



DESIGNING AN ONLINE MENTORING TOOL TO SUPPORT MSC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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Summary

This paper discusses the development of the University Bradford Electronic (UBE) - mentoring system. The aim of the study is to develop, implement and evaluate a virtual on line mentorship area for health and social services management students and mentors. This study came about following a review of students undertaking a part-time open/distance master's course for health and social care managers (Prowse et al 2008) where we found that many students did not have a mentor and that formal mentorship arrangements within their organisations were sporadic or none existent.

There are a great many online mentoring sites available on the web (e.g. horsesmouth) but these target business professionals, literature supporting the use of online or e-mentoring (Rogan 1997, Mueller 2004, Headlam-Wells et al 2005, Knapczyk 2005) led us to believe that a dedicated e-mentoring system to support our students would be a useful way forward.

This paper discusses the research methodology that will be followed to plot the study and discusses design of the ube-mentoring system.

Introduction

Since the election of New Labour in 1997 there has been a plethora of Human Resource Management (HRM) policies and documents concerned with modernising health care, developing the workforce and supporting staff in their new roles (DH, 1998; DH, 2000a; DH,2000b; DH, 2002; DH, 2005a; Prowse and Prowse, 2008). Part of the debate underpinning this approach is that changing working practices may lead to greater productivity and improved individual performance (DH, 2005a:26; Hyde et al 2005). The argument being, that job performance could improve if workers' perceive closer links between effort, performance and valued rewards (Kelly, 1992). As a recent HR policy document stated:

Ultimately, working differently and productive use of time means local employers making full use of the talent available to them, getting better service efficiencies and, importantly, boosting job satisfaction and motivation for staff.

(Department of Health, 2005a:26)

However, for this to be fully realised it is imperative that staff are appropriately supported and mentored in the workplace. A number of studies have examined managers' experiences of support and mentorship in the workplace (Burke and McKeen, 1990; Dreher and Ash, 1990; Gaskill, 1993). The findings indicate that where support and advice are provided, outcomes are more positive. Equally, when individuals receive support from their organisation, they not only value the organisation more, but are more likely to have increased job satisfaction and a better performance (LA Rocco et al, 1980; Osca et al, 2005).

The extent to which this is the case in the health and social care sector is unclear. To date there has been little work undertaken to establish the views of health and social service managers about the types, if any, of mentorship and support provided or how or where they obtain advice and support to undertake their work. Moreover, it is unclear where managers obtain support or advice if no formal mechanisms operate within the organisation.

As part of our induction for a part-time open/distance masters course for health and social care managers, we include a session outlining the benefits of obtaining a mentor at work to support them whilst undertaking the course and to help them access development opportunities. We recently undertook a review of the course and surveyed students (N=52) to establish their experiences of mentorship (Prowse et al 2008). The results showed that many did not have a mentor and that formal mentorship arrangements within their organisations were sporadic or none existent. Many students wrote that it was, 'very important to have a mentor to act as a sounding board'. This lack of mentorship prompted us to undertake this research and to re-examine our approach to mentorship.

The aim of the study is to develop, implement and evaluate a virtual on line mentorship area for health and social services management students and mentors. This paper will discuss the development of the University Bradford Electronic (UBE) -mentoring system.

Main Body

Mentorship has been defined as

“A process whereby a more experienced person (mentor) provides guidance, support, knowledge and opportunities to a less experienced person (protégé) for the purpose of career advancement”

Wasburn (2006:45)

Waters et al (2003) discuss the importance of supporting nurse managers with a mentor programme in order to facilitate career advancement, they also suggest that this process is time consuming and a greater use of technology to facilitate the mentoring process would be beneficial. Online mentoring is not a new concept and has been used to support teachers undergoing online training for many years (Rogan 1997; Knapczyk 2005). Equally, concerns that e-mentoring may not be as supportive as face to face mentoring is discounted in a number of studies. Mueller (2004) suggests that computer mediated communication may in fact aid communication as individuals do not categorise people and this reduces the impact of status differences. Headlam-Wells et al (2005) comment that e-mentoring can enrich the mentoring relationship through a reflective process that explores values, feelings and objects more freely and more timely than face to face communication. Whilst Headlam-Wells' paper discusses the establishment of a community of practice (Allan 2002, Wenger 2002) to establish the notion that not only does e-mentoring enhance the one to one relationship, but opens up the possibilities of group support and interaction. Indeed Molloy (2005) believes that the development of virtual networks are the way forward to support career mentoring. Although there is evidence (Feeney and Bozeman 2008) to suggest that network mentoring can enhance careers, the type of mentoring being developed to support our students is

aimed at enhancing their learning and applying that learning in the workplace. The idea of transferring learning into the workplace through facilitated mentorship was described by Belling et al (2005), this notion is a pivotal one in the development of our ube-mentoring system as the essence of what we want our students to experience is the application of theory to practice in a 'real' and practical way. The ube-mentoring system will support this concept.

The results from our earlier study showed that students who had a mentor (Table 1) valued this and those who were not supported (Table 2) would have valued the opportunity to have a mentor to support them through their studies.

Table 1

In what 3 ways has having a mentor been helpful?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing contacts • Support • Advice • Providing ideas • Giving encouragement • Challenging ideas • Sharing their experience • Talking things through • Having a different perspective • Help me relate my learning to world of work • Provide advice at work to cope with different situations • Given me a completely different perspective • Support- academic and emotional • Superb feedback • Act as a sounding board to bounce ideas off • Allowed me time to fit everything in • Think differently

Table 2

If you don't have a mentor: In what 3 ways would having a mentor help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Another opinion/persons view • Learn from their experience • Challenging progress (or lack of it) • Support • Guidance • Discuss feasibility of ideas for assignments • Other suggestions, sources of information • Clarifying of career objectives and direction

In order to address the issues identified in our study we are developing the ube-mentoring site as a multi-purpose support system designed to meet the above reported needs of our students. There will be three separate elements to the system, the first being that past students who have agreed to become Mentors will be invited to submit profiles of their experiences, talents, and ways in which they can support students on our programme. Their details will be uploaded onto the area and students will then be able to choose an

appropriate mentor and enter into a mentor/mentee relationship; between them they will decide the frequency and method of support. Students accessing the site will need to understand that the mentor will only be able to support a certain number of mentees so they may not get their first choice. The second part of the system will be a learning network space where students can share issues and offer support to each other, any of the mentors can enter into the discussions in this part. A final element of the system will be a dedicated 'pearls of wisdom area' where anyone can offer ideas and suggestions.

The site will be supported by PebblePAD, this facility enables students to keep an e-portfolio, which they can reflect and share with their mentors and others they may chose, this facility allows them to keep a track of their reflections and agreed actions. These reflections may then be used within their academic assignments to provide evidence of the application of theory into practice or in relation to issues that emerge in their working environment. This then connects the transfer of learning to the whole process.

The developed site will be piloted with our September 2009 student (N=60) intake and will be evaluated in May 2009.

- **Methodology**

The methodology will include a questionnaire, an on line evaluative discussion forum and semi-structured interviews. The students participating in the project will be involved at all stages and therefore bring to the research their experiences of being a student on the course, working as a health and social care manager and mentor. Following a literature review and the development, of a virtual on line mentorship area, mentors and past students will be invited to participate in the project and register as a mentor in the virtual on line mentorship area. Current students will be invited to use the virtual on line mentorship area. Both mentors and students will be asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences of the ube-mentoring system and to evaluate it. Members will also be invited to participate in an on line evaluative discussion about the site and mentorship offered, it is expected that this will be an ongoing forum where the evaluation will develop over time, this will allow us to see the journey of the mentors and mentees. A random sample of volunteer students/mentees will be interviewed about their experiences of the virtual on line mentorship area.

- **Analysis and Evaluation**

Analysis of the questionnaires will be undertaken using SPSS. The data from the online evaluative discussion will be analysed and incorporated into the themes and issues from the survey and interviews. The tapes and/or notes from interviews will be transcribed and the data analysed and coded to establish the themes and issues (Miles and Huberman, 1994). All the data collected during the pilot from students/mentors will be used to evaluate, shape and refine the virtual ube-mentorship area.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed an e-mentoring system that will be developed by the Division of Service Development and Improvement, School of Health Studies, University of Bradford. The system will be ready for piloting in September 2009, and evaluated using the multi method data collected in May 2010. The results of the study will allow us to develop a mentoring system that will provide support for our students and aid them in transferring their learning into their work and practice.

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