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► **To cite this version:**

Tania Navarro Rodríguez, Alexandre Largier. Senior Mentoring, Skills Transfer Subject to Conditions. Managing Future Challenges for Safety, Springer International Publishing, pp.59-62, 2022, Springer-Briefs in Applied Sciences and Technology, 978-3-031-07804-0. 10.1007/978-3-031-07805-7_7. hal-03972651

HAL Id: hal-03972651

<https://hal.science/hal-03972651>

Submitted on 3 Feb 2023

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Chapter 7

Senior Mentoring, Skills Transfer Subject to Conditions



Tania Navarro Rodríguez and Alexandre Largier

Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the main findings of French language studies on senior mentoring. It shows in particular that mentoring is a protean system which can be defined and fashioned by the way it is exercised, by the type of activity that it involves and by the context in which the mentoring practices take place.

Keywords Mentoring · Skill transfer · Seniors

7.1 Introduction

Although much debated, the involvement of seniors in mentoring has aroused the interest of manufacturers, the government and researchers in France for several years, as demonstrated by the “Masingue” government report published in 2009 on senior mentoring, the consideration given to this issue in risk industries, in particular the nuclear industry, as well as the numerous publications dedicated to this subject in the human and social sciences (sociology, education sciences, management sciences, etc.). All these players seem to share the same concern: mentoring, and in particular senior mentoring, is considered to be the most appropriate solution to solve the problem of skill transfer.

Recent French language studies have analysed how seniors develop transverse mentoring skills [4]. Other studies have explored how to enhance company mentoring, demonstrating in particular that mentoring is “partner-based teaching, which commits the company collectively” [5]. Lastly, some studies have focused on the deployment of mentoring [6], placing the emphasis on certain limitations in the implementation of senior mentoring.

This document puts in perspective some data drawn from French language literature dedicated to senior mentoring. We will try to identify certain questions that

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need to be answered concerning the implementation of senior mentoring. Although mentoring can be defined

as a teaching approach based on a guided work situation [and a] professional socialization instrument. [5, p. 24]

it nevertheless remains a protean system. It seems useful to investigate the way it is exercised, the type of activity and the context in which the mentoring practices take place.

7.2 Mentoring, Numerous Forms and Varied Contexts

Mentoring may aim to reproduce practices or anticipate changes [8]. The extent to which company mentoring is formalised also contributes to the definition and organisation of mentoring: implementation or not of training for the mentors to prepare them for their roles; implementation or not of means, times and places giving mentors the opportunity to examine their practices. According to B. Masingue, there are numerous types of mentoring: traditional mentoring, cross-mentoring, reverse mentoring, expert mentoring, hierarchical mentoring. All these types can be organised in different ways: tandem or collective; fixed or rotating; organised around a team whose members act as mentors on a segment of their activity, or performed by employees working full-time as mentors. Similarly, mentoring can be organised for a given group of jobs or on a cross-company basis. Lastly, the company context must also be considered: depending on its stability and the need to adapt rapidly, mentoring will be more or less appropriate [7].

Some informal mentoring practices have existed for many years, and the skills transmitted on this occasion may extend far beyond the purely technical aspect of the activity. Representations of the profession, the management, the organisation may also be transmitted, as well as local values and standards, etc., which may sometimes conflict with other company messages. In some configurations, the implementation of “institutional” mentoring may destabilise existing practices which have stood the test of time, in particular as regards safety, with for example the transmission of prudence know-how [2].

In his analysis of company mentoring operating modes, [8] demonstrates that this function is often poorly formalised, the mentor’s activities not being precisely defined. In this case, it often consists of informal actions obeying a training logic in a work situation. According to this author, mentoring practices cover several broad types of activity, in particular: induction of new hires aiming to integrate them into a project and to give a presentation of the company entities; explanation of the work and day-to-day follow-up; assessment of the results, which is often poorly formalised (spontaneous assessment). For all these reasons, evaluating the effects of mentoring proves difficult [3].

7.3 Seniors, All Mentors

The assumption that seniors are the best placed and the most able to act as mentors has been questioned by the Masingue report:

The idea that mentors would obviously be seniors and that seniors are automatically good mentors must be seriously put into perspective in view of the facts. It would even represent a “false truth”. [7, p. 5]

Firstly, acting as a mentor is not purely a matter of possessing high technical skills. The mentor must also possess basic teaching skills and must be willing to be a mentor. Transmission does not simply consist in “pouring” a skill into a container—the mentee. Mentoring is a teaching–learning relationship which, to be effective, feeds on discussions, questioning and professional arguments [1]. The mentoring activity therefore involves listening, reformulation, stimulation and reflection regarding the role-play conditions.

In addition, the mentoring activity also affects the mentor. Mentoring cannot just be considered as a simple one-way transfer of skills from the mentor to the mentee. This practice has a retroactive effect on mentors. These effects of mentorship on the mentors themselves are generally not perceived by organisations. The practices may be explained by reflection–action situations at work: development of the ability to consider and analyse situations and practices (transverse skill transferable to other situations) and development of a critical eye on oneself, one’s practices and one’s own ability to act by taking a detached look at the action (meta-skill: ability to look at one’s own skills and means of action). Wittorski indicates that mentoring may lead the mentor to produce a critical distancing approach [8, p. 22].

This is because this attitude promotes a reflexive position and because the new hire is also a source of enrichment for the mentor. For these two reasons, mentors may have to change their practices, positions and representations, a situation which may be badly received when not chosen freely.

In addition, in some activities, seniors are not necessarily the best placed to perform mentoring activities. This is especially true in activities where knowledge quickly becomes obsolete, for example sales activities where the products change rapidly, and activities in which the technical devices used are being constantly upgraded. This may also be the case of highly arduous activities in which the community (and the organisation) may choose to “preserve” the seniors by keeping them away from the field and by assigning them administrative, preparation or site monitoring tasks, for example.

Lastly, in some organisations with rapid job turnover, a senior in the company, even with extensive general experience, may be a relative newcomer to their job. And to think that a senior is familiar with the field just because they worked in it 20 years ago may prove dangerous since, frequently, everything has moved on since then.

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