



## **From Reverse Mentoring to collaborative community's emergence: A career capital perspective**

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## Extended abstract

### From Reverse Mentoring to collaborative community's emergence: A career capital perspective

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#### Abstract

The spread of *corpworking* initiatives is increasing within companies. Our study is situated in a French *corpworking* space created to enhance digital transformation. A Reverse Mentoring program has been launched in this space to support employees throughout the transformation process. Therefore, this research examines, through a career capital framework, the relative role of Reverse Mentoring on developing knowledge and building collaborative community. Using a qualitative single case study approach, we found that Reverse Mentoring can build a new form of *knowing* that we refer to as “*collaborative knowing*”. This outcome seems to influence the emergence of digital collaborative community in the *corpworking* space. We conclude by emphasizing different outcomes of the reverse mentoring program for reverse-mentors and reverse-mentees.

*Keywords:* Reverse mentoring, career capital, collaborative community

#### Scope

Reverse Mentoring (RM) is an alternative form of mentoring (Kram & Isabella, 1985), offering an innovative way to encourage learning and facilitate cross-generational relationships. It involves mentoring of a senior highly experienced employee (reverse-mentee) by a younger less experienced employee (reverse-mentor). Not surprisingly, most of the studies focus on the advantages of RM to transfer technological skills throughout corporate settings. RM has also been perceived as a social exchange tool which leverages the expertise of reverse mentees-mentors (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012). Despite the considerable literature on traditional mentoring, little has been written about RM in the workplace. According to our knowledge,

there is a gap in understanding how such a practice leads to develop career capital for reverse mentor-mentee. In this article, we refer to career capital as the capabilities that people need to build in order to develop a career. It involves three key dimensions of knowing, such as “*knowing-how*”<sup>1</sup>, “*knowing-why*”<sup>2</sup> and “*knowing-whom*”<sup>3</sup> (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). The career capital literature has received relatively little attention in connection with mentoring or RM. So far, only two empirical studies have linked traditional mentoring and career capital (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Singh et al., 2009). No studies have been found capturing RM, career capital development, and collaborative communities. Therefore, this research claims to be the first empirical investigation in this area. It aims to address the research question of “*how does RM influence the career capital of reverse-mentors and reverse-mentees?*” and to examine the RM outcomes on the emergence of collaborative community.

## Methodology

#DigitalSNCF is a program supporting the digital transition of the French national railways, S.N.C.F. To monitor its implementation, SNCF has set up “*corpworking*” spaces (Bréchnac et al. 2017) in Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Nantes and San Francisco to foster in-house and external talent. In this context, a RM program is offered to encourage employees to be part of the digital community. Our study examines the development of the RM program in the *corpworking* spaces of Paris. To achieve this, a single case study approach is adopted following Yin’s recommendation (2013). Multiple sources of evidence were carefully chosen to address our research question. First, semi-structured one-to-one interviews helped to gather information about reverse mentees and mentors’ expectations for the development of their career capital. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were held, lasting between 45 to 75 minutes, and transcribed word by word. Strict individual anonymity was maintained. Second, non-participant observation was adopted to examine the interactions during RM events, matching sessions and Digital Department managers regular meetings. All observational data were collected during 20 days of presence on site in 2017. Finally, we had the access to documents providing the background of the RM program. It included the charter, the questionnaires before matching and the results of different satisfaction surveys. Data from these three sources were

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<sup>1</sup> The “*knowing-how*” relates to hard skills and good performance.

<sup>2</sup> The “*knowing-why*” refers to motivation and career sensemaking.

<sup>3</sup> The “*knowing-whom*” refers to career-relevant networks and contacts.

subjected to thematic content analysis to identify emergent themes using the *computer-assisted qualitative data analysis system Nvivo 11®*. A comparison of emergent themes and their interconnections was made through an interpretative process.

## **Results and discussion**

The results are related to our two research objectives. To begin, they outline the role of RM in developing career capabilities' *knowing-how*, *knowing-why*, and *knowing-whom*. A major finding is that RM program enhances the development of career capital for both mentors and mentees. However, the key approaches used by reverse-mentors and reverse-mentees are different, as both parties have diverse goals. Further, it seems that reverse mentors and reverse mentees' interactions can create new knowledge through their collaborative learning in *corpoworking* spaces. Thus, we suggest adding this new form of knowing in the career capital capabilities as "*collaborative knowing*". This drives us to our second research goal: understanding the emergence of a digital collaborative community. Based on our findings, reverse-mentors highlighted the role of the RM in creating a connection with their reverse-mentees but also with other mentors. They developed a sense of belonging to a new community. But this brings us to the chicken-and-egg relationship of practice and community. What comes first: either collaborative practice, such as reverse-mentoring, or collaborative community? This remains an important debate in the literature.

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