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Educational and Economic Aspects of Mentoring - How Mentoring Can Contribute to the Development of Soft Skills

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Abstract

The OECD's skills strategy and policy highlights skills ahead of formal qualifications and draws attention to the importance of work-based learning (apprenticeships). In the economy, given the utilisation of the skill set of individuals at the workplace level, the conscious management of the knowledge and skills of the organisation now appears to be an efficiency-increasing factor. One way to do this is to involve and mentor economically inactive groups (students / new entrants, low-skilled social groups and pensioners) in the labour market. Mentoring should be treated as a discrete area, but one that is still a part of the organisation's strategically defined human resource management and knowledge management system, in which the goals, roles, processes, responsibilities and benefits, as well as the possibilities for development, are clarified. This study analyses the educational and economic context of mentoring, the nature of mentoring and the possibility of its application; its conclusions provide an appropriate framework for developing a mentoring programme.

Keywords: education, low-skilled workers, mentoring, skilled professionals, skills-set

1. Introduction

The first version of the European Union's skills strategy and skills policy, developed around 2011 and then published in 2019, represents a new paradigm for education policy thinking that distinguishes between formal qualifications and actual skills. Formal (school) graduation is not the same as the actual knowledge that is utilised in the labour market, and higher education and / or higher skills do not automatically lead to increased productivity and competitiveness in the economy. As the labour market increasingly focuses on skills over qualifications, the colourful world of adult learning, including non-formal, in-work and informal learning, is gaining in value. Viewed this way, not only the creation of abilities, but also their disappearance, degradation, and cessation can be observed.

According to the skills strategy, the employee and supply side means the creation of skills (skill formation) and, as a result, the sets of skills accumulated by individuals. However, the source of the skill set is not only the qualifications obtained in the field of formal education and training, certified by a certificate or diploma, but also the constantly changing, enriching areas of knowledge and skills acquired in the fields of non-formal and informal learning. An individual's skill set appears in the given labour market as skills matching demand, a skills deficit, or a skills surplus. Cumulatively, all this manifests itself in the economy as an ability balance or imbalance (Halász, 2013; Tribble, 2020).

The emergence of the capability strategy has brought the resource-based approach to the forefront of successful businesses, focusing not primarily on market requirements but instead on the internal strategic resources of companies that can form the basis of lasting competitive advantage. Competence-based organisational theories emphasise the need to change traditional approaches and value judgments related to knowledge, to consider individual motivations, as well as to develop learning and teaching competencies, to formulate new methodological procedures, and to foster an organisational environment that supports learning. Nicholls' (2007) competency model is based on the assumption that the competencies needed to cultivate an area are in fact a predeterminable set. In other words, it is clear what skills, abilities, knowledge are needed for what the given field requires. In this case, the mentor's task is to support the related competence development, primarily through observations, feedback and monitoring of progress.

On-the-job mentoring, as part of organisational knowledge management, can be an important element in the internship training of career starters, representing the key to both retaining talented, proven young people and the knowledge transfer and re-employment of older workers as mentors. Mentors are familiar with the organisational culture, and the whole process of working in each area. At the same time, it is very important that they carry out their work consciously with their personal competencies and the pedagogical-andragogical skills and knowledge that they have gained through mentoring.

2. About mentoring in general

Mentoring, as an increasingly popular form of support, is a kind of collective concept that has spread in many areas in recent decades. It is used in public education, higher education, vocational training and adult training, but is also used to support integration and learning in the workplace. Nowadays, the content of the concept and the nature of mentoring tasks are

becoming increasingly clear. Different mentoring abilities and skills come to the fore in many areas, but in each case the main goal is to support and develop the mentored person.

Putting a mentoring programme into practice in the workplace has many organisational benefits, with positive impacts on both the new entrant and the mentor. Through on-the-job mentoring, the new employee gets to know the corporate culture and the organisation sooner, and their role and responsibilities become clearer, so they become a productive member of the organisation in a shorter time. For the mentor, this task can have prestige value. This is because the mentoring task can be rewarded by management, an incentive which can increase the mentor's loyalty and thereby reduce the turnover rate, as well as contribute to the faster development of the organisation's network of contacts and the more effective functioning of communication in the workplace (Kozák, 2016).

The original meaning of the word "mentor" is derived from Greek mythology; it means "educator", which was later used with the meaning of "teacher", "counsellor", "paternal good friend". This term appeared in the Hungarian adult education literature at the time of the change of regime, when - under Western influence, primarily following international cooperation to help renew teacher education - it began to be used in higher education for the general designation of professionals assisting students in pedagogical internships. In teacher education, the goal of mentoring is to support and develop children's progress.

Mentoring support systems usually focus on three areas: professional support, personal support in the development of professional identity, and the promotion of institutional and professional community integration. Mentoring is an activity that can be integrated into the knowledge and competence systems of many occupations and professions. Support and counselling methods can be learned, and the ability to take personal care and attention of individuals can be developed through training for anyone working in any field.

In line with the diversity of mentoring and its potential, the following mentoring models can be outlined (quoted by Gatti, 2017):

1. Humanistic model: here, the focus of mentoring is mostly on emotional support and motivation, with a particular emphasis on interpersonal and psychological characteristics of the relationship. According to this model, the aim of mentoring is to develop the mentee's self-confidence and awareness in a positive way, in order to strengthen the so-called coping strategies and tools, with the help of which it will be easier to take on the obstacles in the future.
2. "Situational learning time", when for the mentee the mentor is a kind of role model where the latter shares his / her own knowledge.
3. In case of a model based on competence, expertise, the task of the mentor is to support the related competence development, primarily through observations, feedback and monitoring of progress.
4. Reflective model, in which the mentor instructs much less, takes on the role of an inquirer, researcher and tries to support the reflection with his critical attitude and questions.

3. Mentoring in education

We could meet the conscious and well-defined use of mentoring in the field of public education in the early 2000s in the so-called Employment Embedded Training (Foglalkoztatásba Ágyazott Képzés, FÁK in Hungarian) programme. For disadvantaged students, this meant employment-embedded training that sought to help drop-out students get a high school diploma. To this end, employment has been linked to education and training, and a protection incubator has been set up in each workplace and training place. Thus, the target persons could not only get a job, but also a real chance to stand up in the labour market. This required dedicated and specially trained educators who were considered mentors based on the indicated criteria.

Nowadays, mentoring - in connection with the introduction of dual training - has again come in the spotlight in the field of vocational training and higher education, and it already has a well-developed system in several fields and higher education institutions. The experience of higher education has a long history, so they can enrich the practice of workplace mentoring. Dual training provides students with personal experience gained in a work environment in parallel with the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, thus establishing and significantly developing labour market and professional competencies. As an economic entity, the organisation ensures the foundation and development of the professional skills and competencies necessary for the given profession, supported by mentoring; meanwhile, as a deliverer of training, it creates the institutional, personal and material conditions that are necessary for effective training to take place. The training institution benefits because students in dual training perform better and have better academic outcomes compared to students in traditional training. It is useful for the business organisation, because this form of training increases the overall awareness of the company and provides an opportunity to train employees who also meet their own needs (Mészáros, 2007). Dual training is learning- and learner-oriented; it is more than traditional internships, as learning support takes place in a workplace environment. This provides a way to develop an educational culture that focuses on teaching, research, and experience, a key element of which is the application of the mentoring system (Derényi, 2017; Alston et al, 2020).

The successful implementation of a complex system of mentoring tasks in dual training greatly contributes to the value of a certificate or diploma. Of course, the companies undertaking the training must be prepared and provide significant resources for receiving dual students, dealing with them, mentoring their learning process, their professional preparation, and dealing with their personal problems outside of learning. In this respect, there is a significant difference between organisations entering dual training, especially between large companies with a human resources department and well-trained HR professionals, and small and medium-sized companies.

When selecting mentors, two aspects should be considered: the motivation of the mentor candidate and the development of his / her existing competencies. The mentor must be committed to preparing the learner, be able to give an overview of the operation of the company, the given work process. The most important areas of knowledge and competences are the right expertise, as well as interest and openness to young people and good communication skills, leadership skills, sufficient sensitivity and patience.

The mentoring task can be performed by both young and old workers. For a young corporate professional, it can be a personal development, the first step to becoming a leader. Young mentors usually find it easy to connect with their peers, are happy to take care of them, work

with them while gaining leadership experience. It develops the attitudes and personal qualities needed for mentoring, such as flexibility, adaptability, and stress tolerance.

Companies more often appoint retiring professionals, important corporate knowledge carriers, who are happy to pass on their knowledge and experience to members of the younger generation. Re-employment of pre-retirement or retired professionals is an important and useful solution for both the organisation and the employee.

The preparation and training of mentors is very different from company to company, the possibilities of large companies and small and medium-sized companies are different. HR departments in large companies usually have detailed mentoring training plans and programmes. Mentoring training is even more differentiated if the company employs multiple mentors in the training of mentees. In higher education mentoring, it is common for the company to appoint a supervisor for the whole mentoring of the learning process, who is responsible for the student's development. In the case of SMEs, due to limited resources, there is usually no way to operate differentiated support roles. Here, the mentoring task is usually performed by a (project) manager, and the supervisor task is performed by the company manager. Mentors are trained by the university in the case of smaller companies and by the HR department of the given company in the case of large companies.

A mentoring relationship basically means the individual accompanying of the mentee. The mentoring role, like the pedagogical and andragogic roles, is a complex activity in which the roles can even conflict with each other. The basic question is the definition of the mentoring role, the limits of the mentoring identification competence. A mentor is not a social assistance person and is not a psychologist or a psychiatrist. The main role of the mentor is to help, but this can be well distinguished from other helping roles (counsellor, parent, teacher, friend, older sibling, etc.). The mentor can be described by the metaphor of the “guidance board”, i.e. in case of a given problem, he / she shows, suggests a kind of solution, but it is up to the person being helped to decide and walk the path.

The process of mentoring is fortunately nourished by the needs of the mentees and its content is outlined based on the joint activities of the two parties, and can be divided into stages (Merlevede et al, 2006):

- Making and accepting contacts. The first encounter is when a mentor and mentee get to know each other and accept the relationship.
- Establishing the rules of cooperation, when the rules of the emerging relationship and cooperation are jointly outlined. The mentor initiates and suggests, always considering the needs of the mentee.
- Defining the starting point: it means planning specific actions. The mentor assesses the prospective employee's prior knowledge, experience, attitudes towards the profession, and his / her attitude towards work tasks.
- After that, the tasks are discussed, operationalised and monitored together.
- Closing your mentoring is the decision to end. Mentoring work ends when the frequency of discussions decreases, the co-worker is integrated, and the mentoring relationship is increasingly reclassified as a professional exchange. One of the great difficulties of mentoring is that mentoring is not a “main occupation”, i.e. the mentor must perform

the mentoring tasks in addition to and in parallel with their professional work (Shenkman, 2005).

4. Mentoring in the workplace

Companies with a successful HR culture welcome a newcomer with a well-developed integration plan after a successful job interview, salary negotiation and signing of an employment contract. The new employee will receive a handbook from the HR manager of the organisation as part of the orientation programme for smooth integration and adaptation. The manual contains information about the company's organisational structure, the position held, the company's values, habits and employment. Another important element of the integration programme is the appointment of a workplace mentor, who is carefully selected from among the employees. A workplace mentor is an experienced, reputable employee of the company who performs a personal support role to help newly hired or newly relocated employees to successfully integrate as soon as possible. Mentoring is often characterised by the competencies to be developed or by the activities that take place in the process. Mentors use characteristics, skills and abilities that are partly brought about, but partly learned and developed during mentoring, such as: active attention, the ability to guide, support for the setting of goals and setting priorities with their practicality, being open to learning and to using their own experience. Mentors have a supportive attitude but are also sufficiently critical and specific in their feedback (Caldwell, Caldwell, 2016; Maksymiuk, 2017; Jeong, Park, 2020).

In the mindset of the European area, the mentor is an “older, more experienced” worker who contributes to the newcomer’s professional and organisational integration in the first weeks or months. Overseas, on the other hand, they believe the mentor should also have “good interpersonal and professional skills” to help the new member of the organisation feel at home with the company as soon as possible. If we start out from the American way of thinking, it is not certain that a pre-retirement mentor should be chosen alongside a twenty-year-old person, and the professional experience and abilities of a mentor should not be considered alone. A person who has good communication and conflict resolution skills, knows the channels and the methods for building an organisational network should be selected for the mentoring task. In addition to all this, it is also important that the leader communicates the mentoring assignment in such a way that the mentor senses their duty and as a consequence, performs it responsibly.

Several international studies focus on the labour market situation of young people (Cook et al., 2015; Kluve et al., 2016; Balan, 2017; Furlong et al., 2017). Both international and Hungarian studies (Cseh-Papp, 2007; Varga, 2010; Makó, 2015; Cseh-Papp, et al., 2017; Héder, Dajnoki, 2017) highlight that one of the biggest barriers to young people's participation in the labour market is the lack of a transition between education and the labour market.

For young people, there is a shortage of internships and traineeships that fit the field of study. This would make it much easier for young people and career starters to enter the labour market. The study of Czeglédi and Juhász (2015) showed that the level of negative prejudice towards career starters is very high among companies. However, if companies are willing to invest energy in educating their young people and employ appropriate mentoring programmes in connection with internship positions, young people will be significantly more motivated and loyal in the short term, and the corporate culture will be shared. This is how “quality culture” can be established. Quality culture is a corporate environment where a certain approach, behaviour and attitude are prevalent, which is accepted by all the participants and which makes

everybody be responsible for quality (Bencsik and Horváth-Csikós, 2018). Internships are one of the most effective sources of talent supply because they can be used to try and prove employees. The importance of traineeship programmes to facilitating the transition between education and the labour market is widely recognised, yet they are rarely implemented. A study by Gault et al. (2010) also showed that high internship performance also increases the value of the employer, in addition to strengthening the young person's marketability.

The emergence of generations Y and Z in the labour market poses a challenge to employers. Despite their different values, habits and expectations than the older generations, young people can easily integrate into the world of work, and their creativity and drive can be of good use to companies. It is up to employers to create a work environment for members of Generations Y, Z and Alpha in which they can be successful with their mentality and become committed employees. In their case, however, the concept of motivation needs to be placed in a different context. The younger generations can only be motivated and won to perform the given tasks if the task or activity also serves their own goals and they can do the work responsibly independently. In their case, a cross-section of company and employee goals needs to be found. The mentor helps to show young people the value of work so that it is not a compulsion but an experience for them.

For companies participating in the internship programme, the mentoring programme is an advantage, because commitment to the organisation grows rapidly, communication between the generations improves, and the learning / development culture develops. Surveys (DuBois et al., 2011; Brady, 2015; Dong, Deng, 2016) have shown that employees stay at least 25 percent more often at a company that uses mentoring than where they do not mentor. Mentoring has a positive effect on the desire to apply and helps to retain young people in the long run. Graduates are enthusiastic about the new challenges, respecting those who sacrifice their knowledge, time and energy for their support. Over time, a good mentor becomes an example to whom his mentees look up. Graduates are enthusiastic about new challenges, with respect for those who sacrifice their knowledge, time and energy to make them better too.

Western countries are looking for a way to involve middle-aged people in the economy in larger numbers, as the labour reserves hidden in this age group are huge. Those aged 55-64 were already young at a time when many had at least a secondary education, and most of them had acquired the digital competencies needed to work from the early 1990s. Age group activity has increased significantly in the labour market in recent years, not only in Hungary but throughout Europe. In addition, the higher the level of education, the more it requires them to remain active, so many people in this age group would be happy to work even in retirement. Large companies in Germany and Japan are the best examples in recruiting, retaining and re-employing older workers, including mentoring. Representatives of the older age group are suitable for this role due to their experience and patience. Mentors can play a counselling role in a young person's professional life, while preventing the social exclusion of the elderly.

5. Summary

The importance of mentoring and the various mentoring programmes is undeniable, and its popularity today is no accident; as it proves to be an effective form of support that is constantly evolving, its methodology is being refined and differentiated. The study found that mentoring has an indisputable value in educating newcomers as well as in adult education or intergenerational education, internship training for new entrants, and the re-employment of

older workers. For all this, the systematic development and application of workplace mentoring is essential. The study reviews the main concepts and contexts of mentor and mentoring, as well as the main features of its areas of application, and draws attention to the importance of training and systematic use of mentors. That is to say, it is not enough to train mentors; it is better by far to introduce a complete mentoring system where roles, processes, responsibilities and benefits are all clarified.

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