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Supporting Women in Business: The Role of Mentorship

Track: Gender in Management

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Supporting Women in Business: The Role of Mentorship

Summary

It is widely accepted that mentorship can be a key driver of success for women in the workplace, however the experiences of mentees has not been fully explored. Further to this, mentorship of female university students keen to enter into leadership positions while growing is still an area lacking in development and therefore guidance surrounding such programmes is limited. Following a group of female university students engaged with a Women in Business mentorship programme this study will use 3 stage interviews to explore the mentorship experience and its perceived value from the perspective of the mentees. Findings will be used to develop guidance principles towards a process for mentorship programmes for use at educational establishments.

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Background

Workforce diversity as a topic of interest for both research and industry has grown exponentially in recent years, with progress, though slow, being seen in a variety of settings (Lynch, 2017). While intentions behind such a push for disparity reduction vary it is clear that a move to a more balanced workforce on the basis of gender, race, and background is set to continue (Kirton & Greene, 2021). To enable this progress a variety of methods are being implemented across different industries, with mentoring as a method of individual and group development increasingly gaining traction (Jones, 2017). Though not an activity limited to those with minority status, mentorship schemes are often provided to those seen to be at a disadvantage, be it at a societal or industry specific level (Dashper, 2020). Research thus far on the process of mentoring is not lacking, however a focus on the experience of mentees preparing to start their careers is somewhat limited, especially where the notion of female specific mentoring is considered.

Research Aim

The role of industry led mentorship programmes and the subsequent experiences of the mentees while of increasing interest has not been widely reported. The aim of this study is to explore the perceived value of industry mentorship from the perspective of the mentees to develop a greater understanding of the potential benefits mentorship relationships can provide. Additionally, this research seeks to evaluate the process of mentorship schemes and using the knowledge gained suggest guidance principles to support successful mentorship for use in educational settings.

Objectives

1. Explore the experiences of mentees receiving mentorship from business industry leaders.
2. Identify the key aspects of the mentoring process that enable or prevent perceived value from being derived.
3. Develop guidance principles to support the successful provision of future mentorship activities.

Literature Review

While an increase has been seen in the number of women holding leadership positions in the workplace there is still an imbalance when comparisons are made with their male counterparts, with further disparities seen where women are also part of another minority group (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Despite a greater percentage of women graduating from a higher education institute with the minimum of a bachelor's degree than men, women are still greatly underrepresented in leadership positions, with leadership positions across a variety of industries still disproportionately held by men (Cortland & Kinias, 2019). Causes of this gender inequality have not been sufficiently identified, however studies such as Coleman (2020) have found that barriers such as the masculine nature of work culture, gender stereotyping, discrimination, and the challenges of balancing family life form part of the issue.

One method of reducing this inequality is the provision of mentorship schemes aimed at supporting women into higher level positions, or for those early in their careers providing networking opportunities and guidance to build confidence and aspirations (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015). Exact definitions of mentoring vary, however there is a consensus that the process of mentoring includes personal-professional relationships that formulate strategy to

develop human capacity (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021), providing functions supporting both personal and developmental growth (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Early research in the field suggests that engaging with mentorship, particularly in the early stages of one's career, can significantly enhance professional outcomes (Kram, 1983), with numerous individuals in prominent positions citing engagement with a mentor as a factor in their success (Scandura, 1992). In more recent studies this positive outlook remains (Klinge, 2015; Ivey & Dupré, 2022), further confirming that the process of mentorship can provide numerous benefits to individuals, as well as organisations and society as a whole (Alred & Garvey, 2019).

Further to the universal benefits of mentoring that are commonly reported, the benefits to women in particular can be profound (Turner-Moffatt, 2019); with assistance in decoding masculine organisational culture, enhancing a sense of belonging, and promoting successful functioning and advancement in organisations often recognised as a means of overcoming gender specific barriers (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007). Many scholars agree that women who engage with mentoring often have better outcomes than those that do not (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004), therefore establishing that mentoring should be both widely available and actively encouraged (Tolar, 2012). Despite this however it has been noted that women often find it more challenging to obtain an appropriate mentor than men (Anne, Johnson, Xu & Allen, 2007), with further difficulties seen where cross-gender mentoring is the only option (Burke & McKeen, 1990). Additionally, early career women have been found to excel when supported by a same-gender role model (Bettis et al, 2019; Canaan & Mouganie, 2023), yet the provision of female specific mentoring programmes is seldom seen as a priority (Casad et al, 2021). To combat this efforts must be made both within educational establishments and businesses to provide women with opportunities that are suitable, and of comparable quality to the opportunities had by men, as the importance of mentorship for early career women cannot be ignored (Dashper, 2020).

While primarily considered from a positive perspective it must be acknowledged that there is a potential for schemes solely engaged with by women to perpetuate further discourses that suggest women are lesser than men and less able to engage with programmes free from a gender divide (Dashper, 2019). Further to this the approach to this study cannot be solely from a position of expressing the benefits of mentoring as it is not only known that negatives can stem from mentorship (Bernier, Larose & Soucy, 2005; Ivey & Dupré, 2022), but also that this work is exploratory by nature and therefore open to any potential outcomes. Though limited within the literature challenges in mentoring from the perspective of mentees have been identified, most notably surrounding issues such as mentor-mentee alignment, scheduling, meeting expectations, and deriving real value (Keller et al, 2014; Manning & Hobson, 2017).

As with any intervention developed to improve outcomes, an assessment of process is vital to ensure both appropriate and successful (although relative) provision (Outhwaite, Gulliford & Pitchford, 2020). However, as the recipients of the benefits of mentoring, perceived or actual, the experience of mentees must be documented; without insights into the tangible and intangible benefits derived from mentorship programmes their success cannot truly be commented upon (Hall & Maltby, 2013). To fully utilise the potential of mentoring as an intervention, research must focus not only on the nature of the provision, but the experiences of those involved; it is this feedback that will enable mentorship providers to tailor their offerings in a way that benefits those involved, as opposed to simply 'ticking a box' (Boeren, Lokhtina-Antoniou, Sakurai, Herman & McAlpine, 2015).

Despite identification by Jacobi (1991) and later recommendations for future research and practice by Crisp and Cruz (2009) there remains a need for clarity surrounding the provision of mentorship for university students and early career individuals, with further requirements for a greater exploration surrounding the perceptions of women (Humble, Solomon, Allen, Blaisure & Johnson, 2006; Graham, 2019). Previously conducted studies such as Read, Fisher and Jurn (2020) that have explored the value derived from mentorship programmes have highlighted the positive experiences of those who have proactively engaged with this method of development, though primarily this has been focused on women who have already begun their careers; crucially, it has been found that the conceptualisation of the mentoring experience differs between university students/early career individuals and those already secure within employment, therefore the need for further insights into the perceptions of those at earlier stages of their career journey is apparent (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2004).

It is through this research that the perspectives of mentees taking part in a female led mentorship programme will be explored to identify whether potential drawbacks such as those identified are in fact outweighed by the perceived benefits gained. Further to this due to the opportunity for such programmes to provide women with the support needed to progress into higher level roles this research has the potential to not only contribute to knowledge surrounding the topic, but also to support the construction of guidance principles that can be used to further enhance the deployment and success of such schemes as currently there is no clear best practice for mentorship detailed in the literature (Farkas, Bonifacino, Turner, Tilstra & Corbelli, 2019).

Methodology

This study will take an interpretivist theoretical approach stemming from a position of critical realism that seeks to understand the experience of mentorship and what that means in terms of value derived from the perspective of the mentees (Zachariadis, Scott & Barrett, 2010). As an exploration of the phenomenon of mentorship a qualitative longitudinal case study will be conducted following a group of mentees at a university in Sheffield over a period of one-year. These mentees will be female students in their final year of study who have chosen to take part in the Women in Business mentorship scheme at the university. Mentors for this programme are women in leadership positions who have volunteered to act as mentors for the programme.

Data collection will take place at three stages within the mentorship programme: 1; pre-mentoring, 2; during mentoring, and 3; post-mentoring. The programme is scheduled to run for 12 months, from January to December. All mentees involved in the mentorship programme will be invited to take part in the set of three semi-structured interviews, with each interview set to last around 30 minutes. As the mentorship programme that will be followed is in its infancy the sample size at this stage cannot be confirmed, however based on similar studies an aim of 15-20 mentees will form part of this case study, though data collection may conclude with a smaller sample if saturation of findings occurs or extend beyond this if a larger sample can be obtained.

To derive meaning from the data collected content analysis will be used (Prasad, 2008). Using a conceptual model designed by Schunk and Mullen (2013) participant responses will be coded against the inclusions detailed within the three mentorship stages; 1; pre-mentoring, 2; during mentoring, and 3; post-mentoring. This framework will enable an analysis of data that identifies the reasoning behind the perceived value (or lack thereof) gained from the

mentorship programme, with the findings used to develop guidance principles towards a process for successful mentorship programmes for female university students.

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