

# CAREERS & RECRUITMENT

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## Mentors in the office



Mentoring is introducing two employees to each other and encouraging them to help each other in a defined relationship

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Business mentors help budding entrepreneurs, but mentoring by colleagues within companies can reap considerable benefits too, writes Gareth Naughton

Companies looking for a cost-effective way to maximise employee productivity should consider developing an internal mentoring programme.

Business mentors use their experience to help budding entrepreneurs set up their companies and expand their products. But the same positive effects can happen within an organisation.

Mentoring pushes people forward and helps them to get

a sound footing, according to Adrienne O'Hare, managing director of To Be Training and Development. "If you ask successful business people what helped them on the way, you often hear stories of a more senior business person who mentored them," she said.

"They may not use that language specifically but you can recognise that they have been guided, supported, pointed in the right direction or given an introduction to the right person that helped them to be really effective and confident and grow on their own."

Setting up a mentoring programme does not cost a lot and it works at all levels of the organisation from junior to senior.

You are essentially introducing two employees to each other and encouraging them to help each other within a defined relationship.

Indeed, a mentoring programme cannot be prescriptive. Both parties need to want to take part – it will not work if either is forced to do so – and they need to be able to work well together.

"The mentor needs to have a desire to support other people and to share their knowledge as well as a number of skills – being able to advise, question and to draw those being mentored out of themselves to help them solve problems rather than just give them all the solutions," said O'Hare.

"They also need to have really good communication skills and the ability to build rapport. There needs to be a really good match between the mentor and the one being mentored because not everyone will work well together."

### Boundaries

For any mentoring relationship to work, it is important that participants establish defined boundaries across a whole range of issues before commencement.

This need not necessarily be a written contract but both parties should be very clear on what is acceptable.

"How often are they going to meet? Where are they going to meet? How they are going to communicate – do they meet over lunch, do they meet in an office or over drinks? Do they email in between or just use the phone?"

"Confidentiality is very important and needs to be set up in the mentoring agreement as well. They need to set out in advance what is appropriate or inappropriate for both parties. It is also useful to have a defined beginning and end for the relationship," said O'Hare. "You can decide to go on,



Adrienne O'Hare, To Be Training and Development

but people often outgrow their mentors. Someone mentoring them for 12 months may be perfect for that time, but the one being mentored may have gained the skills, knowledge and confidence that they need so it is time to move on."

Managing expectations is crucial to ensuring that the relationship run smoothly and both parties are happy with the end result.

*Both parties must want to take part and be able to work together*

"The ones being mentored have a number of responsibilities – they have to respect that they are asking somebody who is, obviously, very busy if they are in a senior role in an organisation to give their time and their expertise," said O'Hare. "So, for example, show up for meetings on time. Respond

## RECRUIT briefs

### More positive HR outlook

Just under half of employers have a more positive outlook for business this year than in 2011, a new report has found.

The report by recruiter Morgan McKinley Ireland found that, among 584 respondents in financial services, professional services, manufacturing and IT companies in the republic, 58 per cent said salaries in their companies would remain steady in 2012.

Twenty-one per cent predicted a modest rise of about between one and five per cent. Thirteen per cent said salaries would fall by the same amount this year.

Asked about the biggest HR difficulties facing employers this year, respondents cited attracting professionals, talent retention and skills shortages.

Just four per cent of respondents reported concerns about handling redundancies in the next 12 months.

Karen O'Flaherty, chief operations officer, Morgan McKinley Ireland, said the survey revealed a "slight lift" in business confidence.

"Although there is still considerable uncertainty in the market and growth predictions are sombre, the major steps taken last year towards Ireland's economic recovery have made many professionals feel that it is time to move on and work towards a stronger and more stable 2012," said O'Flaherty.

"This increased optimism does not necessarily equate to increased salaries, however, with the majority of respondents expecting salaries within their businesses to remain unchanged over the next 12 months.

"Taking into account the current mood of austerity and ongoing uncertainty over the euro currency, it may seem strange that talent attraction, talent retention and skills shortages are seen as predominant issues facing human resources managers in 2012.

"Employers recognise there are still shortages of skilled professionals in certain sectors, so sourcing and retaining top talent within allocated recruitment budgets is a priority, even in this challenging economic climate."

### Engineers Week is launched

Companies have been called on to support Engineers Week 2012. The annual event is aimed at encouraging more young people to consider a career in engineering.

John Power, director general of Engineers Ireland, made the call for corporate support in advance of the initiative, which will this year focus on the transformational and varied nature of modern engineering.

"The engineering profession is becoming increasingly diverse with the modern engineer involved in everything from space travel technology design to games software development and medical technology. Engineers Week 2012 will show the young and the curious the fantastic potential that a career in these emerging areas of engineering offers," he said.



Karen O'Flaherty

to any email communication and be respectful of the time that you are being given. Do not spend it whining about how unfair things are or giving out about other people."

### Independence

With your mentor available to guide you through challenges and tribulations, it could be tempting to become reliant on their support.

Those being mentored should ensure they do not become over-reliant on their mentor and that they are capable of making decisions in their own right.

"It is important to maintain your independence and to recognise that it is about your growth and learning as a mentee, so you do not have to run everything by your mentor or need their approval before you make a decision," said O'Hare.

"Sometimes, relationships can develop in such a way that there is an over-reliance. However, if it is set up well with the boundaries and expectations established and if you are clear about what you want to get out of it then, generally, there are very few pitfalls compared to a lot of benefits."

### Leveraging benefits

Ad hoc mentoring goes on all the time, but companies that really want to leverage the benefits set up a plan. A mentoring programme developed by life assurance company Acorn Life was opened to new recruits last year.

Acorn Life operates on a tied agent structure. Brokers are self-employed and run their own businesses. The idea behind the company's mentoring scheme was to give new recruits the support needed to navigate their first year in operation, according to Tom Hannigan, head of Acorn's training and development.

"Being a professional adviser can be challenging because you operate your practice on

your own so, when you are meeting clients, there is no one observing you to see what you are doing," said Hannigan.

"If you played sport, you would have a coach watching you at training and helping you, so, basically, we wanted to put a support structure in place for people entering the business.

"We wanted them to have a sounding post if they came across a query or something that they hadn't experienced previously; to ensure that they would have somebody who is experienced in the business who they can bounce these things off," he said.

The company developed a training programme, delivered over a six-to-seven-month period, to help mentors develop their own skills, particularly in the area of coaching.

Although it is early days yet, the effort appears to be paying off with those participating in the mentoring programme improving productivity by about 15 per cent. Mentors were also reporting improvements to their own businesses resulting from their involvement in the scheme, Hannigan said.

"Their results are improving because they are focusing on what it is that they do and it is helping them to build their business because they are looking at their own practices," he said.

"Those being mentored have the knowledge but they may not be 100 per cent confident and they have the reassurance of an experienced professional that they are heading down the right road.

"Our business is all about building relationships and trust with clients and that can be damaged very quickly. The priority for anyone in the business is to make sure that they find out what suits their client, do a comprehensive fact-find and build a solution that meet their needs.

"That is quite a challenging thing to do when you are new to the business, so to have someone that is experienced and who can give you tips and guidance is hugely beneficial," said Hannigan.

### Acorn Life

Acorn Life financial advisers Declan O'Neill and Enda Moynihan share their experience of taking part in the company's mentoring programme

**Mentor: Declan O'Neill CPD, financial adviser, Acorn Life**

"The mentoring programme provided me with an opportunity to help another adviser to establish himself in the financial services industry and to pass on the skills and knowledge I have picked up during my time in the business. I benefited from a similar experience when I joined the business but in a less formal way.

"As a mentor, I make sure I'm available to the one being mentored on a regular basis. I'm always at the end of the phone when I'm needed, whether it be for technical advice or to bounce an idea off me. Our business is highly regulated, which is very good for our clients, but can seem a little daunting for those new to the business.

"It is important that the one being mentored is confident of the regulatory requirements of the business and part of each of our meetings focuses on this aspect of the business.

"The key to the mentoring relationship is to be available and to help the person identify a number of approaches to a situation and to guide him to select the most appropriate solution. In a way I have merely helped Enda to arrange his thoughts and ideas and select the best solution.



Declan O'Neill, left, and Enda Moynihan

"Mentoring forces me to take time out and focus the mind on what I do well that makes my business successful. We can all be busy fools but this process has helped me to appreciate the value in building long-term relationships with my clients.

"It is challenging and very rewarding. The relationship must be open and honest and work both ways. Honesty as always is the best policy, but remember mentoring is about helping your protégé to be successful and, therefore, feedback must be balanced and constructive."

**Mentee: Enda Moynihan, financial adviser, Acorn Life**

"I have been in the financial services industry for a number of years now and when the opportunity came to start my own financial advisory business I decided the time was right.

"Although experienced in the industry, starting a new business venture like this one can be challenging. The fact that I would have the support of a very experienced successful adviser to help me get started made a big difference to me.

"The most important people in our industry are our clients. Understanding their needs and helping them to put the best solution in place is my job. Helping clients to make an informed decision can be challenging and so the mentoring programme, and Declan more specifically, helps me to do this.

"We meet our clients at a time that's convenient to them which often entails late evening. If I need technical or advisory support, Enda is always there at the end of the phone. That makes a big difference, though I'm not sure whether he envisaged that his mentoring would be 24/7 when he signed up for the role.

"Mentoring has helped me build my business. We meet regularly to review my business plan, discuss challenges and opportunities I have encountered, clients I am due to meet and some of the administrative tasks I need to complete. It is hugely beneficial when it comes to business development, planning, customer relationship management and importantly time management.

"Sometimes it is just great to be able to talk to someone who has experienced the highs and lows of the business who can reassure you that you are doing the right thing."