



# SkillSharpener Web Extra



## Building and managing a mentoring program

There are a number of ways in which a mentoring program could benefit a customer service organization, says Beth Carvin, president and CEO of Nobscot Corporation, which offers mentor/mentee matching software.

Turnover is one. "We all know that one of the challenges of managing a customer service operation is dealing with turnover," Carvin says, "and one of the strengths of a mentoring program is that it increases employees' commitment to the organization. There are a number of research studies that show how mentoring and retention are related.

Another benefit is that, for new hires, working in customer service can be quite overwhelming at the start. "Most companies do a good job of training," Carvin says, "but once you are on the phone by yourself, things can be a bit frightening."

The stress related to working in customer service is another good reason to consider a mentoring program. "If you are in a call center where you often have customers yelling at you," Carvin says, "wouldn't it be nice to have someone that it was safe to talk with about how to deal with this or that sort of situation?"

Mentoring can also help build advancement opportunities. One common cause of customer service turnover is the perceived lack of career opportunities, "so having a mentor who can help a rep with learning all they need to know within the service

center environment and with creating a career plan within the organization can be of great value," says Carvin.

### Getting a mentoring program started

The first step in developing a mentoring program for your customer service organization is to determine what you want to accomplish with the program. "You might want a new-hire mentoring program, or a high-potential mentoring program, or a diversity mentoring program," Carvin says. "So you really want to start by focusing your efforts on the challenges and issues your service center is facing that you can best solve with mentoring."

### Keep track of these mentoring metrics

Different companies use different metrics, depending on their goals, to track the results of their mentoring programs, says Beth Carvin of Nobscot Corp. Specific outcomes that companies should look for include:

- Sharpening job-related skills
- Increasing confidence on the job
- Expanding one's understanding of the organization
- Creating useful networking opportunities
- Solving specific challenges or problems, and
- Increasing one's commitment to the organization.

More formal metrics might include retention rates of those in the program versus those outside of the program, promotion rates of those in

and out of the program, and performance improvements of those in and out of the program. The more positive results you have to report to senior management, the better.





Second — as with any other departmental initiative — is to find an executive champion or sponsor. “It always helps to have somebody at a senior level supporting the program, helping to promote it, providing necessary resources, and possibly even participating in the program,” says Carvin. “A sponsor or champion can also help you to put your business case together to present to senior management if that’s necessary.”

The third step is to determine how formal or informal you want the program to be. “On the informal side of the spectrum, you might just provide some information on how mentoring works and how it can help — and encourage people to seek out a mentor,” Carvin says. On the more formal side, you would have administrators to run the program, forms to fill out, contracts to sign, and more detailed information on what mentors and mentees should be doing as part of the program.

“The successful programs that I have seen fall somewhere in the middle,” Carvin says, “where you provide a framework for the mentoring program, and a set of established tools for connecting participants, and then have people choose or be nominated to participate in the program.” She adds that the research shows the more involvement the mentee has in the selection of the mentor, the better the outcome for the mentorship.

### Providing the necessary tools

Having information and resources available for participants is one of the most important tools a mentoring program can provide. “Often people just do not know how to be a mentor, or a mentee,” Carvin says. “So if you really want people to participate and make use of the program, you need to help them answer questions like: What does it mean to be a mentor? And what does it mean to be a mentee? What should we be doing?”

Carvin says she would start with a set of questions for participants, both mentors and mentees, such as: What are your goals for the mentorship? What do you hope to gain from being involved? How would you like to communicate? Are there any areas that are off-lim-

its? How will we handle confidential information? Participants answer these questions and bring their responses to the first meeting.

The first meeting should also cover goal-setting, and whatever goal-setting guidelines the manager can provide will be helpful to participants.

It is also helpful to provide ideas for activities — for example, having the mentor arrange a lunch with a colleague who can offer advice on specific issues or career development needs. Or sending the mentor and mentee to a seminar together.

Once your mentorship program has been under way for a while, you will have a range of ideas, activities, and tools you can suggest to get new relationships going.

### Maintaining momentum

The problem that plagues many mentoring programs is that once the initial momentum for the program dies down, enthusiasm can lag and the benefits of mentoring can be lost. To prevent this from happening, Carvin says that customer service managers should be active recruiters for their mentoring program — getting people excited about participating.

They should also work to keep the program energized by communicating regularly to mentors and mentees. “You want to be putting out success stories — whether they’re about how some mentor helped a mentee overcome a challenge, or how a mentor helped a mentee to be promoted within the organization,” Carvin says.

“You also want to keep track of results and report on the success of the program to senior management,” she says. One practical way to do this is to survey participants to see what they are getting out of the program.

And, of course, track to see if your staff retention is improving — especially if retention is improving more among those who are in the program compared with reps who are not part of the program.

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