

Mentoring Culture as Employees' Career Success Factor in Polish Organizations

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Changes in employment relationships and the spread of flexible forms of employment call for the search for such methods of employee development that would better fit the needs of both employees and Polish organizations in a turbulent environment. Studies of literature on the subject point out the importance of mentoring culture for the development of employees' competences and their career success. This paper tries to answer the question: in what way creating the culture of mentoring can contribute to employee objective and subjective career success in organizations? This goal will be achieved by presenting the results of a survey research carried out in 155 organizations operating in southern Poland. Generally, the findings suggest that mentoring culture is positively related to subjective success but it is not connected with objective success of employees.

Keywords: mentoring culture, employees' development, career success.

Introduction

Human capital is considered a fundamental driver of achieving and maintaining competitive advantage in contemporary organizations. High level of specialization makes it more difficult for employers and employees to align their mutual needs and demands. Dynamic pace of changes and rapid development of knowledge make the required employees' competences become more complex and the period when they are up-to-date is shorter. At the same time, traditional long-term relationships between an employer and employees in Polish organizations are gradually replaced with temporary, flexible, contract-based arrangements. Career paths of employees become more diverse and complicated. Nowadays, every employee should be prepared for changes in his or her career. Therefore, it has become vital for both an organization's and employees' survival to pay special attention to

the issues connected with continuous learning. It should become a fundamental value, emphasised by organizational culture to prevent obsolescence of knowledge. In this context many researchers indicate the importance of creating mentoring culture which can encourage employees' development in organizations simultaneously contributing to employees and corporate success.

This paper attempts to answer the following questions: what are the relationships between mentoring culture and career success of employees in contemporary Polish organizations and in what way can mentoring culture contribute to employee career success? This goal is achieved by presenting the results of empirical research. It should be stressed that this research is one of the first attempts to study these problems in the context of changing relationships between an employer and employees in Polish organizations.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

The concept of mentoring and mentoring culture

In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in the use of mentoring to encourage the development of employees. It is easy to assume that mentoring is a new phenomenon being the answer to development needs of employees in contemporary organizations, disregarding its historical background. However, in history there are many examples of mentoring relationships that are important in the development of protégés. Traditionally, a mentor is understood as a person who is an experienced teacher and a guide, endowed with trust and respect, a person who possesses knowledge and high competence, and who serves as a role model (Parsloe & Wray, 2002). In the context of employee development the concept of mentoring has been popular since the late 1970s. In organizations, mentoring is traditionally viewed as a long-term, development relationship between two individuals: an older, higher-ranking and more experienced person i.e. a mentor and a younger and less experienced member of the organisation called the protégé or mentee (Kram, 1983). The mentoring relationship usually develops over and above formal work duties. Kram (1983) identified two groups of mentoring functions, i.e. career-related and psychosocial functions. Career-related functions comprising coaching, protection, challenging assignments, sponsorship, exposure and visibility enhance career advancement of the protégé (Kram, 1983, p. 614). Psychosocial functions encompassing role modelling, counselling, friendship, acceptance and confirmation increase the sense of competence, work identity and self-confidence of the protégé (Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Usually, the role of a protégé is taken by young employees. However, the changing context of work and career makes many mature employees also look for mentors as they search for new opportunities of professional development. In some opinions even, nowadays everybody needs a mentor (Clutterbuck, 2004). Sometimes individuals who are protégés in one relationship, simultaneously take the role of a mentor in another relationship. Moreover, today it can be hard for a single mentor to match all developmental needs of a protégé, particularly in highly dynamic career settings. Therefore the co-called multiple mentoring has become popular, whose influence is based on cultural norms and values which are specific for the group (Dansky, 1996).

Mentoring in an organization should be embedded in organizational culture. Mentoring goals and values need to be aligned with organizational norms and values (Bally 2007, p. 145). Organizational culture allows employees to give sense to arising changes and directs their behaviours. It is "glue" which integrates employees around organizational goals. Organizational culture influences perception, interpretation and expectations of employees regarding their work environment, hence it also effects their motivations and attitudes. Today organizations require competent employees who are able to solve problems, take initiative and quickly respond to customers' needs. These high expectations will be fulfilled only if the culture stresses values of learning, knowledge sharing and development both on organizational and individual levels, e.g. mentoring culture.

Mentoring culture encourages employees to actively look for development activities, learning and teaching others (Eddy *et al.*, 2005, p. 386). It can be interpreted as a kind of a learning culture. According to Bates and Khasawneh (2005, p. 98), a learning culture based on beliefs about the importance of learning shared by organizational members, supports and stimulates learning and the use of its effects in organizational environment. Such culture influences employees' perception of organizational practices which support or restrain learning (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2004, p. 374). In mentoring culture employees are expected to aspire after professional development and they are supported in sharing knowledge with other members of the organisation. Every employee has opportunities to share their ideas and experience with others. The value of cooperation and human capital development are emphasized. In this work environment which provides chances for development, employees are able to face new challenges. Mentoring culture accelerates not only individual but also organizational learning processes. The key role in creating the culture of mentoring is played by managers. They should understand links between the use of mentoring in the organization and its culture. To create a culture which is supportive of mentoring practices, managers need to adopt leadership style that will enhance learning

motivation, collaboration and mutual trust, partnership and empowerment (Bally, 2007, p. 145).

Changing employment relationships in Polish organizations

Before system transformation, Polish economy was mostly directed by political issues. This system led to low effectiveness and bureaucratic culture of many Polish organizations (Weinstein & Oboj, 2002). In organizations personnel management performed mainly administrative and political functions. Job security was guaranteed regardless of job performance or economic outcomes of an organization because of the model of lifelong employment. Many employees worked for the same organization until retirement. Hierarchical career model dominated. Career success was mostly dependent on personal connections and “political correctness”. Professional competences were rather second-rate criteria for career development. Such approach stifled employees’ ambitions and willingness to learn (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006, p. 2021). This situation made the problem of employee development of marginal importance.

Along with political changes the process of economic, social and organizational changes has begun (Marzec *et al.*, 2009). New economic conditions gave rise to the growing focus on effectiveness, competitiveness, and development in Polish organizations. Economic transformation has resulted in commercialization and privatization of many Polish enterprises. These processes have also encompassed employment restructuring. Long-term relationships between employees and the employer have gradually been replaced with short-term contract-based arrangements to limit costs and to increase flexibility of Polish enterprises (Marzec & Van der Heijden, 2003). Structural changes within the economy and employment restructuring processes within organizations have led to a difficult situation in the Polish labour market. High unemployment and increasing demand for workforce pose a serious challenge to many employees. Temporary contract arrangements do not provide employees with the security of long-term employment. Growing sense of job insecurity and quick rate of knowledge obsolescence result in the concern of employees for their careers, hence they start to seek new opportunities for professional development to increase their value in the unstable Polish labour market. Simultaneously, these processes are accompanied by changes in employees’ attitudes. Development, self-realization and work success become important values for Polish employees (Marzec & Van der Heiden, 2003; Dobosz-Bourne & Janowicz, 2006). The research conducted on sample population of 1.011 respondents by Social Opinions Research Centre revealed that work has become an important source of life satisfaction (CBOS, 2009, p. 10). Career paths of Polish employees have become

more complicated and diverse. Professional mobility of Poles is rising. Nowadays, the traditional understanding of career as a structural phenomenon sinks into oblivion. The flattening of organizational structures limits the possibilities of a hierarchical career in many Polish organizations. A traditional career model is frequently replaced with a new one, based on lateral movements outside and inside organizational structures. Polish employees have become more responsible for their career development and employability enhancement. Employees' adaptability, willingness to learn and develop, have gained great importance for their career success. The aspect of employees' pro-activeness in searching for new opportunities for professional development has been frequently stressed as a distinct feature allowing them to survive on the demanding labour market. According to many employers, today's employees should be intrinsically ready and willing to seek and exploit opportunities for their career success. For many of them such opportunity is mentoring culture.

Simultaneously, in the face of global economic crisis and growing competition, many Polish organisations have also started to search for new methods of human capital development which allow them to fit the requirements of turbulent environment. However, despite the awareness of the problem, many owners and managers are still frequently unwilling to invest in employee development, particularly in Polish SMEs, because of their limited financial resources. Moreover, ongoing changes in employment relationships make some Polish employers get rid of the responsibility for employees' development very quickly and willingly. However, in knowledge economy, human capital should be considered as a fundamental driver of achieving and maintaining competitive advantage. Polish organizations are faced with new challenges which they will be able to meet only if they develop their human capital. The basis of this process may become creating culture of mentoring which encourages employees' learning and development.

Hypotheses Development

Mentoring culture and career success

Since early days numerous scholars have put emphasis on developmental aspects of mentoring. Many studies confirmed that mentoring positively influenced improvement of protégés' and mentors' competences, accelerating their career development (e.g. Kram, 1983; Headlam-Wells *et al.*, 2006; Bryant & Terborg, 2008). It was found that mentoring is positively related to employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, career commitment, satisfaction with opportunities for promotion (Ragins *et al.*, 2000).

However, mentoring culture is a relatively new phenomenon in Polish organizations. Poland exhibits a relatively larger power distance than Western European countries (Kolman *et al.*, 2003). In practice, the large power distance hinders the establishment of a mentoring culture in Polish organizations. On the other hand, high uncertainty avoidance that is characteristic of Polish culture seems to facilitate creating the culture of mentoring in organizations. In the cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, employees are more willing to seek for mentors than in low uncertainty avoidance, because mentoring reduces the uncertainty of organizational environment (Bozionelos, 2006). In the context of Adaptive Structuration Theory, a mentoring relationship can be perceived as a kind of a social structure determined by its features (Sosik *et al.*, 2005). This theory suggests that mentoring functions and outcomes are maximized when features of mentoring relationship are consistent with features of the environment, e.g. its cultural characteristics.

Many empirical studies show that mentoring positively influences both objective and subjective career success. Most of these studies were conducted in Western economies, where mentoring functions and mentoring culture are better recognized. Despite this fact, mentoring culture may bring a lot of benefits for Polish organizations and their employees. It can be perceived as a chance for human capital development. Mentoring culture facilitates identification and realization of career opportunities, hence it can influence employees' career success, which may be conceptualized in terms of both objective and subjective accomplishments of an individual in his or her career. Objective success refers to objective accomplishments of the individual in his or her career (e.g. promotions, salary, job title, etc.). Conversely, subjective career success pertains to subjective evaluations of an individual's past and prospective career accomplishments (Gattiker & Larwood, 1988; Judge *et al.*, 1995).

In general, changes in Polish economy and limited financial resources of many organizations and difficult situation in the Polish labour market, make Polish organizations and their employees intensively seek for new development opportunities. Mentoring culture may be a particularly valuable and attractive chance for them. Previous research revealed that the results of mentoring depend on the effectiveness of mentoring functions (Bozionelos, 2006). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the impact of mentoring culture on career success of employees depends on the way in which mentors perform their functions. Therefore, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Subjective career success of protégés will be positively related to the mentoring culture in organizations.

Hypothesis 2: Objective career success of protégés will be positively related to the mentoring culture in organizations.

Research methodology

Sample and data collection

In order to verify the formulated hypotheses a survey study was conducted. Empirical research was carried out at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. The final sample encompassed 155 organizations operating in southern Poland. At the first stage, interviews with top management of organizations and/or HRM managers were carried out in order to identify organizations which try to create a mentoring culture and where mentoring is a common organizational practice. Additionally, interviews were aimed to recognize managers who focused on professional development, have or had mentors in the organization and have a broad knowledge of the practice of mentoring in their organization. On the basis of the interviews one respondent was selected from management of each organizations which try to create a mentoring culture.

These organizations were divided according to the kind of activity: 22.6% of the organizations dealt with production activity, 19.4% with wholesale and retail trade, 12.9% with financial intermediation, 7.7% with transport, storage and communication, 5.8% of the organizations constitute hotels and restaurants, 5.2% constitute public administration and 5.2% of the organisations dealt with other community, social and personal service activities. The share of other organizations did not exceed 5% (in total 21.2%). Structure of the organizations according to the number of employees can be presented as follows: 1–49 employees – 25.8%, 50–149 employees – 22.6%, 150–249 employees – 12.9%, above 250 employees – 38.7%. The organizations were also divided as to the period of existence on the market: 12.9% of the organisations existed for up to 5 years, 45.2%, between 6 and 13 years, 23.2%, between 14 and 21 years, 18.7% existed for over 22 years.

Measures

Mentoring culture was measured by means of the level of mentoring functions realized in the organizations with the adopted Ragins and Cotton's (1999) scale, which consisted of thirty three items (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree). Cronbach α for the present sample was 0.94.

Objective career success was measured by items based on the instruments of Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001) including the number of promotions achieved in the organisation, salary/wages, gross income in PLN per year (including salary and bonuses, prizes, share options, etc.).

Subjective career success was measured with items adopted from Gattiker and Larwood (1986), scored on a 7-point rating scale (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree). The items concern the respondents' evaluation of different aspects of their career success, e.g. job success, hierarchical success, financial success, interpersonal relationships and life success. Cronbach α for this sample was 0.87.

Controls. Three key information about the respondents were used as control variables, i.e. gender (coded: 1 – male, 2 – female), age, educational attainment (coded: 1 – Primary education 2 – High school, 3 – Bachelor's degree or recognized equivalent, 4 – Master's degree (or recognised equivalent), 5 – Doctorate or PhD). This information was obtained with single items. Many previous studies indicated that these basic, individual-level variables are significantly related to the employees' career success; thus they can also moderate the examined relationships in the Polish organizations (e.g. Ng *et al.*, 2005).

Results

In order to test the constructed hypotheses, descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were applied. Table 1 shows the results of Pearson's correlation analysis and descriptive statistics of the examined variables. Pearson's correlation coefficients indicate that mentoring culture was significantly, positively associated with subjective career success ($r = 0.43$, $p < .01$) but not with objective success. Therefore the obtained results were in line only with hypothesis 1 but not with hypothesis 2, but to confirm the hypotheses the examined associations should be tested over and above the contribution of control variables (Bozionelos, 2003, p. 56). Therefore the hypotheses were also tested with the hierarchical regressions using one-tailed significance testing since directional relationships had been hypothesized. The control variables including age, educational attainment and gender were entered as one block in the first step into the regression models because previous research suggests that they are key control variables which can affect the examined criteria (Ragins *et al.*, 2000). The stepwise procedure for control variables' inclusion was utilized because statistical power depends on the ratio of cases to variables included in the regression equation. Consequently, only these control variables which were significantly related to the criterion variables were included in the final models (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006).

Hypothesis 1 was tested with hierarchical regressions that utilized general subjective success as criterion (Tab. 2). In the first step controls were entered into the model but only gender made a marginally significant contribution to the total

amount of variance accounted for in scores on general subjective success (Tab. 2). In the second step scores on mentoring culture were forcibly entered in the model. Mentoring culture made a significant addition to the total amount of variance accounted for in scores on subjective success ($\beta = 0.426$, $t = 5.816$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the obtained results confirmed hypothesis 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Examined Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Education	2.43	1.00						
2. Age	31.10	9.86	0.02					
3. Mentoring culture	4.60	0.86	0.03	-0.06				
4. Subjective success	5.15	0.62	0.04	0.02	0.43**			
5. Number of promotions in current organization	1.52	2.03	0.01	0.14	0.05	0.11		
6. Salary	33368	32935	-0.01	0.13	-0.05	0.19*	-0.01	
7. Current Gross Income	40817	34001	0.01	0.15	-0.04	0.24**	-0.01	0.96***

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Source: Self-elaboration.

Table 2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Models Testing the Relationship between Mentoring Culture and Career Success

Predictors	Dependent Variable			
	Subjective success	Number of promotions in an organization	Salary	Current gross income
	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In
Step 1				
Gender	-0.164*	-0.086	-0.218**	-0.226**
Education	0.032	0.010	-0.025	-0.007
Age	0.048	0.144	0.125	0.147
Step 2				
Mentoring culture	0.426***	0.049	-0.039	-0.029

Predictors	Dependent Variable			
	Subjective success	Number of promotions in an organization	Salary	Current gross income
	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In	Beta/Beta In
T	5.816	0.604	0.493	-0.364
R	0.426	0.049	0.224	0.230
R ²	0.181	0.002	0.050	0.053
ΔR^2	0.148		0.001	0.001
Adj. R ²	0.176	-0.004	0.038	0.040
	F (1, 153) = 33.829***	F (1, 153) = 0.365	F (2, 152) = 4.01*	F (2, 152) = 4.239*

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

Note: All coefficients refer to the final models. T value concerns the examined variables included into the models in the second step. All tables also show the approximate Beta value of the controls excluded from the final models due to their low level of statistical significance.

Source: Self-elaboration

Next, hypotheses 2 was also tested with sets of hierarchical regressions that utilized indicators of objective success i.e. the number of promotions achieved in current organization, salary and gross income as criteria (Tab. 2). In the first step the same control variables were entered into all regression equations using stepwise procedure. In the second step scores on level of mentoring culture were forcibly entered in each regression respectively. Regarding hypothesis 2, mentoring culture did not make a significant contribution to the total amount of variance accounted for in the number of promotions in an organization ($\beta = 0.049$, $t = 0.604$, ns), salary ($\beta = -0.039$, $t = 0.493$, ns) and gross income ($\beta = -0.029$, $t = -0.364$, ns). These results lead to rejection of the 2 hypothesis.

Discussion

Generally the findings suggest that mentoring culture is positively related to subjective success but it is not connected with objective success of employees. The results suggest that mentoring culture rather influences the perception of career success of employees, who feel more self-confident regarding their job situation than objectively their promotions, salary or incomes. However, these results also showed that mentoring culture is important for employees' evaluation of their career accomplishments. These results may stem from the limited access to other

developmental opportunities which is characteristic of the Polish organizational context. Moreover, these facts indicate that mentoring culture may influence employees' career motivation and job satisfaction.

It should also be noticed that despite the cultural and economic differences the obtained findings on mentoring culture are to a great extent in line with other studies on mentoring, particularly the ones conducted in similar cultural and economic contexts characterized by high uncertainty avoidance and relatively big power distance (e.g. Bozionelos & Wang, 2006). Socio-economic changes in Poland have led to the increase in the number of jobs in which continuous learning is a key factor determining the effectiveness of employee performance. Polish companies perform in conditions of significant changes and uncertainty. Many organizations reduce costs through limitation of their employees' developmental activities and staff redundancies. Uncertainty of employment and growing sense of job insecurity lead to the increase in the employees' awareness of the significance of professional development. Paradoxically, the difficult situation of many organizations should be a stimulus to increase intensity of human capital development. New opportunities for learning should be provided in Polish organizations to enable development of employees. For many organizations and their employees such chance is creating the culture of mentoring.

By providing insight into the relationships between mentoring culture and career success the study has been intended to contribute to theory building on employees' development practices in Poland. Concern for human capital development should also be considered in the broader context of social responsibility of Polish organizations as it becomes its important element. Assuming that people and their competences are the most valuable capital of organizations, taking care of employee development should acquire primary importance in Polish organizations and become an inherent element of HRM policy.

Limitations to the study must also be discussed. First, because respondents belonged to management of the organizations, further studies should also be extended to subordinates and their perception of mentoring culture and its impact on their career success in Polish organizations. Moreover, additional analyses should be conducted to obtain a more complete picture of distinctive elements of mentoring culture. Future studies could also lead to additional investigations into the effects of mentoring culture, e.g. its impact on employees' performance, their commitment and motivation. In addition, the specific Polish cultural context may also significantly influence the examined relationships. Comparative research conducted in the Polish and other cultural contexts would allow to recognize the impact of national culture dimensions on specificity of the mentoring culture and its outcomes. Next, the moderating impact of control variables should be

deeper examined. Results indicated that particularly gender is a variable which can be significantly related to the examined outcomes, hence these relationships should be thoroughly examined in the future. Another limitation to the study is the relatively small size of the sample. It should be stressed that the sample was not representative due to the applied sample selection method and the obtained findings cannot be generalized. It is also important to emphasise that despite the discussed limitations, this research is the first attempt to link mentoring culture with career success of employees in Polish organizations.

Summarising, difficult job situation of many Polish employees and their limited possibility of development clearly indicate that issues of creating culture of mentoring seem to be very up-to-date. Dynamic changes impose rapid adjustment of HRM standards to the new conditions of the environment on in Polish organizations. Human capital is more and more often the factor deciding about survival and success of organizations on the unstable and demanding market. However, in many Polish organizations HRM practice still differs significantly from norms and principles applied in western organizations. Contemporary Polish organizations need creative and competent individuals who quickly and flexibly adapt to changes in the organization and its environment. Therefore, organizations should aim at creating such work environment in which people can share their knowledge, develop and achieve career success. Undoubtedly, mentoring culture could be helpful in meeting this goal, bringing numerous benefits both to organizations and their employees.

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