supports for mentors

Co-mentoring requires extra time to plan, set curriculum, define roles and deal with emerging problems (Billett, 2003; Laughlin *et al.*, 2011). Support is essential to helping mentors manage this additional workload and to recognize their contributions (Billett, 2003; Carvin, 2011; Gibson *et al.*, 2000). The interviewees spoke of the need for solid support, suggesting that offering mentor development opportunities throughout the program would acknowledge their contributions as well as continually engage them.

The mentors were satisfied with the program support. All found the orientation sessions invaluable. These sessions described the program design, rationale, meeting and learning objectives, mentor and mentee roles and responsibilities, effective mentoring practices, how to prepare for and host the meetings and how to support a group of mentees. The orientation was facilitated by an experienced mentor who modeled delivery of the sessions and was delivered through teleconferencing and Web conferencing to provide mentors with a firsthand experience of learning through technology.

After the orientation, a program support person was assigned to provide ongoing support to each mentoring group. As Kyla noted, "Whenever we needed assistance [...] [the program support person was] always available. I never felt that I was thrown out to the wolves". Similar to Carvin (2011), this study confirmed that providing consistent and ongoing support to mentors is essential to enabling them to effectively deliver the program, which could affect their desire to mentor in the future.

Discussion and conclusions

This case study investigated a many-to-many group mentoring program in a government setting. It described the design of the program and mentees' and mentors' satisfaction and experiences. Despite extreme organizational churn, the program successfully met its stated objectives to address staff, team and organizational learning needs. It also fostered relationships that crossed divisional and geographical barriers, which increased knowledge sharing throughout and across the organization (Economides, 2008; Friday and Friday, 2002), passing on key organizational knowledge as large numbers of employees near retirement (Kranz, 2010).

Some mentors committed to the program out of a desire to have dialogues with staff who shared their interests and passions, consistent with [Potter *et al.* \(2009\)](#). The mentors also learned from mentees and other mentors, as did those in [Bell \(2000\)](#) and [Anderson \(2003\)](#). Similar to [Zasloff and Okurowski \(2012\)](#), several mentors gained understanding of current practices and workplace situations, and others reported a new appreciation for other generations' ways of approaching work.

The relational aspect of group mentoring was apparent in this study. The participants developed "growth-fostering relationships", which result in mutual development ([Hammer *et al.*, 2014](#), p. 6). Of particular interest was mentors' sharing of personal stories. Although story-sharing was noted as a mentoring technique "to pass on organizational culture and standards" ([Parkin, 2004](#), p. 128), in this study, mentors' stories created an emotional connection between the mentors and mentees that powerfully enhanced engagement and learning. This finding reveals that mentors' story-sharing would be a rich area for further exploration.

A limitation in this research was its primary focus on positive perspectives. Our participants were highly active mentors, which excluded those who were not fully engaged. Considering that some mentors did not participate fully on their teams, including these voices might have yielded rich data on the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to their participation ([Brown and McCracken, 2009](#)). Similarly, 13 per cent of mentees reported that they did not benefit from the group mentoring program. Examining their experiences might have yielded insights into how to make the program more effective for this group. Further study is needed to understand the dynamics of disengagement.

Several issues emerged that impacted the effectiveness of the program. Participation was an issue for mentees, who reported both intrinsic (e.g. disengagement) and extrinsic factors (e.g. other work priorities or lack of supervisor support). To benefit from the group mentoring program, mentees must actively participate, which means not just "attending" meetings or "lurking" but engaging in discussions and assignments. Those who did not participate regularly and fully negatively affected the learning of the group. Consequently, those implementing such a program may wish to implement a process for removing such mentees from the group. Similarly, some mentors did not contribute fully to their mentoring teams. Collaborative activities, like team mentoring, require support for establishing productive team relationships ([Eisen and Tisdell, 2000](#)). While the program support team oriented mentors and offered support throughout the program, they did not directly support team formation and performance. Team performance support could help mentor teams learn to work better together. The issues underlying low participation are varied and complex and merit more study.

The use of various technologies in different groups provided insights into which technologies promoted engagement, with teleconferencing alone being least effective and the use of Web conferencing and collaboration technologies being most effective. Mentors should be encouraged or required to deliver the program using an effective combination of technologies. This would require training and ongoing support to enable them to use these effectively, and it may require changes to mentor selection criteria to include a willingness to learn and use technologies.

The program provided several advantages over classroom or online training. First, group mentoring is less expensive than formal training ([Emelo, 2011a, 2011b](#)). Second, despite extreme organizational churn, the program delivered effective and engaging

learning for a large number of people, which argues for the program's ability to stay relevant, despite changing priorities, directions and staff movement. Third, the mentees' learning, based on mentors' personal stories, and current organizational projects and challenges, required little translation for application to the workplace because the cultural and systems issues were already embedded in the case studies and stories. Finally, the use of in-house talent as mentors provided job enrichment as well as opportunities for re-engagement for long-term employees and inspiration for mentees. A well-planned and supported group mentoring program can offer responsive, relevant and personal learning to mentees and mentors.

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