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## **Chapter 6**

### **Mentoring: Bridging the Generational and Career Divide**

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Mentoring has always been recognized as a valuable tool in the business world. It serves the interests of organizations in a multitude of ways. Mentoring has been used as a means to retain valuable knowledge and to increase both employee satisfaction and employee retention. For example, it is an excellent way to ensure that all team members feel committed to the organization which ultimately aids in the competition for talent (Cranwell-Ward, Bossons, and Gover et al., 2004). Also, in the current environment marked by the exit of the large baby-boom generation from the workforce, mentoring has been suggested as a way of guaranteeing that critical knowledge is preserved in the workplace (DeLong, 2004).

In this analysis I contend that mentoring is more crucial than ever to organizations today given recent career-pattern upheaval and demographic change. These two factors are often acknowledged human resource issues in terms of recruiting and retention, and mentoring is a vital aspect in dealing with them. Among its numerous benefits for individual employees and organizations, mentoring can be used as a tool to help deal with career-management issues and generational diversity. For example, with respect to careers, mentoring is of great importance in dealing with the changing psychological contract and the absence of life-long jobs (Cranwell-Ward et al., 2004). Also, the use of mentoring has been recommended to improve cross-generational communication (Sabattini, Warren, Dinolfo, Falk, and Castro, 2010).

The importance of mentoring to organizations has received considerable attention among scholars. However, what is missing from the mentoring literature is a recognition of the relationship between career change and generational diversity and it is this gap that I seek to address in this analysis. Mentoring is discussed here in the context of work relationships, specifically in terms of changing career dynamics and generational diversity. Mentoring is characterized as a dynamic process in a learning partnership where the unique relationship is reciprocal yet somewhat asymmetrical (Eby, Rhodes, and Allen, 2010). A further objective is to demonstrate that this learning process is ideally suited to the inter-related issues of career management and generational diversity.

In terms of organization of this analysis, I begin by discussing generational issues. What are generations and why is this issue of generational diversity so important today? Then I summarize changes in career patterns in the postwar period, specifically addressing the overlooked relationship between generational groups and career patterns. Finally, I discuss some examples of how mentoring can help deal with career management and generational diversity. I conclude that specific, goal-oriented mentoring programs are ideally suited to deal with the inter-related issues of career pattern change and generational conflict.

### **Generational-Diversity Issues**

The sense of generation has been heightened in the postwar period. In this section I use demographic terms to define generations, in the sense of age-based cohorts drawn from boom and bust cycles in fertility. I present why the issue of generational diversity is so important in the workforce today and argue that mentoring is needed to deal with this diversity.

Trovato (2009) noted that every member of a population belongs to a birth cohort who generally experiences formative life-course events and transitions at similar times. For example, members of birth cohorts tend to encounter similar conditions and circumstances, including important events such as graduation, entry into the labour force, marriage, or home ownership. Thus a cohort experiences similar conditions at similar life-cycle stages as it moves through its lifetime, and it is this sharing of events that sets off a cohort (Trovato, 2009). A cohort's shared

experiences (e.g., living through a war or a major economic depression) may create unique sentiments and even a unique world-view among its members that the members of other cohorts may find difficult to appreciate. For example, the baby boom generation has been said to be responsible for the counterculture movement of the 1960s (Trovato, 2009). There has been some recent discussion in the media of how the so-called great recession of 2007-2008 and its aftermath will affect younger people living after that event (e.g., the baby-boom echo group).

The sense of belonging to a generation has become heightened over the post-war period due to a number of factors. Owram (1996) asserted that society's post-war school experience became more universal with people's regular school attendance and their more prolonged period of education. Taken together these factors meant that the sense of peer group (here beginning with the post-war baby boomers) was accentuated, and as a result, individuals' daily contact with people of differing ages and experiences tended to be postponed. At this time there tended to be a prolongation of youth where the transitional period of youth that individuals passed through became elongated.

Ricard (1994) asserted that people did not always define themselves in terms of age groups. He noted that demographic equilibrium or the distribution of age groups is usually so stable that the influence of generations is barely perceptible. He described the post-war baby boom as a profound upheaval, and defined it as the rapid and sustained increase in the number and rate of births that took place in Canada and in some other countries after World War II. Today the demographic or cohort factor influences individuals' identity as people come to regard their generation as a fundamental aspect of themselves. Ricard (1994) stated that age has become a new source of division between groups, and that this division determines in large part the nature of relationships between different cohorts.

To further understand these demographic cycles, one could refer to the concept of fertility, defined as the average number of children that a woman has. Boom groups make up a large cohort associated with increases in fertility rates or a large supply of babies. Bust groups, in contrast, are smaller cohorts associated with a decrease in fertility or a smaller supply of babies. Generational influences include the formative experiences mentioned above, as well as the size of the cohort that will have an effect on a group. Boom groups, for example, face greater within-group crowding and competition, because their members overwhelm school systems in their youth, compete for jobs and housing in adulthood, and eventually crowd seniors' homes in their later years.

A particularly large boom group can cause upheaval or shock to society's institutions by virtue of its generational size. One such cohort is the post-war baby-boom group, which was a defining demographic feature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Owram (1996) described the large post-war baby boom cohort as a generation that has the effect of a shock wave, forcing adjustments on society's institutions. Ricard (1994) even referred to the baby boom group as cataclysmic in terms of its effect on society. Bust groups, on the other hand, often face more favourable conditions in terms of lessened within-group competition.

After postponed fertility throughout the 1930s Depression and WWII periods, the most significant baby boom occurred over the two post-war decades. Consisting of people born from 1947 to 1966, this cohort comprises approximately one-third of the Canadian population (Foot, 1996), and is commonly referred to as the boomers despite the fact that there were several boom groups born during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The post-war boom was preceded and followed by bust groups. The next bust group was born from 1967-1979. The boom group born from 1980 to 1995 is often referred to as the "baby-boom echo" or "baby boomlet," because they were the children

of the post-war baby boomers. The latter boom is not as large or as prolonged as their parents' group. To place this concept of generations in terms of the workplace: today's workforce is mainly comprised of these three demographic cohorts or generations: baby boom, baby bust, and baby-boom echo. Most of the preceding baby bust (i.e., the Depression and WWII bust) have moved out of the labour force through retirement, although some of its youngest members may still be working.

The factor of generational diversity in the workforce has received much attention from scholars. For example, Lancaster and Stillman (2002, 2010) and Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000) discussed how to deal with the different values and expectations of these diverse generations in the workplace. Zemke et al. acknowledged that there have always been multiple generations employed in the same organization; however, they also indicated that in the past these cohorts were largely sequestered from each other due to traditional organizational stratification and structure. For example, middle-aged employees were most likely in mid-management positions and older employees were in command positions. Generational mixing was not common in past workplaces, where formality and protocol were the rule. Today, however, because of new technologies and the increased focus on team-based approaches in most workplaces, different generations and age groups have begun to interact and work together more than ever before. Yet, at the same time, Lancaster and Stillman (2002) made the point that multiple generations in today's workplace also have wider attitudinal and value gaps than ever before due to the accelerated pace of change. They further suggested that these gaps are of greater strategic importance to organizations in terms of recruitment, retention, and succession policies.

Zemke et al. (2000) also noted that today's information-centred workplaces have become more horizontal (i.e., showing trends towards fewer hierarchical levels due to de-layering and/or removing mid-management positions) and spatially compact, leading to greater opportunities for generational mixing. They postulated that diversity can be a source of creativity as well as a source of conflict. Sabattini et al. (2010) discussed the challenges of integrating a multi-generational workforce as a form of workforce diversity. These researchers referred to such challenges as a relatively new and under-developed aspect of workplace life. At the same time, there has been a corresponding growth of interest in the process of mentoring in organizations as a viable means of dealing with these intergenerational differences.

Generational workshops or training seminars have been relatively recent additions in the workplace (see Belkin, 2007; Silverman, 2007). These seminars are meant to teach the members of the workforce about the younger incoming workers, in order to be proactive in dealing with any potential generational conflict between/among groups. The learning process is also meant to enhance mutuality, whereby each generation will learn about the other(s). The use of mentoring has proven useful in bringing together the different generations.

### **Career Pattern Changes**

What is sometimes missing from discussions of mentoring, however, is any analysis of how career patterns have evolved since the end of WWII. More importantly there is a lack of recognition of the connection between generations and career pattern change. In this section I will begin with a discussion of career change in the post-war period, followed by linking this change to generational groups, and ending with the importance of career mentoring.

It has been well established that careers in the post-war period have changed considerably beginning in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Egan, 1994). During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there appears to have been a career divide or schism that began in the late 1970s

and early 1980s. The immediate post-war period has been depicted as a period of unparalleled prosperity, marked by a steady rise in the standard of living and an acceleration of technological development (Ricard, 1994). The stable career patterns of the early post-war decades came to be viewed as the norm during that time, although those careers evolved during a period of economic buoyancy and muted competition in North America. Betcherman and Lowe (1997) further speculated that future historians would characterize the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a period when North America struggled with the transition from a long and prosperous post-war period of industrialism to a new post-industrial age. During the 1980s with the rise in global competition, industry entered a period of restructuring and downsizing (Craig and Hall, 2006). Though there was an initial expectation of a return to normalcy, in terms of business and career patterns, it became apparent that firms would be in some form of continual transition, and that stable career patterns would be the exception rather than the norm.

In her book, *The Death of the Organization Man*, Bennett (1990) documented the change in careers after the end of the post-war golden age. The one-company-for-life philosophy essentially developed out of the three-decade-long heady growth period following WWII. During that extraordinary period of post-war expansion, North America went through a period of rapid organizational growth in which there was a disproportionate increase in white-collar and middle-management jobs, and in which employees enjoyed stable and often promotion-centred careers (Bardwick, 1986). With the shortage of experienced managers, low unemployment, and muted competition during that period, many corporations in North America focused on keeping their employees within their firms (Bennett, 1990). Employees were hired at entry level, trained, and groomed for lifetime employment at one workplace through internal job markets (see Cappelli, 2006). Cappelli (2008) referred to those types of long career ladders and low rates of turnover as the golden age for talent management.

Life-long stable career patterns of the early post-war decades have given way to less stable and more varied career patterns, organizational de-layering and downsizing, creeping credentialism, and life-long learning as issues. For example, Leana (2002) pointed out that being with a single firm matters less now, in that most employees will work for a greater number of employers with shorter periods of tenure over the course of their careers. Cappelli (2006) also documented how modern careers have broken the attachment between employer and employee that was observed in previous generations. Thus, a major change in workplace life has been the switch to external from internal hiring and the decline in job tenure.

What often goes unnoticed is the interaction effect between the previously discussed demographic cohorts and their career patterns. A crucial point here is that career patterns and cohorts went hand in hand. It was mentioned in an earlier section that small cohorts typically have better access to jobs and employment opportunities (Trovato, 2009). Of course a major factor affecting these demographic boom and bust groups is the economy which in turn will affect their labour force experiences. In fact, interaction effects between demographic and economic factors also help account for career pattern changes in the post-war period. This trend especially applied to the Depression baby bust, who entered the labour force during a period when the economy underwent rapid growth with intense demand for workers. For that smaller cohort the situation presented a fortuitous combination of circumstances (Trovato, 2009). I refer to these busters as being doubly blessed, because they formed a small labour force which was in high demand during buoyant economic times.

In contrast, the larger post-war baby-boom cohort were raised during a prosperous period with high aspirations, yet they faced challenging economic conditions after the late 1970s with

more tenuous job and career prospects that produced an unfavourable conjunction of demographic and economic conditions (Trovato, 2009). The influx of the larger baby boom cohort into the labour force occurred during a period of increased global competition coupled with technological change, which together led to the elimination of many entry-level and mid-management jobs (see Bardwick, 1986; Bennett, 1990). While strong service-sector job growth helped the front-end boomers, job saturation was especially felt by the post-peak or tail end of the larger baby-boom generation (see Gaudet, 2007). In contrast with the Depression busters who were doubly blessed before them, some members of the baby boom were in a sense doubly cursed, by virtue of being part of a larger generation during a period of economic and career-pattern upheaval.

The study of career patterns revealed dramatic change beginning in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Driver, 1985). The two career patterns most prevalent in the immediate post-war decades had been the steady-state career (a stable career path with a life-long commitment to a profession) and the linear career (climbing a promotion-centred ladder within a tall organizational hierarchy). However, the two career patterns more prevalent today are the spiral and the transitory patterns (see Foot & Venne, 1990). The spiral career involves a moderate number of changes in occupation over a number of firms. The transitory pattern has the most variation with frequent occupational change and lateral mobility. These latter two career patterns involved employees being in charge of their more varied careers, having less internal job markets, and having increased demand for education. If careers in the earlier post-war period could be characterized as paddling a canoe down a slow-flowing stream, careers today are more likely to be compared to white-water rafting down a thundering river with numerous rapids and turns along the way.

One notable change in career management, today, is that increasingly the work environment has shifted the responsibility of an individual's career from the organization to the self (Venneberg & Eversole, 2010). In the immediate post-war decades, it was the organization that decided who would move to what job in order to serve the needs of the firm, because the individual had little choice in the matter (Cappelli 2006). Lancaster and Stillman (2002) referred to career changes as the difference between job security and career security. The former was where depression/WWII busters and early boomers worked their way up the career ladder of a lifetime-employment firm, and the latter was where mid-to-late boomers, current busters, and the echo build their expertise and guide their careers, themselves. Individual employees are now told that one's growth and career are one's personal responsibility (see Egan, 1994). Career mentoring and management has moved from being rigid or heavy handed under the old career patterns to being non-existent at many firms, today. Thus, Cranwell-Ward et al. (2004) noted that mentoring today is needed more than ever because employees need guidance navigating their careers through the changing psychological contract. I explore the importance of mentoring with respect to careers and generational diversity in the following section.

### **An Emerging Model of Mentoring**

In this section I provide examples of how mentoring can be used to deal with changing career patterns and generational diversity. The benefits of mentoring are crucial to organizations as they navigate the changing psychological contract and an emerging model of career management. Also mentoring can improve cross-generational communication and alleviate conflict between cohorts in the workplace.

Cappelli (2008) observed that the shift in career management has gone from the traditional model, in which career plans were managed entirely for the employer's interests; then to a

situation of no planning and no help occurred, in which employees were on their own; and now to an emerging model, in which employers seek to help employees figure out their career interests. This latter model uses processes of mentoring and career coaching. It increases employee engagement and retention while decreasing uncertainty, which is especially important with today's tighter labour markets. In essence the employee is given more of a sense of control.

Firms that provide career-development guidance through mentoring have the benefit of developing human assets for the firm. Mentoring aids in the retention of valued employees by seeking to create a bond and enhancing job satisfaction (Harvard Business Essentials, 2004). For example Lancaster and Stillman (2002) found in their research that over 40% of Xers (current busters) reported that having a mentor directly influenced their decision to stay at their current company. Mentoring was found to be in demand, because two-thirds of employees in their survey complained of a lack of mentoring in their careers. DeLong (2004) provided an example of one firm's career development program that helped to reduce attrition; and Dougherty, Turban, and Haggard (2010) reported that those employees who were mentored enjoyed greater career success.

Another important function of mentoring is to help transfer important tacit knowledge from one set of employees to another. This area relates to career pattern change as well as to generational diversity, because the transfer is usually from older to younger employees from different cohorts with dissimilar career experiences. Mentoring has also been suggested as a way to deal with the exit of the large baby-boom generation from the workforce. DeLong (2004) predicted that many organizations will be overwhelmed with threats of lost knowledge due largely to baby-boomer retirements over the next few years. He described mentoring as one of the most effective ways of directly transferring critical, implicit and tacit work-related knowledge from one person to another. Mentoring can support the sharing of the broadest range of knowledge from detailed technical skills and tacit cultural values all the way to career development advice. However, he acknowledged that certain barriers exist to mentoring in dealing with knowledge transfer between the generations.

Training of both mentors and protégés and creating effective infrastructure to support mentoring are essential to ensuring that critical knowledge is passed on. Furthermore, in mentoring relationships where there is specific knowledge transfer from more senior to more junior employees, DeLong (2004) recommended adequate two-way interaction between mentors and protégés, and training should involve encouraging this interchange. In terms of generational diversity and mentoring, Erickson (2008) was one of the most sanguine of the experts. She identified the close relationships that the baby-boom echo cohort has with their parents and expects that these relationships will transfer to their baby boomer colleagues. In effect she noted that echos are happy to be mentored and feel comfortable with their parental-aged colleagues. Indeed, Scandura (2002) discussed the mentor role as a balance between parent and peer. Regarding the demand for mentoring, Lancaster and Stillman (2010) indicated that the younger generation was in search of mentors, because they have been coached all their lives. In her optimistic book Erickson (2008) noted that the younger cohorts have been accustomed to team learning and are comfortable working with boomers. She also suggested that the mentoring relationship is collaborative in that it has the dual benefit of re-engaging mid-career or late-career workers (the mentors), while boosting the organizational know-how of less experienced employees (the protégés or mentees). Mentoring as a two-way street is a recurring theme among experts.

Other scholars were not as optimistic as Erickson regarding how the generations interact in the workplace. Delong (2004) characterized the baby boomers as highly competitive and anxious to gain respect for their experiences and achievements. Important ingredients for effective knowledge transfer are trust, mutual respect, and specific training in mentoring. Both Lancaster and Stillman (2010) and Delong (2004) further suggested that another key factor was to reassure older workers that fear of losing one's value by sharing expertise with younger colleagues is an almost universal emotion in organizations, today, and that they should rather see themselves as unique possessors and important contributors of accumulated wisdom. Generational knowledge and sensitivity training for all members of the organization would help everyone deal effectively with generational diversity and with the facilitation of the mentoring relationship (Zemke et al., 2000).

There are numerous examples of how mentoring can bring the generations together and aid in career management in workplaces today. For instance, Lancaster and Stillman (2002) described a non-profit program called *Women across Generations* that encouraged cross-generational mentoring. Such programs placed a value on generational diversity, which they considered to be diversity at its finest. One example involved a program in the state of California in which retired state employees returned to the workplace on a part-time basis to serve as mentors and to ensure that their expertise and wisdom were passed on to the upcoming cadre.

Another example involved the 3M mentoring program whereby one high-level director was paired with several younger employees from outside his or her reporting structure. This mentoring program enhanced generational understanding, in that the director (usually a baby boomer) taught the busters or echo boomers "the unwritten rules" regarding 3M's culture, while the mentor also heard the perspectives and ideas of younger employees. Another innovative program, called *Two-in-a-Box*, partnered older and younger engineers. The program was designed to deal with preventing lost knowledge, and had the added benefit of improving retention of those who shared key information (older engineers), as well as those receiving the information (younger engineers). That is, both groups realized the value of sharing their respective bodies of knowledge in a two-way fashion as the younger was also able to share their own thoughts as well.

There are also examples of the two-way benefits of so-called reverse mentoring. Sabattini et al. (2010:7) described a bank's program of reverse mentoring (referred to as *Engaging Generational Differences*) where senior leaders were paired with junior employees to cultivate opportunities to educate senior employees about diversity, provide visibility to junior employees, and improve cross-generational communication. Lancaster and Stillman (2010) found that reverse mentoring could be used to enhance the younger employees' skill sets, which in turn resulted in increased understanding of generational differences among all sub-groups. Another benefit of reverse mentoring involved younger members teaching technical skills to older workplace members. Though research on the benefits of mentoring for the mentor had been minimal, Ramaswami and Dreher (2010) asserted that awareness of generational differences and knowledge of the latest trends in one's field were two observed benefits for mentors. Cranwell-Ward et al. (2004) concluded that although mentoring may offer challenges for both mentor and protégé, alike, it was a good way to ensure that all team members feel committed to the organization, a fact which would ultimately aid in the competition for talent.

### **Concluding Comments**

As with any workplace program, the best interventions are purposeful or strategic. So organizations need to determine why they need a mentoring program, what goals they have for

the program and what success will look like (Tardy, 2011). In this chapter I have proposed mentoring programs as a bridge to the generational and career divide. With these twin goals in mind, a successful mentoring program would result in lessened generational conflict and successful career management resulting in high levels of employee engagement and a strong retention rate for the organization. Other measures of achievement might include the successful transfer of knowledge from the older to the younger generation of workers.

In terms of dealing with career management and generational diversity, mentoring can prove to be a valuable tool. Savickas (2010) highlighted the seismic shift of the new boundary-less career with its repeated transitions, and identified mentoring as the prime form of career assistance in the information age. Zemke et al. (2000) noted that generational-friendly workplaces allow for accommodation of employee differences, and for creation of workplace choice in terms of careers that are no longer regimented. Mentoring has been shown to enhance generational understanding and to help ensure that diversity is a benefit rather than a source of conflict. The use of mentoring in the modern workplace, when applied strategically and purposefully with appropriate resources (e.g., training) can be highly effective in dealing with the related concerns of career change and generational diversity.

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