Successful Hybrid-Mentoring Programs for SMEs in Developing Countries

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Abstract*: Operating mentoring program is widely acknowledged in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to promote professional development within organizations. However, mostly for those operating in developing economics, the operation of such programs becomes very challenging. To draw benefits from such programs, we explore those challenges and analyse the cases that optimized their mentoring program in three industrial SMEs in Iran. We carry out the research using a qualitative multiple-case study approach. This paper brings out the challenges from diverse perspective of various stakeholders engaged in mentoring program and provide solutions to gain the most of those programs.*

Keywords*: Mentoring, Hybrid Mentoring, SMEs*

1. Introduction

Mentoring programs have been mentioned as a crucial means of developing employees professionally in any organization (Kram, 1985). To this end, the programs provide an ideal platform for knowledge transfer and acquisition of skills and stimulating personal growth that are helpful in enhancing productivity and job satisfaction among employees (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). However, according to the arguments of Ragins and Kram (2016) a successful mentoring programme is highly cumbersome to implement, especially in the case of SMEs in developing economies.

SMEs usually present restrictions that would be hardly noticeable in larger enterprises, such as lack of resources or totally flattened organizational structures (E. St-Jean & Audet, 2012). These challenges are accentuated in developing country contexts; local cultural considerations and organizational arrangements in developing economies could contribute to other complications that make efforts toward successful mentoring relationships hard to establish (Lescano et al., 2019; Preston, Prieto-Flores, & Rhodes, 2018). It is also important to point out that several forms of mentoring could be employed in this form of environment. While formal mentoring programs offer structured, organizationally credited relationships, they often lack the personal connection and trust that is automatic in an informal mentoring relationship (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Belle R. Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Informal mentoring relationships occur organically; thus, they offer less rigid learning experiences and sometimes create deeper personal connections. However, they often lack the structured support necessary for a successful mentoring program to take place(Baugh & Scandura, 1999). A possible solution was thus conceived in the form of hybrid mentoring programs, through which such a paradox would be reduced by realizing both the strengths of formal and informal mentoring (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005). Such initiatives might marry the structured support accorded by formal mentoring with the personalized and relational aspects of informal mentoring, therefore providing flexibility and adaptability, as may be required by SMEs in developing economies. The present study extends existing literature by focusing on challenges and potential solutions to implement effective hybrid mentoring programs within the context of industrial SMEs in the developing economy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We selected the Iranian case, a developing country in the Middle East, because of unique

situational and cultural factors likely to uniquely impact the programs of mentoring (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003).

This research contributes to the literature on many counts. First, it contributes to the limited available literature on hybrid mentoring programs in SMEs in developing country settings. It focuses on the Iranian context to examine some unique socio-cultural and economic factors that could bear on such program effectiveness. Finally, it suggests solution to overcome mentoring challenges for SMEs.

2. A literature review on mentoring programs

Mentoring programs are frameworks where knowledge is transferred, skills are developed, and personal growth takes place. According to Kram (1985), such programs offer effective mentoring that directly relates to the building of job satisfaction, levels of productivity, and employee turnover(Eby et al., 2008). There are several kinds of mentoring programs that organizations use, including formal and informal ones, and even hybrid combinations. The formal Mentoring is organized, and the organization recognizes them and even encompasses paired mentors and mentees. In this type of mentorship, it sometimes operates through assigned pairs(Chao et al., 1992). On the other hand, Informal mentoring relationships, on the other hand, tend to spring naturally, and are defined by their non-obligatory nature and the interpersonal chemistry that exists in the ties between the mentor and mentee (Belle R. Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Each of these forms of mentorships has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Formal mentoring programs can ensure structure, support, and results that are measurable, but sometimes lose the personal element of trust and camaraderie that can come with informal mentoring. Informal mentoring can ensure well-formed interpersonal relationships and fluid learning processes but will not provide the structure and support of a formal program for the employee (Baugh & Scandura, 1999).

2.1. Hybrid Mentoring Programs and SMEs

E. St-Jean and Audet (2012) point out that SMEs do face unique challenges that deter them from effective mentoring programs because of limited resources and flat organizational structures, with a dynamic work environment. Therefore, some organizations of today, realizing the strengths of both formal and informal mentoring, have adopted a hybrid approach to mentoring programs. These kinds of programs try to combine the structured support of formal mentoring with the personal, relational aspects of informal mentoring (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005). Hybrid mentoring programs offer room for adaptation that can work with the peculiar constraints of SMEs and the fluid nature of today's work environment. (É. St-Jean & Mathieu, 2015). However, effective mentoring program implementation does not come without its issues.

2.2. Mentoring Program Challenges

Effective Implementation of Mentoring Program can be challenged on various fronts, including time and resource constraints, performance mentoring conflict, and cultural considerations of the organization(Nimmons, Giny, & Rosenthal, 2019; Belle Rose Ragins, 2016). Other commonly reported challenges include effective communication, appropriate matching of mentor and mentee, and fostering an enabling organizational culture to support mentoring(Clutterbuck & Poulsen, 2012). Overcoming these challenges often requires changes to the program design, clarity of the program objectives and ongoing mentor training and support(Garvey, 2009).

2.3. Mentoring in Developing Economies

While a handful of studies on the emerging economies regarding mentorship demonstrates its effectiveness for better performance (Schwerdtle, Morphet, & Hall, 2017), the adoption of such initiatives in those environments poses extra challenges. Organizational structures, limited resources, and ingrained norms of practice in schools further exacerbate the very development of effective mentoring programs (Baluku, Matagi, Musanje, Kikooma, & Otto, 2018). It therefore becomes important that a deep understanding of these contexts informs not only the design but also the process for implementing mentoring programs if such initiatives are to be effective and assured of longevity (Underhill, 2006).

Research in Iran focuses on the mentoring programs within large organizations. Most focus on the personal development impact of mentoring rather than the organizational factors(Foroughi, Chenari, & Nazem, 2022). When the organizational factors are used, they are used to investigate their effect on mentoring program (Nourmohammadi, Ahmadi, & Salavati, 2023). It appears that mentoring is primarily an HR function rather than an organizational priority.

3. Research Methodology

This work adopts a qualitative design in carrying out the research to explore in depth the challenges of the mentoring program that may be faced by the industrial SMEs, taking into consideration a developing economy such as Iran. This has been considered because it has an inherent ability to explore complex phenomena within their contexts (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021, p. 66).

3.1. Sample Selection

Three SMEs in the industrial sector in Iran have been purposely selected to take part in this study; all these SMEs use a hybrid mentoring program. Focusing on SMEs using hybrid mentoring approaches befits the objective set for this study since it tries to understand formal and informal mentoring structures combined. This purposeful sampling means that selection is for information-rich cases to allow an in-depth study to be conducted (Palinkas et al., 2015).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with mentor-mentee pairs, representatives from the Human Resources departments, and upper-level management within the selected SMEs. These participants were chosen because of their direct involvement and varying perspectives on the mentoring program (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to delve into each participant's experiences and perspectives while providing room for unexpected themes to emerge (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All participants were assured of confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained before each interview; We used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (Heaton, 2021). The overall information of companies and interviewees is presented in Table I. We used thematic analysis to code the data, identified patterns and organize them into the processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

TABLE I: Research Cases

Company	industry	Interviewees
M-Co	Machinery	4 Mentor-Mentee pairs A HR Manager CEO
P-Co	Petrochemical	5 Mentor-Mentee pairs HR VP 2 HR Manager CEO
C-Co	Cellulose industries	5 Mentor-Mentee pairs A HR Manager COO Chairman

4. Finding

In the present study, we researched specific challenges and possible ways of overcoming them in realizing effective hybrid mentoring programs within the context of industrial SMEs operating in a developing economy. The aim of this study was to find out the challenges faced, and strategies used to overcome those challenges. The findings will, in the end, form a blueprint for other organizations with similar challenges to enhance their mentoring programs. The ground level findings of this study come from two categories of stakeholders: the mentor-mentee pairs, which provided operational challenges

and potential solutions; and the HR and management representatives, which emphasized the organizational perspective of the subject.

4.1. Findings from Mentor-Mentee Pairs

These mentor-mentee pairs provided rich insight into some of the daily operational challenges and possible solutions to the delivery of a mentoring program. Discussions revolved around three key themes, namely, time management, communication, and finding a balance between work that is task-oriented with professional growth.

Time Management: Time management for mentoring amidst work was cited as a big challenge in all three companies by both mentors and mentees. One of the formal mentors from M-Co said, "The balancing of the mentoring session with normal work commitments was quite a challenge initially." A mentee from P-Co further reiterated, "It often feels that there is not enough time for meaningful mentorship session amidst normal work responsibilities." They also proposed solutions. A mentee in C-Co revealed, "We have started to insert mentoring sessions into regular work jobs, hence managing to make the sessions more practical and time-efficient." Such integration into routine work was seconded by an informal mentor from P-Co: "Since for me it was very important that my mentee stay on the line of progress, we allocate special time slots for mentorship in our timetables so as not too much tension arises between the regular work and the mentoring responsibilities.

Communication: The rapport between mentor and mentee due to effective communication is the second imperative theme. It contains three sub-themes, namely, rapport effectiveness, trust, and role conflict.

- **Rapport Effectiveness**: The first sub-theme that constitutes an effective rapport. A formal mentor from M-Co said, "There were sometimes when we couldn't communicate effectively, and the things got misunderstood. That happens more in the beginnings of the program. There was a rule in our mentoring program that we should work with someone we didn't work before, so it was really challenging at the beginning". A mentee from C-Co said the same concern: "Sometimes it is hard for me to express my development needs or concerns to my mentor clearly. Especially when HR chooses your mentor, they say that you can reject the mentor if you cannot feel connected, but how I can reject a manager I see every day in the workplace".

- **Trust**: trust was an important part of any mentor-mentee relationship. While the trust was formed beforehand, from the very beginning of the process, the communication was highly effective. In turn, that would make informal mentoring more effective at the early beginning stages of the process. Another formal mentor from M-Co reported: "My mentee was very passive at the beginning of our sessions. I think it was because of a lack of trust. After a few sessions, my mentee told me that he thought I was forced to him". Despite these challenges, solutions were offered. According to the interviewed mentors, one mentor from P-Co mentioned: "We have introduced feedback sessions where both mentor and mentee can openly discuss communication issues. It was really hard at the beginning as I feel that my management authorities have shrunk; day by day, I find this practice useful even in my management span of control.". More creatively, a mentee from P-Co contributed: "My mentor and I have agreed to use a shared document on a google drive to note down important points from each session, improving our communication."

- **Role Conflict:** Especially in informal mentoring, when the mentor and mentee are in a working relationship, change of role of communication during the time period of mentoring is hard. For example, a P-Co informal mentor testifies: "I have a very authoritative way of management; I have to be like that because of my position in the organization; however, as they HR Consultants told us, we should pursue a developmental way of communication, switching between those ways of communicating was difficult at the beginning." However, the same mentor found a way to decrease the role conflict: "When we have a mentoring session, I said to my mentee, now I have the mentor hat, and I put on a real hat; it helps me to switch in the most effective way, and my mentee new that when I have this hat, I am her mentor."

Task-orientation versus Professional Development: A third theme involved the nature of the mentoring sessions. More specifically, there was tension between task-oriented work and a focus on

professional development. As mentioned by a mentee from P-Co: "Sometimes the sessions felt more like an added workload, rather than a chance to learn anything." However, one solution was suggested by a mentor from C-Co, where he said: "We try to intertwine learning objectives with actual tasks, making the sessions more relevant and less burdensome." Within these themes, there is a diversified view between mentors and mentees that mentors, especially the informal ones, like the mentee to intertwine the mentoring route with daily tasks, whereas the mentee needs separate portions.

4.2.   Findings from Human Resource Representatives and Management

Insights from the human resource representatives and management brought to light more strategic and organizational aspects of the mentoring program. These appeared in the form of five themes: Program Structure, mentor training, creating a culture of mentoring, and constraints of resources.

Program structure: Issues pertaining to the structure of the mentoring program involved the matching process between mentors and mentees. "The most challenging task for HR is matching the pairs when the mentoring process is formal". The HR manager said, "At M-Co, the challenge was to match the mentors and mentees by skillset and personality, which did not work in every situation. Therefore, they apply an anonymous mentor-mentee matching process. They develop a platform where every potential mentee can choose three favourite mentors and vice versa; this helps them in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the mentoring program. The second concern, again, was voiced by the HR Vice President of P-Co: "We have, therefore, implemented a more systematized approach to pairing mentors and mentees according to expertise, working style, and interpersonal relationships.

Mentors' training: One of the key concerns mentioned by the HR representatives and management has been the proper training for mentors. The HR manager at C-Co, says, "One issue was how to get mentors prepared for mentoring." Having this in mind, the HR Vice President at P-Co added, "We planned a comprehensive mentor training program that covers various aspects of effective mentorship joint with two other organization."

Mentoring culture: The other theme that kept coming out was the need for encouraging a supportive mentoring culture. According to the CEO at M-Co, "Building a culture where mentoring is valued and supported was initially a struggle". The COO at P-Co elaborated on building an open atmosphere thus: "It is important to foster a culture of transparent communication and constructive feedback." The Production Vice President at C-Co provided a suggested strategy to enable the acceptance of a mentoring culture: "Regular meetings where successful mentorship stories are shared helped us to foster a positive mentoring culture." This suggestion underlines the effect of mentoring examples that prove successful in encouraging the acceptance of the mentoring program within the company.

Managing resource limitation: the companies being SMEs, their resource, from time to money which could be spent on the mentoring process. Hence, all three cases decided to combine internal-external mentors, also using an external mentoring consultant to manage the process. This helps them to manage the costs of mentoring. Also, since the supervision mentoring sessions were on weekends, the least possible working time is spent developing mentoring competencies in organizational mentors. Planning combined training programs along with other organizations reduces the cost as well.

Program goals: Finally, the last theme surfacing from the discussions with top management was about setting clear goals for the mentoring program. Defining clear and quantifiable objectives of our mentoring program is not easy," claimed the CEO at P-Co. To which the Chairman of C-Co responded, "We are laying down clear objectives for our program so that its effectiveness can be understood and improvements made accordingly." That again reinstates the fact that goal clarity is essential for effective evaluation of the mentoring program. The CEO supported this idea by adding, "The periodic revisit and adjustment of the objectives of the mentoring program, in the light of ongoing feedback and evaluation, have helped us keep in line with the evolving needs of our organization." These results have demonstrated the complexity of establishing a successful mentoring program related to both interpersonal and organizational challenges. At the same time, they disclose creative solutions developed by participating SMEs which clear the way for an effective and helpful mentoring program within their organizations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our research investigates challenges about the introduction of a hybrid mentorship initiative in Iranian industrial SMEs, set in the context of a developing economy. We could find the main challenges these firms face and some solutions they pursue. Fig. 1 shows a general look at this paper's findings.

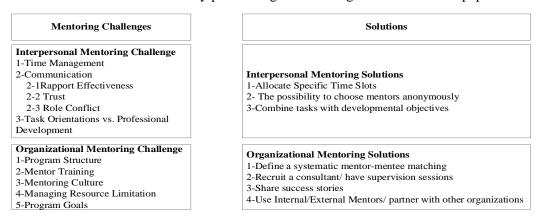| Mentoring Challenges	Solutions

Interpersonal Mentoring Challenge
1-Time Management
2-Communication
  2-1Rapport Effectiveness
  2-2 Trust
  2-3 Role Conflict
3-Task Orientations vs. Professional Development
	Interpersonal Mentoring Solutions
	1-Allocate Specific Time Slots
	2- The possibility to choose mentors anonymously
	3-Combine tasks with developmental objectives

Organizational Mentoring Challenge 1-Program Structure 2-Mentor Training 3-Mentoring Culture 4-Managing Resource Limitation 5-Program Goals	**Organizational Mentoring Solutions** 1-Define a systematic mentor-mentee matching 2-Recruit a consultant/ have supervision sessions 3-Share success stories 4-Use Internal/External Mentors/ partner with other organizations

Fig. 1 Research Findings, Mentoring Challenges and Solutions in SMEs

Our Study make some contributions. First, detailed investigation of mentoring challenges from different point of view of different stakeholders. It helps investigate hybrid mentoring programs in SMEs within a developing country. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research targeting such an organization's mentoring in Iran's context (e.g.Foroughi et al., 2022; Nourmohammadi et al., 2023). Being an expensive plan, some of the large organizations pursue such a plan, but for the SMEs, suggestions which introduce in this research may help those types of organizations to take advantage of mentoring programs. It also enriches the literature of mentoring in Iran by introducing a comprehensive view of challenges and suggestions for overcoming those challenges.

6. Managerial Implications

This research has several implications for the HR and higher managers of SMEs in the developing context that wish to implement hybrid mentoring programs. In the realm of interpersonal mentoring:

1. Allocate specific time slots: The nature of industrial SMEs would highly require the creation of time slots because mentors might wholly or partially neglect mentorship amidst the busy schedule, hence allowing regular communication and guidance in the right direction.

2. The possibility to choose mentors anonymously: The selection of anonymous mentors within industrial SMEs is used as an attempt to try and encourage transparency and comfortability with the mentorship. This way, there can be the avoidance of potential bias, hence effective mentorship taking place because of mutual understanding and respect amongst them.

3. Combine tasks with developmental objectives: It is advisable to make mentoring more practical and relevant by incorporating real-world tasks with developmental objectives by mentors. In this way, such practical approach may lead the mentees towards applying theoretical knowledge in practical fields, which may give a rise in their learning process in the industry.

From an organizational point of view:

1. Define a systematic mentor-mentee matching: SMEs should have a formal mechanism through which matching between mentors and mentees takes place. This would be with the view to finding a good match based on factors related to technical skills, industry experience, and personal characteristics.

2. Recruit a consultant/have supervision session: The industrial SMEs may therefore consider recruiting a consultant or doing regular supervision sessions to assure the effectiveness and relevance

of the mentoring program. This will help identify challenges quicker and further improve the quality of the mentorship program.

3. Share Success Stories: Sharing of success stories on previous mentoring relationships will motivate SMEs, present participants, and future ones in the program. Additionally, it might provide specific examples of how mentoring could be useful for individual development and organizational success.

4. Using Internal and External Mentors/Partner with Other Organizations: Industrial SMEs must leverage internal and external mentors to facilitate a variety of experiences and perspectives. To that end, partnering with other organizations for inter-organizational mentorship and for cost reduction may also be explored.

If these recommendations are taken on board, then the hybrid mentoring programs in the industrial SMEs of the developing contexts will improve the skill development, knowledge transfer, and career development of the employee workforce.

7. Limitation of Research and Future Research Suggestions

This study has some limitations. We focus on three SMEs in a developing country with a unique socio-cultural environment. Furthermore, we chose only the industrial SMEs, and thus did not consider the service provider organizations. Therefore, it is recommended in the future studies that a various organization may be used; additionally, to reach the generalizable research, using the quantitative research is suggested.

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