

Pay it Forward... or backwards! The importance of mentorship and knowledge sharing.

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The importance of knowledge sharing is a widely acknowledged concept in organisations. Leadership Teams appreciate 'Why' mentoring is necessary and beneficial but the 'Who', the 'What', the 'When' and the 'How' are slightly less realised and rarely executed to maximum potential.

'Who', mentors come in all shapes and sizes. My first mentor was my grandfather; my monitor of maths and science homework, then it was my manager and head of department and now it is my colleagues, a diverse mixture of all disciplines and backgrounds.

'How' mentorship is carried out will depend on who has the knowledge and experience and who doesn't. A lot of us believe that mentors can only be our seniors, both in age and role. This is not the case, passing on of knowledge can come from every age and every level of an organisation, no single experience is the same. Someone straight from University will have learnt the most modern methods, which someone more senior may not have been introduced to. But someone more senior will be able to apply their experience to the new methods.

'What' Mentorship includes is not just limited to technical knowledge, although this is where most of the effort is usually centred. Mentorship encompasses a variety of aspects including, but is not limited to: technical knowledge, consultancy skills, pastoral care, language assistance, LGBTQ+, etc.

'Where' is an ever changing goal post. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a change in dynamics of organisations on a global scale. More and more of us are moving away from office based working and striving for healthy work-life balance. Post-pandemic organisational changes will see a shift in working practices and so will mentor schemes and working relationships. Virtual platforms will enable more flexibility but may compromise personability if not used correctly.

'When' is often well established at the beginning of our careers. As we become more independent, our need for mentorship becomes less prominent but definitely no less important.

Why?

Benefits to the Individuals

Continuous Professional Development is important for maintaining best practice knowledge and techniques. It is our own responsibility to remain informed and there are many different sources we can use, e.g. training courses, conferences, technical papers, etc. But one of the least utilised tools, that can offer the greatest rewards, is Mentorship. Both beneficial to the Mentor and the Mentee, Mentorship provides the means for knowledge sharing in many different directions across a range of topics. Relationships are made and careers are progressed.

Benefits to an Organisation

Knowledge sharing through Mentorship will aid in flexibility of resources and nurture diversity. The more employees, and the greater diversification of the employees an organisation has with the access to certain skills and knowledge, the better prepared it is to meet the needs of their customers.

Benefits to Industry

Industries, especially well established ones, will have experienced the ebbs and flows in available skilled resourcing. Mentorship allows for people in different companies to knowledge share and grow the skill pool. The more Mentorship is encouraged across an industry and between industries, the more we can learn. One Chemical Engineer's experiences in the Food Manufacturing industry will be vastly different to a Chemical Engineer in Oil Processing. We, as professionals, need to make sure that the opportunities to learn from one another are not hindered by the perceived boundaries around us.

Who?

The Mentor

The role of the Mentor is definitely not 'one size fits all'. Both the Mentor and the Mentee need to agree, and be comfortable with the method of mentoring, along with the frequency and complexity. One Mentor's style may not fit with the Mentee, and vice versa. A typical pairing would be a senior mentor with a junior mentee, but how many senior engineers and consultants have free time to dedicate to mentorship? Not many! Availability will, unfortunately, be a driving factor in Mentor/Mentee pairings, not necessarily who is the best fit.

This is why it is important that the different Mentorship mechanisms are utilised, and not just the conventional senior-to-junior route.

The Mentee

As the one seeking the help of the other, it is important that Mentees have it clear in their minds what it is they are trying to achieve, what it is they are striving for. A good way to achieve this is to have a specific target statement, one that can be answered at the end of the mentorship with a simple 'Yes' or a 'No'. Even the best mentors can only help those who are ready and want to be helped, this is especially important where the mentorship is mandated by external drivers, e.g. Chartership requirements for minimum mentored hours worked. Making it clear to the Mentor what is needed of them will better prepare them to help the Mentee effectively to achieve that target statement.

How?

Passing on of knowledge can come from every age and every level of an organisation, no single experience is the same. At Atkins, it is acknowledged that Mentorship does not need to follow the conventional senior-to-junior route. The Atkins Mentorship approach encourages mentorship in all directions within the organisation, top-to-bottom (conventional), horizontal (peer mentoring) and from the bottom-up (reverse mentoring).

Peer Mentoring

It would be hard to find an engineer or consultant that has taken the same route to get to where they are. This allows for a multitude of experiences all at the same level of an organisation, something consultancies feed on. 'Peer Mentoring' allows those at a similar level to lean on one another, to draw from different experiences and education.

Reverse Mentoring

Whilst there are more senior members of an organisation with more experience in real life application of methodologies and problem solving, there will also be the juniors coming from education, lacking the experience, but armed with the most recent teachings that may be new to the seniors. The most relatable example being the teaching of Information Technology (IT) from the younger generations to the elder.

What?

The approach in Atkins, whilst encouraging multidirectional learning partnerships, also promotes Mentorship for all aspects of working life, not just the technical stuff!

Technical Knowledge

Many professional institutions will require that a certain amount of a candidate for Chartership's technical work is mentored by a Chartered member, as validation of capability. It is common for the specific framework and methods for this mentorship to be prescribed by the institution to fit its capability requirements. Outside of this prescribed rigidity, there is always the option to pursue Mentorship styles that are more suited to the individuals.

Consultancy Skills

Whilst professional institutions are advocates of Technical Mentorship, there are many other forms of mentorship which can be just as influential to an individual's career. Consultancy skills, for example, are something that do not come naturally to all.

Consultancy has historically been something that engineers and specialists would do in their later career stages once all of their experience has been matured. This has changed drastically over the 20th to 21st century transition. As in my own experience, it is now common for consultants to have never been anything else, for graduates to enter the world of work as consultants. This puts even more emphasis on the importance of Mentorship and knowledge sharing. Until the experience has been gained, mentorship and knowledge sharing is the most important aspect of an incoming graduate's development.

Pastoral care

Whether it be an individual's first year in work or last, the needs to do their job happily and safely will vary from person to person. Some may require very minimal guidance to achieve their goals, whilst others may require more assistance. Pastoral Mentorship is where the need for appropriate Mentor/Mentee pairing is most prominent, as the subject matters are likely to be more sensitive. Some examples of Pastoral Mentoring subjects include Career Management, Language development, LGBTQ+ guidance, Equal Opportunities and Religious and Racial Matters.

For large multinational organisations, such as Atkins, being able to identify and support Pastoral Mentoring will enable the organic growth of diversity and inclusive workforces.

Where?

Historically

Historically, along with most other aspects of working life, Mentorship has been face to face in a place of work. Private meeting spaces and shared conversations all lean to a very tangible experience. But Mentorship is not just for the workplace, the transfer of knowledge and experience happens in all aspects of our lives, from school, to sports, to communities. All of these potential opportunities for Mentorship will help to shape and influence us and those we interact with.

Post-COVID

Whilst face-to-face methods are still many people's preference, the dynamics of communication and geographic diversity is evolving. Where once people needed to be close to their place of work for meetings and daily office life, more and more organisations are embracing dynamic ways of working, allowing people to live further away from the workplace. With this change, comes the need to adapt Mentorship programmes in organisations and professional institutions to accommodate the changing working environments.

Utilising the video conferencing platforms available, Atkins' employees are adjusting to virtual ways of working and virtual Mentoring Partnerships. This shift allows for colleagues in different geographical locations to link in ways they did not do so before.

When?

School

During developmental years, the dynamics of mentorship are more established. During the school years, mentors come from all aspects of life, older siblings, parents, grandparents, teachers, sports coaches, etc. Learning is an everyday occurrence during those school years, something we often forget when we get into our routines and careers. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Career' as "an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life and with **opportunities for progress**" [Oxford Dictionary]. Although the opportunity to learn may not present itself every day, we always have the choice to learn something new every day.

Early Career

Some organisations acknowledge and address the necessity of graduate mentorship with graduate programmes. These programmes come in all shapes and sizes, two of the most common approaches being 'Rotational' and 'Targeted' programmes.

Rotational programmes give individuals the opportunity to experience several aspects and departments of the organisation. The intention is to establish a Mentor/Mentee partnership during each rotation, exposing the Mentee to a variety of skills and experiences from which to learn. This allows the graduate to make an informed decision about their career path whilst having, at the minimum, an understanding of the operations of neighbouring departments and how one influences the other.

Targeted programmes tend to be driven by business requirement, by an individual's specific skill sets, or both. For example, those qualified in a specific engineering discipline will likely be utilised in their given discipline straight away, rather than educating them in neighbouring disciplines. The advantage is that the Mentee will be in a better position to develop their acquired skills faster.

Mid-Career

For most, this is where the line stops. But it shouldn't! Few consultants receive formal, structured mentorship at work, past early career or chartered application stages, and few engage in reverse mentoring. The benefits to be gained from knowledge sharing and mentorship are powerful, but to see the results, organisation must first invest the time, and therefore money, to allow for mentorship schemes to take root.

End of Career

So, this is a time where being the Mentee might well have passed, although no one can put a time stamp on when learning stops. One of our key responsibilities as individuals, organisations and members of the IChemE is to ensure that every opportunity to share our knowledge and experiences has been taken, and that we don't leave the world of work without paying it forwards... or backwards.

References

Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2022 Oxford University Press, <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>