

March/April 2013

The Bench^{er}

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN INNS OF COURT[®]



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The Power of Informal Mentoring Programs

BY TAMMY A. PATTERSON AND MARK J. KORF

Developing a successful career in law is challenging in many aspects. It often requires skillfully navigating a combination of objectives: completing a quality legal education, developing skills as a practitioner, finding a firm or organization that is a right fit, seizing the right opportunities, and more.

Mentoring has long been a popular and valuable tool for assisting law students and lawyers in their professional development and career advancement. Mentoring relationships provide a variety of benefits both to the individuals who participate as mentors and mentees, as well as to the firm or organization involved. Associates rank mentoring as the second-highest priority for their professional development, behind only work-related, on-the-job training. While mentoring—both formal and informal—is widespread, little research has been done on the topic until now.

First In-Depth Study of Mentoring

The National Association for Law Placement, Inc. (NALP) Foundation for Law Career Research & Education and Beyond the Bar, part of West LegalEdcenter, a division of Thomson Reuters,

recently partnered to conduct a first-of-its-kind, in-depth study of lawyer mentoring programs.

The study examined mentoring programs provided by law schools, law firms, and bar organizations. A series of surveys was distributed to lawyers, law firm and law school administrators, law students, and state and local bar associations. The objective was to gain a comprehensive and well-rounded perspective on the state of mentoring in the legal profession. The research examined whether programs and the relationships that develop are formal or informal, how often lawyers and students participate in these relationships, and mentoring program objectives and benefits.

The results from this comprehensive research study yielded valuable information regarding mentoring programs and relationships that can have a lasting,

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positive impact on career success. This article looks at one particular aspect of the research findings—the success of informal mentoring programs in law firms.

Program Structures, Training and Importance

Mentoring—the pairing of law students or new associates—with more experienced attorneys—is a time-honored practice that is widespread throughout the legal profession. The vast majority (87%) of law firms participating in the study reported that they currently have a mentoring or associate integration program. For most firms, the mentoring program has a dedicated budget and has been in place for six years or more.

In the vast majority of firms, the programs are mandatory for most newly admitted lawyers (93%) and laterally hired associates (79%). However, most law firms participating in the study do not currently offer specialty mentoring programs specifically designed for women or ethnic minority lawyers. Half of the firms stated that they offer formal training for mentees, while 43% offer training for those serving as mentors.

Of the lawyers surveyed, 69% currently participate as a mentee in either a formal mentoring program and/or informal mentoring relationship. For the mentees, career development and goals are stated as the most important topics for which they consult with a mentor. Other important topics included business skills, legal skills, and new client development skills.

For the 12% of firms that currently do not have mentoring programs, the reasons most commonly cited were lack of available staff to manage the program (54%) and lack of prioritization by firm leadership (54%).

Objectives

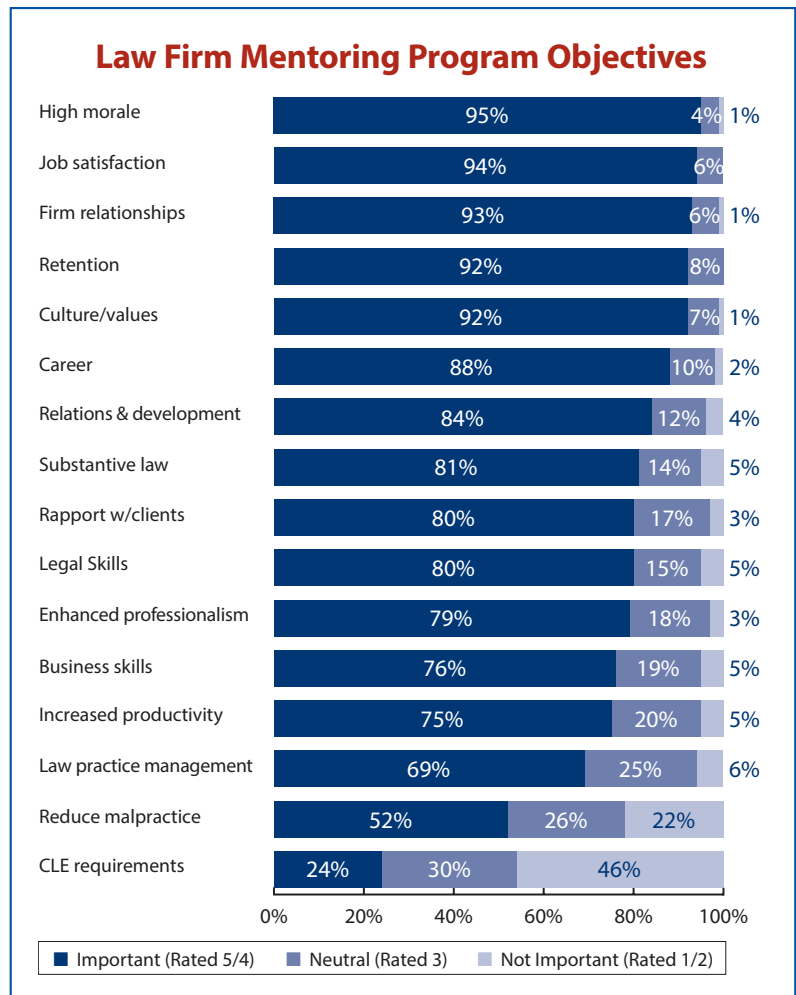
Law firms reported that the most important objectives connected with mentoring programs were maintaining high morale amongst the firm's lawyers, increased job satisfaction, better relationships/networking within the firm, and improved retention.

Objectives that were ranked as less important by participating law firms included the reduction or prevention of malpractice or other claims against the firm (52%) and assisting attorneys with meeting CLE requirements (24%).

Informal Mentoring

One of the most interesting aspects of the research involved its findings on the unique nature and benefits of informal mentoring relationships.

Unlike formal mentoring programs, informal mentoring occurs and develops organically. There is no pre-existing program to follow. It consists of



two people who are compatible and get together to share ideas and learn from each other. One individual takes the role of teacher or mentor while the other acts as the mentee or protégé.

Not surprisingly, results from this study revealed that informal mentoring programs are far more common at smaller and mid-size law firms. Nearly half of firms with 100 or fewer attorneys (45%) report having informal mentoring programs, compared to only 30% of firms with between 101 and 250 attorneys. For large firms—with more than 250 attorneys—only about 3% have an informal mentoring program.

The study results also show that many attorneys are currently participating in an informal mentoring relationship regardless of whether their firm has a mentoring program. More than three-quarters (77%) of attorneys across all firm sizes say they participate as a mentee in an informal mentoring program, compared with 67% of attorneys who participate in formal mentoring programs. Even at firms with more

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than 500 attorneys, more than 70% of attorneys say they have informal mentoring relationships.

The vast majority of mentees (82%) met their informal mentor through their law firm or the organization where they work. Mentees most commonly said that they found their informal mentor by working together on a daily basis, working together on cases or projects, having the mentor in their practice group, or that the relationship developed organically over time. Solo practitioners were more likely to state they met their informal mentors through another firm or organization, a local bar organization, a prior employment relationship, or through another way, such as a social group or a professional function. In addition, 67% of mentees report that they have more than one informal mentor relationship.

Three-quarters of mentees say they meet with their mentor at least once a month. More than one-quarter report that they meet in-person more than 10 times a month.

Benefits of Informal Mentoring

The lawyers surveyed rate informal mentoring relationships as extremely beneficial. These findings are consistent regardless of firm size. The data also revealed that respondents were significantly more likely to rate informal mentoring relationships as extremely beneficial compared to formal mentoring relationships. Overwhelming, 95% of lawyers participating in informal mentoring relationships rated the experience as “very beneficial” or “extremely beneficial.” Only one percent rated it as “not beneficial.” Those figures are significantly better than respondents’ ratings of formal mentoring programs.

	INFORMAL MENTORING	FORMAL MENTORING
Beneficial	95%	63%
Neutral	4%	20%
Not Beneficial	1%	17%

Participating lawyers reported that the greatest values and benefits realized through their informal mentoring relationship were:

- Advice on career and professional development
- Being comfortable going to mentor with any question
- Providing a different/new perspective
- Giving insight into firm’s culture/relations
- Providing introductions/networking opportunities
- Opportunities for candid conversations

- Offering general advice
- Helping to develop substantive skills
- Helping to develop client relations and development skills

Making Mentoring a Priority

A successful mentoring relationship can clearly establish a “win-win” dynamic for all parties involved: the law student, the new associate, the mentoring attorney, and the firm itself. The mentee gains valuable guidance on everything from legal and business skills to professional development to networking to professionalism and civility, and more. The mentoring attorney and the firm gain improved morale, job satisfaction, retention, productivity, and professionalism.

While the vast majority of participating lawyers rate mentoring as beneficial, the gains become even more dramatic when looking at the greater success seen in informal mentoring as compared to formal mentoring.

While most law firms have mentoring programs in place, there is an opportunity to expand and increase the effectiveness of those programs by encouraging informal mentoring. Firms can look for ways to build informal mentoring into the structures, policies and budgets of their existing formal mentoring programs. Because most lawyers are already participating as a mentor—whether formally or informally—it may involve shifting some of the time that they currently allot for formal mentoring towards more informal mentoring relationships.

More to Explore on Mentoring

The issues discussed in this article form only a small part of a broader discussion that we hope will take place regarding mentoring and its benefits to the legal community. The study conducted by the NALP Foundation and West LegalEdcenter is the most comprehensive analysis of mentoring done to date. It examines numerous other aspects and opportunities for mentoring, including those involving law schools, bar associations, and lawyers in the public sector, among others.

We look forward to additional discussions in the future on the study’s findings and how mentoring can and should be used to promote development for the next generation of lawyers. ♦

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