

Changing Concepts and Models of Mentoring

by Ida O. Abbott

The world is changing, innovating and growing at a rapid pace. With so much to learn from so many people, you won't be able to grow with it if you don't change your perspective on mentoring.

— Misti Cain, Founder & Chief Advyzzor at Whyzze

This article is adapted from portions of Chapters 1 and 3 of The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring, 2nd Edition (NALP, 2018).

Mentoring for lawyers is not immune to the powerful changes roiling the legal profession. A number of significant shifts are occurring in the way lawyers approach, view, and experience mentoring relationships. For example, the time-honored concept of mentoring envisioned the mentor as teacher, guide, and protector. The experienced lawyer provided input and the junior lawyer received most of the benefits of the relationship. Because the legal profession was stable, close-knit, and consistent over decades, a senior partner could feel confident that the career advice he gave a junior associate was accurate because the world of law practice had not changed much.

That no longer holds true. While much of the wisdom a mentor shares may still be relevant and beneficial, many of the practices, strategies, and techniques that served a 50-year-old partner early in his career may not be suitable for a 26-year-old associate trying to navigate and get ahead in the very different world of law practice today. This does not devalue the mentor's advice; it simply means that mentors must adjust to new workplace conditions and career concerns. It also requires a broader understanding and acceptance of variations in mentoring roles, expectations, and dynamics.

The role of the mentee has also changed. In the past, junior lawyers “received” the wisdom and assistance mentors bestowed upon them. Finding someone who served as your mentor was a matter of proximity, good fortune, and similar pedigrees. Today's young lawyers do not wait for mentors to find them; they seek mentoring strategically. When they have a goal, challenge, or problem that could benefit from the wisdom and advice of someone with more experience and knowledge, they use their networks to identify prospective mentors and reach out to them with targeted requests for help, which typically involves one or more brief conversations. Some lawyers find these prospects online at sites where professionals share knowledge and information. They have short-term and limited learning encounters, often online, but sometimes the connections grow into something more. And if they repeat this process several times with several different and diverse “mentors,” they accumulate a body of knowledge and advice that can be more consequential than counseling from a single mentor.

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Most principles of contemporary mentoring, as distinguished from traditional mentoring, have been apparent for a long time, but the breadth and relentless pace of change in the legal profession is giving them more prominence. These now-accepted principles include the following:

- Mentoring is mutual and reciprocal, with each party sharing in the responsibility for making the relationship work and each one benefiting when it does.
- Mentoring relationships are collaborative and hierarchy is less important than it used to be. Rather than strictly a top-down process with a senior mentor as teacher and a novice mentee as learner, mentors and mentees can learn from each other.
- Mentoring can involve many people at once; it is not limited to one mentor and one mentee.
- Lawyers need a “network,” “constellation,” or “personal board” of mentors. They can have numerous mentors at once, at different times, and for different purposes. Instead of looking for a single perfect mentor, lawyers create a network of developmental relationships with many mentors throughout their career.
- Mentoring does not require a long-term commitment. Some mentors will guide a mentee’s career over several years, while others will have only brief or limited influence.
- Mentors can be any age and seniority level. They can be peers and, in some cases, lawyers who are junior and less experienced in certain ways but more knowledgeable in others.

- Mentors can be any gender or race, and in any job or profession, not just law. As lawyers become more strategic about mentoring and use mentoring relationships to focus on particular learning or career goals, they seek mentors from any background and with expertise in any field that can help them achieve their goals.

Table 1 sets out these and other distinctions between traditional and contemporary concepts of mentoring.

Table 1. Traditional and Contemporary Models of Mentoring

Traditional Model	Contemporary Models
One mentor	Multiple mentors, developmental network
One-to-one	Pairs or groups
Arises organically	Can be matched
Mentor as expert	Mentor as co-learner
Mentors control agenda	Mentee controls agenda
Hierarchical	Egalitarian
Stable	Dynamic, changing
General, career-oriented	Focused, strategic, goal-oriented
One mentor deals with everything	Mentors for specific purposes (development, performance, sponsorship)
Long-term	Short-term and episodic alternatives
Transformative	Informative, supportive
Mentor selects mentee	Mentor or mentee initiates relationship
Relationship based on similarities	Differences are valued
Face to face	Virtual, different locations
Benefits young lawyers	Benefits lawyers at any age or career stage
Mentor is senior	Mentor may be junior or a peer
Mentor is a lawyer	Mentor need not be a lawyer
Same organization	Inside and outside organization

Other mentoring approaches emphasize the sponsorship features of mentoring, focusing on the mentor's use of power and influence in advancing the other's career.

In most legal workplaces, mentoring still tends to focus on nurturing a less experienced lawyer's professional growth and progress. But there are significant variations today in what that assistance is and how it is offered. For example, some workplaces emphasize mentoring as a developmental activity in which mentees learn professional skills and conduct, are integrated into the organization, and become empowered to take personal control over their careers. Mentors serve as teachers, coaches, wisdom-sharers, counselors, confidants, and confidence builders. They focus on improving performance, growing capabilities, and helping mentees reach their potential. Mentors assist and support, and may offer a mentee direction, but responsibility for driving the relationship and achieving goals lies principally with the mentee.

Other mentoring approaches emphasize the sponsorship features of mentoring, focusing on the mentor's use of power and influence in advancing the other's career. This model requires more active, hands-on involvement through advocacy, making introductions to key people and appointments to key positions, and pushing the other — usually termed the protégé — to the forefront. The focus is on doing what is necessary to secure opportunities for the protégé to move up to partnership and leadership roles in the organization or profession. While successful outcomes depend ultimately on the protégé, the mentor takes responsibility for finding or creating the opportunities. The increasing awareness that sponsorship is essential to career advancement is leading some firms to experiment with mentoring programs specifically devoted to sponsorship, especially for women and minority lawyers. (A separate chapter of *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring*, 2nd Edition, is devoted to discussing coaching and sponsorship in greater detail.)

Mentoring is also increasingly recognized as worthwhile not just for novices, but whenever a lawyer moves into a new work situation, accepts a new set of responsibilities, or just needs someone to offer moral support or boost their motivation, focus, and drive. For example, lateral lawyers can benefit from a mentor who can introduce them to new colleagues and familiarize them with the logistics, culture, and politics of their new firm. Lawyers moving into non-equity and then equity partnership can use mentors to prepare them for their new responsibilities, support them in client development efforts, and help them develop leadership skills.

Mentoring is also highly valuable in succession planning and client transitions. Partners who take on leadership roles for the first time can benefit from a mentor who has preceded them as, e.g., practice group leader, managing partner, or client team leader. Even senior partners who are contemplating retirement can use advice from a retired partner about the things to plan or consider and the pitfalls to watch out for.

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All of these kinds of mentoring can be subject to informal and formal mentoring processes. Many firms, especially large firms, have a variety of mentoring initiatives, including programs for particular constituencies (e.g., women) or experience levels (e.g., new associates, new partners). These initiatives may combine different mentoring formats across the programs and even within a single program.

New Mentoring Models

The familiar “top-down, one-on-one” model of mentoring is still valid and widely used, but in some situations and for some individuals, it is no longer feasible or desirable. As a result, new models are emerging — many of them aided by technology — which address lawyers' changing needs, preferences, work conditions, and careers and serve as expedient substitutes

for high-quality mentoring. (See Table 2.) Each of these models may be used in a stand-alone program or combined with other models.

The learning aspects of mentoring are easy to adapt, and most of the new mentoring models have to do with methods of transferring knowledge, providing work-related information and experience, and offering general career support. The greater challenge is in adapting the relationship part of mentoring, which is its core. High-quality mentoring requires a sense of mutual competence, caring, and commitment. It takes time to build the shared trust, respect, and affection that are the foundation of a genuine mentoring relationship. Uncertainty about another person's tenure and loyalty make it risky for people to invest in a mentoring relationship. Impatience or inability to devote time to relationship-building compounds the problem.

Some of these models are new ways to experience mentoring relationships; others are methods or systems that facilitate the formation of mentoring relationships; and some are redefinitions of the mentoring relationship. These new models can exist independently, be incorporated into traditional mentoring programs, or supplement those programs.

Table 2. New Mentoring Models and Concepts

- Enhanced informal mentoring
- Peer mentoring
- Group mentoring
 - Mentoring groups
 - Mentoring circles
- Reverse mentoring
- Virtual mentoring
- Episodic mentoring
- Social mentoring
- Relational mentoring
- Self-mentoring
- Mastermind groups

The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring (2nd Edition, Chapter 3) discusses each of the mentoring models listed in Table 2 in detail, and includes examples of the ways law firms are using these models. This article presents adapted excerpts discussing just three of the newer models that may be less familiar: reverse mentoring, virtual mentoring, and episodic mentoring.

Reverse Mentoring

Reverse (or “upward”) mentoring pairs a junior person as mentor with a partner or executive as mentee. The purpose of switching roles is to facilitate knowledge flow between senior and junior lawyers and to encourage the juniors to share their perspectives and specialized knowledge with seniors. This approach is built on the idea that learning never stops, that everyone has something to learn and to teach, and that all lawyers can make a valuable contribution to the success of the firm whatever their age or seniority.

First popularized in 1999 by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, reverse mentoring was developed for areas where younger employees had greater technological expertise, such as use of social media or etiquette in the digital world. It now is used for a variety of purposes, e.g., developing future leaders and promoting better understanding of cross-generational perspectives and priorities. At Procter & Gamble it is used to help senior staff understand the daily challenges faced by employees with disabilities.¹

Reverse mentoring has many benefits for employers and participants. The benefits reported by companies that have used reverse mentoring are impressive. Pershing, a global financial solutions company, reported a 96% retention rate among junior participants.² The Hartford, an insurance company, found that their program led to higher productivity, better morale, and more widespread innovation and change.³ One of their executives who was a mentee in the program said, “Perhaps the most important gift of reverse mentoring is the affirmation in all sectors of a company and across generations that the next big idea can come from anywhere.”

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For lawyers, reverse mentoring increases empathy and the ability to appreciate others’ points of view. It underscores younger lawyers’ value to the firm while providing a true service to firm leaders. Reversing roles helps mentors and mentees cross barriers created by status and age differences and, in many cases, become more adept at having difficult conversations. Specific benefits for younger lawyers include:

- direct access and a chance to interact with decision-makers;
- an inside view of top-level management issues and processes;
- the ability to contribute insights, knowledge, skills, ideas, and suggestions;
- the ability to express opinions and concerns and be taken seriously;
- a chance to showcase leadership skills;
- feeling more comfortable and included in the firm; and
- a sense of purpose.

Senior lawyers who are mentees also derive considerable benefits, including:

- an increased awareness that younger lawyers have important things to teach and valuable points of view;
- staying up to date in important areas (e.g., the latest legal technologies, workplace trends, associates’ interests);
- learning new skills;
- hearing fresh perspectives on topics not usually raised or considered by firm leadership;
- greater insights into younger clients;
- the ability to show they are not so set in their ways that they can’t embrace new ideas; and
- increased faith in the future of the firm.

Law firms are using reverse mentoring primarily to promote diversity and inclusion by educating partners about the experience, ambitions, and thinking of more junior women and minority lawyers in the firm. In this way, senior lawyers can become better, more informed leaders who think more creatively and act more deliberately to build an inclusive workplace. For descriptions of two innovative reverse mentoring programs, one for leadership development and the other for promoting inclusion, see the appendix to Chapter 3 of *The Lawyer’s Guide to Mentoring, 2nd Edition*.

Virtual Mentoring

Virtual mentoring refers to mentoring where mentor-mentee interaction takes place primarily using technology rather than face to face. Traditional mentoring occurs in person, usually as people work together in the same office. But for people in remote areas, niche practices, or multi-office firms, and for some telecommuters, the best mentoring partner may not be located nearby. Plus, a growing number of law firms and alternative legal services providers are entirely virtual, with no physical offices.

Technology offers lawyers access to diverse mentors, broader networks, and development opportunities unavailable locally.

While face-to-face mentoring is still preferred (even by millennials and Gen Z)⁴ and research has proven it to be more beneficial in many ways (e.g., for obtaining promotions),⁵ technology now allows mentoring to take place across great distances and multiple time zones, so mentor and mentee need not live or work anywhere near each other. It offers lawyers access to diverse mentors, broader networks, and development opportunities unavailable locally. Moreover, virtual mentoring has been shown to help companies build the skills, productivity, engagement, and loyalty of their workforces.⁶ This makes virtual mentoring a good option to supplement or, if necessary, replace face-to-face meetings.

When using email, text, intranet chatrooms, or social media, asynchronous communication allows mentoring partners to frame questions and answers more thoughtfully. Mentors and mentees can communicate in writing anywhere, anytime; using video easily available at their desks, phones, or other mobile devices they can also talk while seeing each other. This convenience makes mentoring easier in many ways and for many purposes.

There is evidence that in some situations virtual mentoring can actually be better than meeting in person. Research on computer-mediated communication shows that because relationships are free to develop without the distractions of gender and other demographic differences, trust forms more quickly than it does in face-to-face relationships. Mentees are more willing to speak openly and candidly, which elicits more useful advice from their e-mentors.⁷

Many companies now have extensive virtual mentoring programs and see them as powerful tools for personal and professional development.⁸ This has many benefits aside from facilitating individual mentoring relationships. It promotes cooperation and “social learning” across an organization — i.e., many users can communicate and share knowledge and expertise with each other (via posts and comments). Because communication is mediated by technology, it becomes more egalitarian; status is unimportant and more people share information and ideas across hierarchical and divisional boundaries.

For all these benefits, however, virtual mentoring also presents significant limitations and challenges. Some people find it difficult to build rapport and trust over an electronic medium, and virtual relationships are more susceptible to miscommunication, so mentoring relationships may be harder and take longer to establish. Mentor and mentee cannot engage in certain mentoring activities like shadowing, observing the mentee in action and giving feedback, and attending client meetings, hearings, or professional events together. The lack of in-person contact also limits the mentor’s role modeling functions. When mentor and mentee do not run into each other serendipitously or when

they get wrapped up in other things, it is easier to forget about mentoring or to give up the relationship.

To be successful, a mentoring relationship that is entirely virtual needs a well-defined structure with clearly articulated process expectations, frequent communication, and close monitoring. The parties need to be highly conscientious about scheduling and meeting. In a mentoring program, this means they need more management and support. Training in how to make the most of a virtual mentoring relationship can be very helpful as well.

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In appropriate situations and for certain purposes, virtual mentoring works very well. It is especially well suited for multi-office and global firms like Morrison & Foerster, which has used virtual mentoring in a variety of ways. MoFo has 16 offices and more than 950 lawyers around the world. In one of its small European offices with only three partners and five associates, the firm paired the associates with mentors in other offices to serve as sounding boards and advisors. These virtual mentors also gave the associates more information and broader perspectives about the firm, and expanded their internal networks.

MoFo also used cross-office virtual mentoring when the firm acquired a 28-person office in Berlin from another firm. It used what it called the “Envoy Program” to welcome and acculturate these new lawyers to the firm. Each Berlin lawyer (associates and partners) was matched with a mentor, or “Envoy,” in a similar practice and at a similar or higher level but in another office. Almost every office in the firm had an envoy paired with a new Berlin lawyer for six months. The program coordinator distributed guidelines elucidating expectations for mentors

and mentees, set up the first contact calls, sent out suggestions and reminders, and facilitated in-person meetings whenever possible (e.g., when one or the other was on a business trip to a nearby city). Envoys familiarized the Berlin lawyers with the firm's operations and resources, helped them understand the firm's culture, introduced them to firm lawyers and clients, and generally made them feel more integrated and comfortable in the firm.

Episodic Mentoring

Episodic mentoring (also called "situational," "spot," "flash," "on demand," or "just-in-time" mentoring) consists of mentoring through a single brief learning encounter between an experienced individual and someone less experienced. In these encounters, the more experienced person helps the other address a professional issue or question, but there is no ongoing relationship between mentor and mentee, which is the hallmark of traditional mentoring. However, as definitions of mentoring evolve to meet changing attitudes and work conditions, episodic mentoring is seen as an expedient way to help lawyers learn, develop, and start to build professional connections in a world where everyone is constantly on the move and few have time to form more profound mentoring relationships. It supports the reality that instead of a single senior mentor, lawyers today need a network of "developers" who provide different types of learning and career support.⁹ Episodic mentoring is also a way of connecting people with shared interests who, if they continue to communicate about a topic, may over time develop a more traditional mentoring relationship.

Some organizations stage "speed mentoring" events where people who attend spend 20 to 30 minutes with rotating "mentors" who answer questions or offer career advice. But most episodic mentoring occurs online and within an organization or bar association.

In episodic mentoring programs, a group of people agree to be available for questions and advice on an as-needed basis. Each mentor creates a profile (or uses a bio posted on the firm's website or intranet) that includes their skill set, functions, practice

areas, areas of expertise, and experience. Others in the group can search through the profiles and reach out to the people who likely have the answers they need. They then have a one-time meeting or discussion at which the more knowledgeable or experienced lawyer passes along quick tips, advice, suggestions, or information. Mentors are under no obligation to do more, although they may choose to.

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Many people favor episodic mentoring precisely because it is less formal or demanding than engaging in a long-term mentoring relationship. When lawyers are always pressed for time, episodic mentoring allows them to focus only on immediate learning needs and avoid having to create a mentoring plan or goals. They can get the information they need at the time they need it, and when responses are from colleagues in the same firm or professional group, they can feel confident that the information is correct. Lawyers find these targeted interactions easier, faster, more flexible, reliable, and efficient. They also welcome having access to multiple seasoned lawyers, including partners and leaders they can ask about career issues, not just work-related information. Plus, they can repeat the learning experience with multiple lawyers by making additional inquiries.

Employers like episodic mentoring because it increases internal communication, information transfer, and efficiency, builds internal connections, and expands institutional knowledge. It is especially useful in multi-office and multi-national firms where lawyers can quickly access relevant knowledge that may be dispersed far and wide. Episodic mentors are easy to recruit because the commitment is brief and limited. And episodic mentoring requires very little administration or oversight and can be used as a stand-alone program or in conjunction with more traditional mentoring programs.

Dykema Gossett uses what it calls "Spot Mentoring" as a supplement to its existing mentoring program for associates.

Through this episodic mentoring feature, associates can meet and pose questions to a variety of senior lawyers throughout the firm as the need or interest arises. The firm's intranet lists senior lawyers who volunteer to be "spot mentors," available to talk with associates about designated topic categories (e.g., career development, legal practice skills, professionalism, practice development, and client service/management). Associates can search for a spot mentor by office, title, practice area, management role, and topic category, then reach out to initiate a conversation. The parties agree to speak in person, by phone, or electronically. There is no obligation beyond that one occasion, although some longer-term relationships develop.

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Some law schools and bar associations use episodic mentoring to arrange mentoring opportunities for law students and new lawyers. It is easier to find experienced lawyers willing to advise novice attorneys and law school students on a limited basis without making a long-term commitment. This approach allows mentees to receive useful, succinct professional development advice while also expanding their network of contacts, who may then become sources of employment. A research study that compared episodic mentoring with traditional matched mentoring for law students found that the outcomes of the mentoring programs did not differ substantially. Each program had different strengths and weaknesses, although the costs and benefits of episodic mentoring outweighed those of matched-pair mentoring.¹⁰

A Final Word

Concepts and models of mentoring are evolving to meet changing demands in the legal workplace. And, while 87% of law firms and many other organizations have mentoring programs, young lawyers want more meaningful mentoring than most mentoring programs provide.¹¹ The three new models of

mentoring presented in this article — along with the additional models listed in Table 2 and discussed in the second edition of *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring* — illustrate how different mentoring models provide different benefits — and how the most effective models are those best suited to the situation, and to the specific needs of mentees, mentors, and the firm.

Endnotes

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About the Author



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The second edition of *The Lawyer’s Guide to Mentoring* is available from the NALP bookstore at www.nalp.org/bookstore. The *Guide* not only addresses numerous types of mentoring, including coaching and sponsorship, but also features a wealth of real-world examples of innovative mentoring programs.