

Do I need a mentor?

You might already be thriving in your current role and climbing the career ladder at lightning speed, still a mentor can add significant value. A mentor may not be the sole catalyst for every person's career progression or success, those without one are however missing out on the potential to achieve more.

“Having a mentor allows you to build confidence, learn new skills, brainstorm ideas and build stronger networks.”

No matter age or background, everyone needs a mentor at some stage in their life. Mentoring varies as career direction changes and self-confidence increases. Unlike coaching, which is task-oriented, mentoring is relationship-oriented and more about developing self-confidence and achieving a work/life balance over the long-term.

Students can benefit immensely from the confidence a mentor can provide the mentee. Often the mentor can see what the mentee can't. They can spot strengths that the mentee don't notice. A mentor can also encourage the mentee and give them confidence to apply for roles and projects that they may not have had the confidence for before having a mentor.

Mentoring is particularly beneficial for young people as they often face more barriers than experienced professionals, are balancing competing priorities and unconscious bias, and have less exposure to senior management. A mentor can also help with understanding corporate politics and protocol.

How do I get a mentor?

Business leaders often name their mentors as an integral part of their success. Sir Richard Branson, has regularly attributed the success of Virgin Atlantic to his business mentor, Sir Freddie Laker. US President Barack Obama has referred to Frank Marshall Davis, who was introduced to him by his grandfather at a young age, as a key influence. A mentor – defined as a wise or trusted adviser – can have a considerable impact on your career path and the level of success you achieve. But how exactly do you find a mentor and ensure that they're the right person for you?

An Individual Approach

People often find mentors informally through friends and family, colleagues or superiors. If you haven't found anyone suitable, you can begin your own search, through researching and networking, or ask us at Dream Internship to help you.

There's more to finding a mentor than simply strolling up to your industry idol at an event and asking them to give up their time for you. You can't just go up to someone. You need to build relationships. If you approach people who don't have the time, without building a relationship first, most of the time the answer will be no, it is also important to first understand your career direction.

Be targeted in your approach and take the time to understand where you are going [in your career] so that you can be strategic about what kind of person should mentor you. Take time to research possible mentors and then make a priority list. Determining who ends up on that list, involves a combination of observation and referral, as well as consideration of position and personality. Look for someone who believes in you and what you want to achieve. That someone can be male or female, from any industry.

“You can get a sense of a person’s character when meeting them, so choose someone who has a character that is compatible with yours but has more experience than you.”

While industry and gender don’t matter, many students tend to be attracted to mentors who reflect where they’re at in their life, such as professionals who are or who have recently faced a challenge similar to theirs. It can be valuable for women to have male mentors and vice versa.

“Men have a different perspective than women and sometimes it makes perfect sense to look at things from the other side of the fence.”

Once you have found the right person, get to know them. And when you ask them to mentor you, set the agenda right from the start, including the time commitment involved. Explain that you admire their work and would like to learn from them. Ask for no more than an hour of their time every month, or every two weeks, at times convenient to them or by phone. Explain what you are looking for, why you feel you need a mentor and how you believe they could help you.

Structured Mentoring Programs

If you haven’t found a mentor, there are plenty of structured programs offering access to professional mentors tailored to your industry and needs. A structured program offers the most immediate benefits in that there is a fixed term and a number of meetings required within that term.

“There is usually a structure around the program in that group meetings are organised, as well as your mentee meetings, so the networking is fantastic. There is also a definite end to the program so you are likely to get a very high calibre of mentor who has a vested interest in providing you value through the mentoring term.”

Whether people choose to find a mentor through non-formal means or by paying someone through a structured program depends on the individual. It’s about choice. It depends on where they are and what funds they have, people can use a mix of both.

“Some will be more involved than others, but all will meet a specific need. I highly recommend paying for a mentor within a structured program, as there is an expectation set on the number of meetings, homework and outcomes. The mentor has set aside time to meet with the mentee on a regular basis and is prepared to make time for them”.

Why Mentoring benefits the mentors too!

There are plenty of benefits to the mentor. Mentoring is an excellent opportunity to understand what makes younger generations tick, especially the elusive Generation Y. Reverse-mentoring enables mentors to learn about emerging technologies, such as social media, in nuanced ways. For instance how we can reach younger generations through social media without being patronising. Mentoring a younger person offers a highly valuable goldmine of market research to tap into.

It's important for all leaders and managers to stay in touch. Mentoring someone from outside your organisation is a healthy opportunity for constructive reflection about your management style. Why not use the opportunity to workshop hypothetical scenarios with your mentee and genuinely take on board the value of a fresh perspective, often lacking in ivory towers and highly hierarchical organisations.

Mentoring is renowned for its capacity to build networks and spot future talent. Today's graduate may well be tomorrow's powerful executive or future client, accompanied by a powerful network of contacts. Mentoring sews the seeds for future professional relationships and generates personal referrals based on trust and goodwill – now that's advertising money can't buy!

Mentoring someone can be a highly rewarding experience in an altruistic sense. I have had the privilege and pleasure of mentoring a number of young students over the past 15 years, especially through Dream Internship Mentoring Programs. To watch a young student develop self-confidence and grow in ability is a wonderful pay-off for the time and effort spent mentoring them.

Mentoring need not be laborious or take up much of your time. I've found a monthly or quarterly face-to-face catch-up, with intermittent emails in between, to work very well. Above all, a genuine, shared commitment by both parties is the key to a successful mentoring relationship. The benefits for mentors are potentially just as lucrative as they are for mentees.

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