



# MENTORING ARTICLE REVIEW

by Triple Creek Associates

## ✎ “Learning to Compete in a Knowledge Economy”

By Jennifer Schramm

*Workplace Visions*, no. 3, 2005. Available online:

<http://www.shrm.org/trends/visions/3issue2005/WorkplaceVisions3.pdf>

### **Introduction**

Mentoring is a valuable tool that can facilitate knowledge sharing amongst vast groups of people. When an individual’s unique knowledge of an organization and job practices becomes a company’s greatest asset, that organization can ill afford to lose that commodity. Creating mentoring relationships to share this knowledge is a key way for organizations to tap into their prized assets—their employees.

This article review looks at Jennifer Schramm’s article, “Learning to Compete in a Knowledge Economy,” which appeared in the No. 3 – 2005 edition of the SHRM newsletter *Workplace Visions*. We will examine how mentoring, and specifically web-facilitated mentoring such as Open Mentoring®, can positively impact global competition, managing knowledge workers, and knowledge work and productivity.

### **Global Competition and Managing Knowledge Workers**

According to Schramm, global competition for knowledge-based jobs is becoming more and more intense, and is therefore putting pressure on national education and training systems. We fully agree with this assessment. “More may be expected from programs aimed at promoting lifelong learning, particularly for white-collar workers displaced by the offshoring of jobs,” states Schramm. With this global competition becoming more intense, “the successful management of knowledge workers” and “skills development across a working lifespan and the concept of lifelong learning” are vital to companies’ success.

Schramm makes a strong and effective case for creating a culture of lifelong learning that builds on the foundation of education. Employers can no longer simply hire qualified and educated workers, deploy them and be competitive. They must constantly “upskill” them, especially in highly specialized fields where knowledge increases exponentially. Further, today’s workers know that their earning potential depends on increasing their knowledge and skills. They will likely only stay with companies that invest in the further development of their expertise.

When faced with this reality, the actions taken by HR professionals to boost workforce skills predictably focus on increasing training. In fact, of

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the top seven responses by HR professionals on this topic (those which have a rating of more than 60%), five are directly training related.

Actions HR Professionals Are Taking to Boost Workforce Skill Levels in a Global Knowledge Economy	Percentage of Respondents
Increased technology training	83%
Increased investment in training and development to boost employee skill levels	82%
Increased specialized training	75%
Succession planning	67%
Increased investment in recruiting and retaining highly specialized knowledge workers	65%
Greater investment in and use of e-learning	65%
Increased training in basic skills	63%
Bringing retirees back into the workforce	41%
Offering employment options designed to attract and retain women	38%
Offering employment options designed to attract or retain semiretired workers	31%
Offering language courses for employees	28%
Offering language courses for managers	24%
Using retirees as mentors	15%

Source: SHRM 2004-2005 Workplace Forecast, as cited in Schramm’s article.

Training can help. Yet too often it is static, classroom-delivered content that is already months out of date before the room of students are forced into attendance. The sheer speed at which knowledge is increasing makes static, content-driven training systems, even e-learning delivered training, more limited in value than people realize. The just-in-time nature of e-learning is a step in the right direction because it is driven by the learner’s need. However, the huge investment in creating online courses makes content revision costly, and cutting-edge courses go out of date quickly.

Further, training alone does not effectively turn knowledge into skill. The goal must be to increase knowledge workers, not just knowledge. This means theory has to be turned into practice in the real world of work. This often happens more effectively with a mentor or coach helping a worker with a skill than with training alone. An ASTD study revealed that **managerial productivity increased by 88% when mentoring or coaching was involved, versus only a 24% increase with training alone** (Source: ASTD, as cited in “The Road Best Traveled” by Jeff Barbian, *Training*, May 2002).

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Schramm points out the conundrum in which HR professionals find themselves: Improve knowledge workers to compete while employers are taking money from the HR intervention of choice—training—to pay for benefits, especially rising health care costs. When squeezed against the anvil of ROI, training programs have to produce or be cut. Schramm makes this most important observation, “This has been an ongoing challenge, but could become even more so because *many of the most effective learning initiatives may increasingly be the result of informal knowledge networks and collaboration rather than formal training programs, making them more difficult to identify and measure*” (italics ours). In other words, in today’s world, workers are more effective at spreading knowledge informally than through formal training, but this creates a problem for HR professionals because they can’t measure it and thus get credit for it.

We at Triple Creek saw this trend back in the late 1990s when we began to use the web to create collaborative learning platforms such as Open Mentoring®. Person-to-person knowledge transfer in real time, based on the needs of the learner, is the only way to effectively keep pace with the expansion of knowledge. Further, a web-based tool, like Open Mentoring®, can help HR professionals both promote effective learning through informal networks and capture enough results and metrics to build a credible ROI case based on retention and productivity.

We feel that mentoring, specifically self-selection mentoring, is an effective approach when it comes to managing knowledge workers. If a company has a mentoring culture, employees might view mentoring as a learning community or informal knowledge network—and as Schramm suggests, this kind of collaboration can often produce better results than formal training programs alone.

Web-assisted mentoring can facilitate multiple mentoring relationships for both mentees and mentors. Relationships are mentee-driven and are based on:

1. mentees’ development needs and mentors’ areas of expertise;
2. the level of mentoring each feels comfortable with; and
3. a mutual mentoring agreement that forms the basis for working together.

The flexibility and range of a web-assisted mentoring program make it an ideal way to create an enterprise-wide, self-directed mentoring solution for large or geographically distributed organizations.

### **Knowledge Interventions**

We have summarized into four categories Schramm’s research on knowledge interventions that appears in the chart on p. 2. Mentoring does not replace these in total, but instead increases the effectiveness and impact of many of these interventions because it taps into the way

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people translate information into usable knowledge and interaction with other, more experienced people.

### *1. Training*

Access to the expertise of knowledge workers through a web-enabled process can significantly reduce the need for formal classroom training. For years the argument for classroom training against e-learning was the need for relational interaction to process content. We agree with this premise, but e-learning content processed with a mentor in the context of one’s own job may well accomplish this goal even better. The ongoing nature of a mentoring relationship makes the interaction over the content richer and more specifically job related. Where classroom training is still preferable, our clients are finding that following training with a mentoring relationship can dramatically increase retention and job integration of the content. This is especially true of more specialized training where knowledge and practice are constantly changing.

### *2. Succession Planning*

We know succession planning is a major concern given the large number of aging baby boomers. Massive investments are being made in identifying key players and development needs, as well as in creating future organizational charts based on possible lines of succession. However, actually preparing these key individuals for future leadership roles creates several conundrums for HR professionals. High-potential programs do jump start development, but they can also create social justice issues for those excluded. Formal mentoring programs which assign a senior leader to a possible successor can set off a firestorm of office chatter and reduce motivation of key workers who were hoping to ascend to that office. One solution is using a more open, self-directed mentoring process, which can:

- Increase the entire bench strength of an organization, not just develop the top 5 percent.
- Put the responsibility for development on the workers instead of the organization.
- Create cross-silo exposure critical to more senior leadership positions without costly job rotations through the entire organization, enhancing relational networking across the enterprise.

### *3. Attracting and Keeping Key Knowledge Workers*

Today’s workers are committed only to companies that they perceive as committed to their professional development. Continuous access to mentoring relationships based on personal needs and goals places the power to learn firmly in the hands of workers. This empowerment increases engagement and relational networks, and therefore increases retention. Additionally, offering mentoring has been one of the few interventions proven to retain and advance women and minorities. (For more information on the topics of engagement and diversity, see our research papers at [www.3creek.com](http://www.3creek.com).)

4. *Leveraging the Knowledge of the Retiring and Retired Workforce*  
Because a web-based mentoring process is not built around face-to-face training of mentors and mentees, it is easier to leverage the cumulative knowledge of both retiring and retired workers across the entire enterprise, regardless of position or role with the organization. We have clients who are encouraging workers near retirement to be available for multiple mentoring relationships so that their accumulated wisdom is well-enculturated into the intellectual capital of the enterprise. We have other clients who specifically want a web-enabled process to make it easy for qualified and invited retirees to share their expertise and manage multiple distance mentoring relationships as mentors.

### **Knowledge Work and Productivity**

“Certainly the role of technology has been crucial in increasing productivity rates over the past decade, and investments in technology may still be paying off in higher productivity rates,” according to Schramm. Using technology and other strategies, human resource departments are being forced to “generate conditions that lead to greater productivity in a knowledge economy, such as supporting creativity, leveraging existing knowledge and acquiring new knowledge.”

Mentoring is a good example of one HR management strategy that could be used to attempt to increase the productivity in this growing knowledge economy. In *Implementing Mentoring Schemes: A Practical Guide to Successful Programs* by Nadine Klasen and David Clutterbuck, Director of Diversity and Staffing Services for Texas Instruments (TI), Tegwin Pulley, says: “TI’s mentoring for new hires initiative has substantially improved the productivity amongst this employee group because mentoring enables them to understand more quickly how to go about their jobs (Tyler, 1998).”

Open Mentoring® is an effective way to achieve this productivity, because it not only helps participants be more productive in roles as they gain knowledge of how to perform better, it also offers an efficient, user-friendly workflow that does not require extensive user time and/or input. Mentors can easily register their expertise and set their own time commitments; mentees can complete self-assessments on learning needs and quickly find possible mentors without waiting for a third party to match them. This speeds the formation of ad-hoc learning relationships for specific needs at the rapid pace needed in today’s business environment.

### **Conclusion**

Schramm makes this compelling case for collaboration: “Some argue that, unlike the great inventions of the 19th and 20th centuries, which were often the products of lone geniuses, the key to innovation in an increasingly complex and specialized environment is through collaboration via knowledge networks and communities.” Mentoring can help organi-

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zations move into this 21st century view of innovation if they shift their thinking in these critical ways:

- *Personal Development vs. Organizational Sponsorship*  
Mentoring is more about personal development than organizational sponsorship. While relationships with more senior leaders can help mentees navigate the corporate ladder, the focus of each relationship must shift to the mentee’s personal and professional growth and development.
- *Access For All vs. For Only a Few*  
Mentoring is for every knowledge worker, not just a few at the top. To create the massive knowledge networks needed in the future, the entire knowledge capacities of the organization need to be available in a relational context. This builds bench strength, increases relational bonds, creates cross-silo perspectives, and mitigates social justice concerns.
- *Distance Relationships vs. Face-to-Face*  
Mentoring can be effective at a distance, not just in face-to-face relationships. While mentoring is always about relationships, many approach it as if we were still in the early 20th century with few technologies to help us communicate. Collaborative relationships flourish across every enterprise via today’s media options (such as phone, email, video conferencing and instant messaging), so why not mentoring? A web-enabled process not only speeds the matching process, it also provides a structure to make these distance relationships focused and effective.

Web-based processes, like our own Open Mentoring®, are transforming organizational thinking and practice in these three ways. Mentoring is rapidly becoming an intervention of choice among progressive companies that want to address the critical need to compete in the global knowledge economy. As Schramm suggests, these knowledge networks may well hold the key to the next phase of innovation.

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