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Mentoring: the knowledge transfer partnership experience in the University of Wolverhampton Business School.

Working paper

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Abstract

Knowledge transfer partnerships (ktps), numbering over 100 in the UK, form the background to this paper. Benefits of the partnerships are noted as follows: to the British economy, to the participating company, to the associate or trainee employee and to the University that manages the programmes. Mentoring theory and continuing professional development (cpd) are mentioned, though not extensively. The lead author has developed the unique role of the ktp mentor. The focus is on the mentor's assistance made available to the associate. Two key strengths, checked with present associates, are identified. The first strength is the utterly confidential nature of the process of mentoring. The second strength is the absence of involvement in the day to day running of any partnership. The mentor is outside the formal management structure, not even taking part in selecting suitable associates. The mentor assists in cpd, in identifying skills, personal strengths and weaknesses, and towards the end of the contract in exploring career options with the associate. At all times the autonomy of the associate is respected. The authors conclude that the mentoring role is valuable well received and that it will continue, building on the key strengths noted above.

Introduction to the knowledge transfer partnership role

The Knowledge Transfer Partnership initiative provides small businesses and entrepreneurs with direct access to information and knowledge is of primary importance in facilitating their growth and development. Knowledge is a highly valuable asset. The Knowledge Transfer Partnership (ktp) is a UK Government initiative, introduced in 2003. The Aim of ktps is to strengthen the competitiveness and wealth creation of the UK by the stimulation of innovation in business through collaborative partnerships with the UK knowledge base. Therefore, staff from research organisations gain ideas and business support for further research and consultancies and deepen collaborations with developing businesses. Building upon these aims, the specific objectives of ktps are to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and the spread of technical and management skills and encourage investment in training, research and development. Programmes are designed to provide business based training, supervised jointly by personnel in the knowledge base and in business, for high calibre graduates intending to pursue a career in industry. The common feature of all members of this group is an involvement in the practical implementation of innovation and the management of change. These innovations may involve the application of any area or combinations of areas of engineering, technology management, or business/social science and partners are encouraged to network and share experiences through participation in workshops, seminars and conferences.

Fundamentally, expertise from a university, college or research organization is deployed into a company for a pre-agreed period of up to three years, to address an identified problem or opportunity which is at a strategic level. From a business context this could be to increase the company's profitability through improving existing products; developing new products; streamlining a manufacturing process; improving logistics processes; or developing a business or marketing strategy.

There are more than 1000 ktps operating within the UK across a full range of industry sectors and business sizes. Over a 100 organizations are involved in the implementation of innovation and the management of change. These innovations may involve the application of any area or combinations of areas of engineering, technology, management, or business/social science. Partners are encouraged to network through participation in workshops, seminars and conferences.

The process is initiated through the submission of an application which is scrutinised by a team from Momenta now working under the new Technology Strategy Board (TSB) and if successful funds are allocated to the project. The company has to make an annual contribution to the project, the rest of the funds being allocated through grant aid from Momenta and an indirect contribution from the TSB towards the partner's overheads.

To create a successful ktp programme, a local management committee (LMC) is formed, comprising at least two academic supervisors, with one as the lead supervisor, an industrial supervisor (from the company partner) and a representative from Momenta. The LMC recruits a high calibre graduate, usually with a first class degree. The graduate

is known as an associate. The LMC meets quarterly on a formal basis throughout the duration of the programme.

The associate is expected to follow a course of academic study as part of personal fast track development, and Momenta also provides specific learning opportunities through a series of training modules. In addition, funds are available for associate development which can be used for specific informal or formal learning requirements.

At the end of the project, a final report is compiled which documents the outcomes of the ktp with reference to performance and effective knowledge transfer, against the specific goals documented in the application. The performance of the project is subsequently graded, which provides an accurate measure of improvements in capability.

The unique mentoring role provided by the University of Wolverhampton

Uniquely, ktps in the University of Wolverhampton include the role of a mentor. The mentor stands outside the line management role, taking no direct role in the development of an associate's work, and deliberately not being involved in attending any LMC meetings. Instead the mentor is available as required by the associate. The mentor never participates in the selection of associates. Currently the mentoring role operates predominantly internally, but in one case the mentor has assisted in a programme run by a different University. From the mentor's perspective, the key characteristic of the process is its confidential nature. Notes, if taken, are destroyed. Only contact details are held electronically about the associate or the company.

Transferable skills

The mentor, and lead author here, values the work of Pedler Burgoyne and Boydell in the regularly revised 'Manager's guide to self development'. 'With more than 50 practical self contained activities to help develop your management potential' (Pedler 2007, front cover) the book is a self instruction course for the associate to follow, in identifying and developing skills that could be taken out of the immediate work context for a different job in the same company or elsewhere. Activities and skills that the mentor can help develop include a Personal Journal, Communication Tools, and Political Awareness. The decision to use the exercises rests with the associate, with autonomy respected. Through these exercises, awareness of personal strengths can come and areas for improvement can be discovered, with times for reflection. The process can be used to look at career options as the associate comes to the end of the contract.

However from the few associates interviewed, the concept of the mentoring role covering transferable skills has been rejected.

Some views on mentoring

Mentoring has a number of definitions due to its operation in various organisational and national cultures (Clutterbuck 2004, 11). It can variously be seen as coaching, counselling or 'a kind of godfather relationship' (ibid)

The definitions below can be used to sum up the scope for the ktp context.

Firstly, a mentor provides 'an experienced, objective sounding-board with the power to influence events' (Conway 1995 in Clutterbuck 2004, 12). This definition might project an image of the mentee as being subordinate, but the essentially the mentor is objective, out of any organisation loop, with a separate job outside the mentee's organisation, and with some capacity to intervene, with the agreement of the mentee. The power balance is equal. The associate, the mentee, in the ktp system is entitled not to take up the mentor's suggestions.

The mentor is not a coach. Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005, 4) provide two definitions. To them, coaching 'relates primarily to performance improvement (often over the short term) in a specific skills area'. Mentoring 'relates primarily to the identification and nurturing of potential for the whole person. It can be a long-term relationship, where the goals may change but are always set by the learner. The learner owns both the goals and the process.'

The second definition comes from Megginson and Clutterbuck 1995, quoted in Clutterbuck (2004, 12). Mentoring is 'offline help from one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking'. It is perhaps in the last of those three aspects that the scheme works best. The knowledge and work within the company are sector and company specific and form the main work and contribution of the associate. The thinking dependent on the first two can be broad and wide, with the mentor consultant trying to isolate, identify and develop skills transferable to other areas of employment, or to help the associate focus within a particular sector of employment. So the mentor helps to explore more generic skills, such as self expression and presentation skills, as well as enabling the associate to identify the desired employment within a sector. In doing all these activities the mentor encourages the associate to contribute to the present employing organisation – thinking with and in the company about product or service development.

The third definition is from Mumford and Gold (2004, 187) using the work of Mumford 1993, 103. Mentoring is seen as 'a protected relationship in which experimentation, exchange and learning can occur and skills, knowledge and insight can be developed'. Learning is the core rationale for the whole framework. From the specific ktp context, it is the nature of the protection offered which is important. Protection is implicit in the roles described below. Both Clutterbuck, and Mumford and Gold, clearly separate mentoring from its American versions which carry assumptions about managerial performance with the mentee as subordinate.

There are four roles of the mentor identified by Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995): performance improver, career developer, counsellor, sharer of knowledge. Of these, career developer and sharer of knowledge seem appropriate for the ktp mentor.

Megginson and Clutterbuck introduce and briefly set down 13 mentoring techniques (2005, 1-3) which they go on to explain in their book 'Techniques of coaching and mentoring'. Some techniques, such as 'Managing the learner's own behaviours' seem less relevant to the ktp context, while others such as 'Building self knowledge', concentrating on life and career do describe present ktp mentoring activities.

The mentor role is strong however through the process of reflection, with the mentee evaluating performance and the mentor acting as 'co-enquirer' (Rigby, in Aldridge et al 2001, 187). The mentor has encouraged what might be called programmed reflection, and self diagnosis through the Pedler book already mentioned. The human resource academic emphasis on self development may come as someone new to associates, but they have accepted it, especially when linked to continuing professional development (cpd).

The career perspective

The mentor assists in initial orientation, but only briefly, and later offers ideas on career development. The mentor is an experienced academic in the human resources field well known in the local area, and keen to build links with the business community. This, of itself, does not lead directly to the securing of associate employment but can provide a different perspective.

The main role is to look at the associate's cv - to offer constructive criticism in a number of ways:

- 1) To identify transferable elements of the ktp experience itself
- 2) To identify clearly, and sometimes harshly, future aspirations
- 3) To review previous work experience so as to draw out not so much the technical aspect of previous work, but the transferable skills and knowledge, and to do so briefly: previous work experience may not be as relevant to employers as the associate may think.
- 4) To eliminate poor phraseology, and to check the basic presentation of the cv.

Company perspectives and continuous professional development

Associates in two West Midlands companies were asked what, if any value, the mentoring role could add. The questions, available separately, reviewed the ktp process for the associates, one who had only just begun the programme and one who has completed a little over a year in post. Both felt the mentoring process to be valuable as an independent way of reviewing progress and to identify any issues about company reception of the associates and to plan for career opportunities after the contract. The thorough understanding by the mentor of the tripartite link between associate company and University was regarded as critical to the success of the mentoring activity. For now

no interviews have been conducted with company employees – a development to follow perhaps.

Associates felt that personal and career counselling, personal growth and reflection were all stimulated from the mentor role.

For continuous personal development there was an understanding of the concept from a professional institute. A personal development plan did link to cpd. However cpd was not understood in the companies, in spite of their participation in ktp programmes.

Benefits of the ktp programmes

The Technology Strategy Board, in its annual report for 2006/7 stresses repeatedly, as on page 3, the benefits to the economy of ktps. 'For every £1million from Government the economy gets £2.9 million increase in annual profit, 43 new jobs and 190 existing company staff trained as a direct result of KTP.' (as on page 3) Benefits to the company are clear from this statement.

For Universities new case studies can emerge with high quality research papers possible with assistance to the Research Assessment Exercise.

For the associate, the benefits are challenging strategic level work and development of management and leadership skills

To all this can be added the strengths of the unique mentoring role.

Conclusion

In summary the strength of the mentor role has been demonstrated to be its position outside the reporting structure, offering confidential advice at the request of the associate and without subsequent reporting to the lead manager or the team. The mentor can look at practical issues as the contract progresses, and become more involved with helping the associate to secure desired employment at the ending of the contract. The role of the mentor is now firmly established. This facility has been heralded as good practice to be developed nationally.

Future developments for KTP mentoring

In the future the University will develop the role along the lines already begun. The programmes fit the University's commitment to cpd for staff, students, and associates. The mentoring role could be of increasing importance. The mentor can develop the role that can be confidently described as non judgemental, outside the LMC, and so focussing on the associate's personal and commercial contribution to the company.

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