# WORKPLACE MENTORING

An Overview of APQC Best Practices Study Findings

As virtual learning becomes more ubiquitous, people may wonder whether traditional, high-touch training and development approaches like mentoring still have a role to play. But the past few years have seen a resurgence of interest in both formal and informal mentoring programs. In APQC's 2014 research on developing and leveraging technical experts inside organizations, 89 percent of respondents said their firms use mentoring or apprenticeship to help scientific and technical employees develop their skills and competencies. And among 11 tools and approaches included on the survey, mentoring ranked as one of the top two ways to accelerate learning and development, with 59 percent of users rating it as effective or very effective (Figure 1).

If Your Organization Has a Mentoring Initiative, How Effective Is It in Helping You Leverage and Develop Experts?
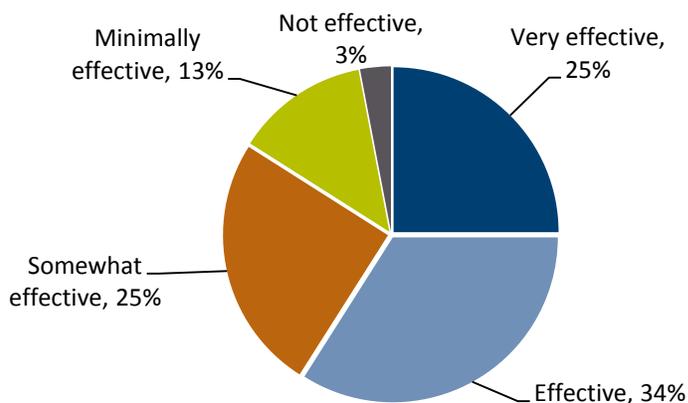
Source: Bridging the Expertise Gap in Science, Engineering, and Technology, and Math: Data Report

N=663

Figure 1

Based on these promising survey results, APQC's knowledge management and human capital management research groups launched a joint, large-scale study on workplace mentoring in 2015. The intent of this research was to understand how organizations position and structure their mentoring initiatives, the level of support they provide to mentors and mentees, and the features most closely associated with program success.

As part of this project, the research team conducted 10 one-hour interviews with individuals responsible for mentoring at organizations with mature, effective programs. The programs

varied in scope and format, but each had been in place at least two years and was generating demonstrable results. The research team wrote and published case studies based on seven of the 10 interviews. It also analyzed the aggregate interview responses to identify themes and best practices, which are encapsulated in this report.

THE BEST PRACTICES

In conducting this research, APQC identified 14 best practices associated with designing, implementing, and sustaining workplace mentoring programs. These practices, categorized by theme, are listed below. The full report, available in APQC's [Workplace Mentoring for Technical and Nontechnical Audiences Collection](#), provides additional details on each practice along with supporting examples from the featured organizations.

DEVELOPING A PURPOSE-BUILT MENTORING PROGRAM

1. **Clearly define the business purpose of mentoring.** Although the research uncovered a rich diversity of mentoring programs, each focuses on a specific set of mentee learning objectives and business outcomes. In analyzing the programs, APQC grouped the business purposes of workplace mentoring into four broad categories: the transfer of discipline-specific knowledge; career pathing and counseling; the development of business acumen and soft skills; and the dissemination of "insider knowledge" about an organization's structure, norms, culture, and professional networks.

2. **Design the mentoring program to suit its business purpose.** The business purpose categories listed in the previous finding are neither neat nor mutually exclusive, but they have profound implications for program design. In analyzing the featured mentoring programs, APQC found that the business purpose category into which a program falls influences how mentorships are structured. Affected elements include the degree of rigor associated with the program, the extent to which mentee goals and outcomes should be visible to line managers and HR, the appropriate duration and format of mentoring relationships, and the organizational distance that should separate mentors and mentees (e.g., the hierarchical levels between them and whether they work in the same business function or unit).

SELECTING AND PAIRING MENTORS AND MENTEES

3. **When mentoring focuses on discipline knowledge transfer, select mentees based on learning needs and mentors based on instructional capabilities.** For this type of mentoring, organizations tend to be more selective regarding who can participate. They establish strong guidelines—and, in some cases, firm requirements—to determine which employees require instruction in a given area and which employees have the requisite expertise to mentor.

4. **When mentoring focuses on career counseling or soft skills development, make participation as inclusive as possible**. For this type of mentoring, organizations minimize participation requirements in order to address diverse mentee learning objectives and boost satisfaction and engagement across the workforce. To ensure a sufficient supply of mentors to meet mentee demand, many programs have broad parameters for who can contribute as a career or soft-skills mentor and actively recruit potential mentors throughout the organizational ranks.

5. **For all forms of mentoring, give mentees a say in the pairing process.** For career or soft skills mentoring, this usually means letting mentees pick their preferred mentors from a pool of available candidates. When mentoring focuses on the transfer of discipline knowledge, managers and mentoring program leaders tend to get more involved in the pairing process to ensure that mentees are matched with mentors who can help them with their specific learning needs. However, even these programs seek mentees' input and take their preferences into consideration when pairing them with mentors.

THE MENTORING PROCESS

6. **Have mentors and mentees define learning objectives at the start of their mentorships.** Regardless of the business purpose a mentorship aims to achieve, participants need clear goals regarding activities and outcomes. Setting learning objectives gives pairs a sense of direction and a target to shoot for. It also encourages frank discussion and prevents mentors and mentees from approaching their relationships with wildly different expectations.

7. **Establish clear timelines for mentorships, and encourage mentoring pairs to set ground rules to guide their interactions.** Mentorship duration varies widely by scope and business purpose, but a defined endpoint helps focus relationships and ensure they don't peter out before mentees fulfill their learning objectives. To clarify expectations and avoid potential misunderstandings, organizations should encourage mentors and mentees to lay out the logistical details of when, where, and how frequently they will meet as well as roles and responsibilities for sustaining the relationship.

8. **Embed broader networking opportunities in the mentoring process.** Mentorships often forge bonds between employees from different generations, hierarchical levels, and functional areas who might not otherwise meet in the course of their jobs. Many of the featured mentoring programs capitalize on this by encouraging mentors and mentees to introduce each other to colleagues and use their mentor pairings as jumping-off points to broaden their professional networks.

TRAINING AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

9. **Train mentors and mentees on roles and expectations, communication strategies, and relationship-building techniques.** The research suggests that a range of training styles and

formats can be effective, as long as both mentors and mentees emerge with a clear understanding of their responsibilities. Mentor training tends to be behavior-based, focusing on ways to talk to mentees and build trust. Mentee training shows participants how to ask the right questions and learn from their mentors, rather than placing all the burden of relationship building on the mentors' shoulders.

10. **Provide tools and templates as needed to ensure productive interactions.** Almost all the featured organizations supply documentation to help mentoring pairs establish objectives, track activities, and make the most of their relationships. Some offer additional tools to guide meetings and conversations and help mentees identify supplementary learning opportunities.

11. **Proactively market the mentoring program to recruit potential mentors.** Attracting qualified mentors in sufficient numbers to meet mentee demand is a common challenge across the featured programs. To acquire the mentors needed for their initiatives, program leaders use a combination of information sessions, recruitment through managers, positive word-of-mouth via past and current participants, and personal outreach to qualified candidates.

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING OUTCOMES

12. **Define a broad vision of success based on the objectives of the mentoring program.** A common theme across the featured organizations is that they began their mentoring programs with a clear notion of what success would entail. This allows them to focus their programs—and any assessment of those programs—on the goals they want to achieve.

13. **Use participation, activity, and process measures to assess mentoring program health.** Almost all the featured organizations track participation statistics to ensure that their mentoring programs are healthy and thriving. Most also ask participants for feedback on the mentoring process in order to surface improvement opportunities.

14. **Articulate the value of mentoring through a combination of learning outcomes, satisfaction data, anecdotal evidence, and success stories.** For programs that focus on the transfer of discipline knowledge, outcome measures typically center on the specific skills and competencies that mentees develop. But for career development and soft skills mentoring, organizations may fall back on anecdotal evidence and success stories to convey mentoring's impact on individual and organizational performance.

THE FEATURED ORGANIZATIONS

Below are brief overviews of the seven organizations whose mentoring initiatives are featured in this study. Some are named, and some have chosen to appear anonymously. More details on each organization and its respective mentoring strategy are available in the full report and

accompanying case studies, which can be found in APQC's [Workplace Mentoring for Technical and Nontechnical Audiences Collection](#).

AEROSPACE COMPANY

At the aerospace company, mentoring is one element of an enterprise-wide knowledge sharing initiative designed to help the organization stay competitive and maintain technical excellence. An enterprise-wide mentoring lead residing in the HR function provides tools and resources to support an array of mentoring programs that vary in formality and focus.

For this research, APQC focused on a technical mentoring program that supports the aerospace company's engineers. An engineering workforce development manager collaborates with HR to promote the benefits of technical mentoring, make information about potential mentors broadly accessible, and provide a toolkit that mentors and mentees can use to guide their relationships. However, program participants and their managers have flexibility to decide how formally they want to plan out and report on their mentoring relationships.

CARDINAL HEALTH INC.

Cardinal Health is a healthcare services company specializing in the distribution of pharmaceuticals and medical products. The organization launched an enterprise-wide formal mentoring initiative in 2011, which was then significantly reimagined and improved in early 2015. The initiative encompasses nine formal mentoring programs, five led by independent program managers (usually line leaders or HR representatives) and four monitored at the corporate level through the mentoring program within the HR function.

The goals of Cardinal Health's mentoring programs vary, with some focused on employees facing specific challenges or career milestones and others enabling more open-ended learning and development. The most expansive is an open mentoring initiative that allows employees to learn almost anything they believe would help them on the job, from specific knowledge and skills to more general strategies for career management and personal effectiveness. Additional programs are tied to business initiatives, such as leadership development and embracing diversity, or to knowledge transfer and learning within particular functions or business segments. All of the programs leverage a common software platform and are overseen at a high level by the enterprise-wide mentoring program manager.

GOVLOOP

GovLoop Government Social Media and Knowledge Network (GovLoop) is an online social network serving more than 200,000 federal, state, and local government employees. The network provides a range of resources and services—including blogs, research guides, complimentary trainings, online discussion forums, and networking opportunities—to help its members solve problems, share knowledge, and advance their government careers.

In 2011, GovLoop launched a mentoring program to connect senior government employees with rising leaders in various branches of federal, state, and local government. The program—which is application-based and highly competitive—aims to provide high-potential government employees with advice and support to accelerate their career development and ensure they remain in the public sector. GovLoop handles the mentor/mentee selection processes and hosts live and virtual events to inspire, inform, and encourage networking among program participants. The organization also provides an end-to-end platform that houses profiles of potential mentors, mentoring action plans and dashboards that participants can review and update during their mentoring meetings, and learning resources that help mentees achieve their development and career goals. To date, the program has facilitated more than 350 mentoring partnerships.

MD ANDERSON CANCER CENTER

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center (MD Anderson) is a highly acclaimed cancer research and treatment center and degree-granting academic institution. In 2009, the organization reinvigorated its formal mentoring program based on results from an employee opinion survey. The current program provides three different levels of mentoring:

1. organization-fit mentoring, which helps new employees acclimate to MD Anderson's culture and build workplace relationships;
2. job-fit mentoring, which includes various mentoring opportunities designed to provide employees with a deeper understanding of job responsibilities so that they may become high performers; and
3. career-fit mentoring, in which employees interested in a particular field can seek out a mentor to help them navigate correctly down that career path.

The program, which receives high-level support from the director of organization development, provides tools, templates, training, and systems to support mentoring relationships and the transfer of knowledge. An institutional mentoring council allows the organization's major divisions to provide high-level direction and makes mentoring more of an employee-driven vs. a solely HR-driven program.

NATURAL RESOURCE COMPANY

The research includes examples of technical mentoring practices at a global natural resource company that asked to appear anonymously. The program focuses on the geology group for a U.S. geographic region, which includes more than 100 geologists with varying levels of experience.

The geology group launched its formal mentoring program to address technical knowledge gaps and ensure less experienced geologists could take on more complex work, advance their careers, and ultimately provide more value to the organization. The program combines

classroom training with high-level career mentoring and technical coaching from internal experts. According to the organization, what began as a relatively informal effort has evolved into a robust system for identifying business needs, evaluating employee skillsets, and providing appropriate coaching in both one-on-one and classroom settings.

PRAXAIR INC.

Praxair, a global industrial gases company, positions mentoring as a key component of its workforce development strategy. It offers a number of mentoring initiatives to accelerate the development of employees' technical and engineering skills as well as strengthen their soft skills in areas such as leadership, collaboration, innovation, and communication. Two mentoring initiatives that focus on Praxair's technical employee development are its leadership technical orientation program (LTOP) and the R&D professional development program.

LTOP is a formal two-year program that expedites the development of new technical hires. The first year focuses on extensive technical training curriculum. In the second year, this training is supplemented with job-specific soft skills development, technical project assignments, and professional mentoring. As part of the program, each participant enters into a formal mentoring relationship with a more experienced employee who provides insights, challenges, and guidance through the learning process. According to Praxair, the program has significantly reduced the time it takes for recent graduates to become fully competent in high-profile, technically demanding, safety-intensive positions.

Praxair is also committed to mentoring opportunities for mid- and later-career employees. For example, its R&D professional development program provides just-in-time, "hands-on" developmental opportunities for R&D employees. The program aims to meet a variety of development goals through structured job shadowing, cross-training, internships, and job transfers. Its informal nature allows participants to address key development needs and avoid the overwhelming time commitments that can be involved with more formal but less targeted mentoring arrangements.

U.S. ARMY ARDEC

The U.S. Army Armament Research, Development and Engineering Center (ARDEC) is a specialized research, development, and engineering center that provides armaments and munitions engineering, design, and development assistance to the U.S. Army. Mentoring has been ingrained in ARDEC's culture for more than 30 years. Two main forms of mentoring exist within the organization: an informal mentoring process to acclimate new hires to their roles; and a more formal mentoring program that helps employees meet career and development goals, learn about the broader organization, build their professional networks, and cultivate personal growth.

The formal ARDEC Mentoring Program, which is open to all employees, pairs new hires and other less experienced employees with more senior colleagues who act as advisors and confidants. After joining the program, mentors and mentees undergo extensive training and participate in a round-robin event where mentees meet potential mentors and select who they want to work with. After the initial pairing, there are few hard-and-fast rules in terms of the duration of mentorships or key milestones that mentors and protégés must meet. Rather, the program is a catalyst that encourages employees from different levels and parts of the organization to meet, network, and exchange ideas and advice. The program supports this ongoing cross-pollination by hosting quarterly mentoring socials, which include both speakers and opportunities for mentoring participants to mingle and communicate informally.