Facilitating Learning and Knowledge Transfer through Mentoring

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Abstract: Mentoring is a human resources development process supporting learning and knowledge transfer. Social media and Web services can be used for learning, communication with mentors and monitoring bringing also other advantages. In this paper formal and informal mentoring aspects and the use of IT in mentoring particularly social media and Web support will be shortly presented. Examples of projects where besides knowledge transfer, formal, informal learning also learning in a Web-based community is used are outlined.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a human resources development process supporting learning and knowledge transfer – KT (Argote and Ingram, 2000). It can be organized to address aspects like knowledge gaps and shortage skills (Hamburg and Marian, 2012). Mentoring, is commonly used to describe a KT and learning process in which an existing staff member or an external one guides new comers or less-experienced people in a task and helps to develop professional skills, attitudes and competencies (Johnson and Ridley, 2008; Edelkraut and Graf, 2011). Mentoring is a complex process involving not just guidance and suggestion, but also the development of autonomous skills, judgments, personal and professional master ship, expertise, trust and self-confidence over the time (Richert, 2006; Breipohl and Hamburg, 2011). The nature of mentoring is "friendly", "collegially".

Relationships within mentoring processes are often divided in informal and formal ones. In the next part we will give some characteristics as well as advantages and disadvantages of these two types.

Due to mentoring effectiveness for developing more productive staff, many organisations are interested to support it. Some examples of professional contexts in which mentoring can take place are induction programmes to maximise the graduate´s learning, continuous professional development supporting professionals to develop new skills and gain additional experience and knowledge, career development, outplacement helping individuals (particularly some with special needs) to integrate into work or to make transitions in new forms of employment, changing management or at implementing a learning organisation.

Informal learning accounts for over 75% of the individuals and companies learning processes, it is necessary to support the use of this form of learning more efficiently also in the mentoring, counselling and coaching and to combine it with new IT services. Strategies using intensively informal learning, e-Learning, mentoring and new IT media, embedded into business and work processes in companies, responding not only to requirements of work/career but also to employees interests and supporting collaboration, knowledge sharing and performance should be developed.

According to organizations using mentoring, social media can be used for communication with mentors and monitoring bringing also other advantages. The use of social media support social learning; forums, blogs, virtual market places, extend face-to-face traditional mentoring allowing mentoring to take place over distance and in different time periods. This approach supports also not only informal but also formal mentoring, more accepted by the organizations because they see direct benefits making also possible that more mentees are mentored.

In this paper formal and informal mentoring aspects and the use of IT in mentoring particularly social media and Web support (O´Reilly, 2005) will be shortly presented

Example of projects where besides KT, formal and informal learning also learning in a Web-based community (Wenger et al., 2002) is used, are outlined.

2 FORMS OF MENTORING

The range of mentoring relationships is a continuum going from informal mentoring to formal, highly structured and planned mentoring.

Informal mentoring is created spontaneously or is initiated by special interest i.e. when the mentee could be a potential employee. An informal mentoring relation can be required by a mentee who approaches a mentor for his/her intentions.

Some characteristics:
- Goals of the relationship are not completely specified
- Outcomes could not be measured in totality
- The process of KT cannot be explicitly described and it is based on the ability and willing for this process
- Access is limited and could be exclusive
- Mentors and mentees are often selected on the basis of personal chemistry that means an initial connection or attraction between
- Mentoring lasts a long time
- The organization benefit indirectly, as the focus is exclusively on the mentee.

Some advantages are a relationship of trust and respect between the partners, high degree of compatibility and cooperation and flexibility of the relation. This kind of relationship has a risk of ambiguity and tension when it becomes too intensive and there are rare possibility to be applied to groups. The most used form of learning in this context is an informal one. Social networks support this type of mentoring.

Formal mentoring is often facilitated and supported by the organisation which makes also tools available to participants for an efficient process.

Some characteristics are:
- Goals are established from the beginning by the organization, men-tors and mentees
- Outcomes are measured
- Knowledge which has to be transferred is known at the beginning
- Access is open to all who meet the criteria established by the organization for the corresponding mentoring program
- Mentors and mentees are paired based on compatibility
- Organisation and employees can benefit directly.

Aspects as the difficulties by paring with the risk of poor one and less flexibility of relationships between mentor and mentees and of the mentoring process are disadvantages. Formal mentoring relationships are more suitable for using e-Learning and Web-based systems can support formal mentoring. The type of appropriate mentoring for an organisation depends on its business and qualification needs, on the needs of mentees. The success will depend on whether the parties involved in the mentoring process have the skills required and if the context of the organisation is supportive.

3 SOCIAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND WEB-BASED SUPPORTED MENTORING

IT platforms supporting social networks can be considered as tools for KT, ways to store organisation knowledge and spaces where employees share knowledge and guide colleagues. One disadvantage of existing social learning platforms is that they do not support a synchronous communication. Web facilities as moderated forums, wikis, and blogs improve the mentoring process in this context. Web-based supported mentoring in networks and a platform by using social media has benefits:
- Provision of a 24 hour access of saved knowledge, for training material and communication
- Accessible anywhere with internet availability
- Provision of a platform even if face-to-face communication is not possible
- Learning assessment and progress monitoring of the mentor/mentee relationship
- Accounting for different learning abilities of mentees
- Overcoming limitations in time or space etc. of traditional training environments
- Reducing limitations of the classroom
- Allowing the learner to work at his or her own space, speed and depth with structured support from both, the educators and the other learners.

Important aspects for a successful mentoring process are trust and the depth of relationships. Face-to-face interaction and socialization processes consolidate the relations between members and group membership. Trust is important for KT and this develops primarily through face-to-face interactions so traditional elements of monitoring/mentoring have to be affiliated (Eby and Allen, 2008). A constant presence of experienced and qualified mentors in the Web-based platform is required. The platform should support motivation and retain students in the learning process and a real mentoring and not be understood as a supervisory tool.

4 EXAMPLES

One European project within Leonardo da Vinci programme is Net Knowing 2.0: Web 2.0 Technologies and Net Collaborating Practices to support learning in European SMEs (www.netknowing.com). It aims to support KT in European SMEs by using informal learning, net-working and mentoring and to help them to turn their daily work into a source of corporate learning.

Within the project we discussed with SMEs about introducing a mentoring system facilitating performance and KT, supporting retention and leadership development. Mentoring is less used in Germany. Within a workshop with German representatives of SMEs some tactics for implementing a mentoring program in their companies have been discussed. One possible approach is that experienced in Brandenburg. The mentors are external persons who should support the sustainable development and advancement of strategic competences of SMEs through informal and formal learning. Potential learning consultants can be trained to act as mentors. Some companies decided to try this concept and also to use company staff as mentors for 1-2 mentees with disabilities who will work for the company. In this case informal mentoring will be used and the KT will be very beneficial for the mentee in the own career but and also for the mentor. At the workshop, SMEs from Germany proposed a route map for the successful deployment of a mentoring program within the specific context of a SME environment:

- Putting the specific working environment into context.
- Researching the role played by the organisational culture or "climate" in the development, maintenance and success of the SME.
- Determining real qualification needs of the staff before starting the mentoring process.
- Determining the knowledge gaps and which of them can be minimised by a mentoring system.
- Demonstrating that a mentoring intervention has real benefits in this context and not being bureaucratic.
- Being a process based on trust, experience, supervision, formal and informal learning.
- Identifying barriers to mentoring/coaching.
- Determining issues to be incorporated within the mentoring/coaching intervention, for success.
- Qualifying coaches and mentors for different forms of working and learning.

This map is considered in the future mentoring

activities in Germany. A learning suite has been developed including a training module for mentors. The module which has been required by SME representatives and other users of the learning suite has been translated in German to be used in further mentoring processes in Germany. The few mentoring activities carried out till now in Germany have been positively evaluated by companies, colleagues and mentees. More moderated forums have been required.
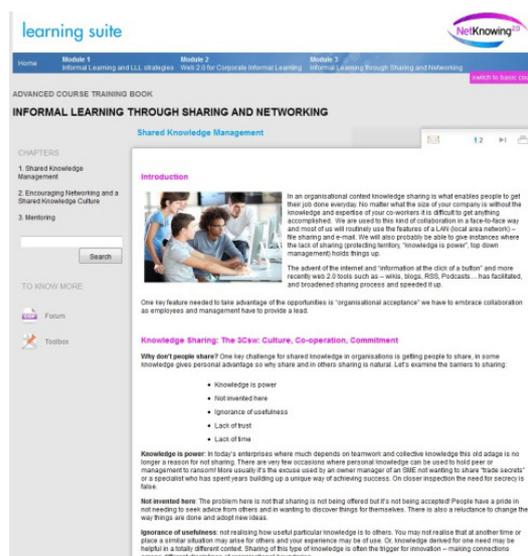
Figure 1: Learning suite.

Another project is Diversity and Mentoring Approaches to Support Active Ageing and Integration DIMENSAAI (www. dimensaai.eu) starting end 2012 and coordinated by the author. By transferring a mentoring model from former projects to Germany and other partners, the consortium wants to improve participation in training and particularly on the job qualification and employment for two target groups: seniors and people with disabilities by the use of a diversity and mentoring model focusing on the working places in the health and care sectors (having skill shortage). Activities planned are the organization of focus group discussions to identify requirements for working places suitable for these groups and needs for mentoring, the transfer, adaptation and test of a mentor training model and developing a catalogue with competencies for mentors, workshops in health/ care sector and other interested organizations for explaining diversity, tests of mentoring processes on the job in the partner countries involving seniors and/or disabled persons, social networking.

In both projects social networking of mentors,

mentees and other experts is supported by an IT platform developed by using TiKi Wiki (Wikipedia, 2012). Tiki is an open source, Web-based application, offering collaboration, publishing, commerce, social networking. In Net Knowing 2.0 the platform (cop.netknowing.eu) is connected with learning suite, particularly with mentor module.

The following figure shows the social platform (www.platform.dimensaai.eu) offering also training for mentors and diversity counsellors within DIMENSAAI project.

Figure 2: DIMENSAAI platform.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In the last years nature and perception of mentoring have changed being more based on equality. Aspects that we considered till now in our projects for making mentoring a successful process i.e. to open new horizons for mentee without imposing mentor own agenda, adapt the mentoring style to mentee needs, supporting mentees to help themselves, reflect critically and known own limitations and boundaries and asking feedback from mentees.

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