

# GOING THE DISTANCE: VIRTUAL MENTORING



Going the Distance: Virtual Mentoring  
February 27, 2007  
Sponsored by MENTTIUM  
By Tom Durgin

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mentoring is a proven method of talent development and the success of mentoring programs has proved to be a valuable component of retention strategies. More and more organizations recognize this and have been busily developing and implementing mentorship programs. In an on-site environment the logistics of managing a mentoring relationship are fairly straightforward. Yet many companies today operate trans-nationally, or globally, and people who would be good mentors aren't necessarily in the right location for face-to-face or hands-on interaction.

Enter virtual mentoring, the practice of taking mentorship best practices and applying them across time and distance. This paper will examine the case for virtual mentoring, the key factors to consider in designing a virtual mentoring program, and share some practical tips of virtual mentoring.

## WHY COMPANIES ARE DOING VIRTUAL MENTORING

An increasing number of organizations recognize the many benefits of virtual mentoring:

- It builds relationships among internal business units

- It provides for development of employees in remote locations

- It builds relationships between "corporate" and the "field"

- It fosters a national or global corporate perspective

A virtual mentoring program can provide the mentors needed to develop talent - wherever it is.

The benefits of virtual mentoring (VM) are not limited to the list above. VM promotes efficiency through its

flexibility of time and location. It can increase the value and productivity of employees. Furthermore, by extending a mentoring program into the virtual world, the pool of talent that will benefit from mentoring is broadened, as is the mentoring network within the organization. VM provides exposure to others that might not otherwise be available, thereby fostering diversity, establishing new connections, and even eliminating potential biases. Not the least of VM's benefits is its ability to allow people to develop long-distance meeting and relationship skills.

The challenges of virtual mentoring

Virtual mentoring is not without its challenges, including the paradigm that mentoring at its best is a face-to-face relationship. Typical challenges include:

- An out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude

- Multiple time zones

- It's easier to cancel a virtual meeting than a face-to-face meeting

- The perception (not entirely unjustified) that it takes more effort and planning

- It is more difficult to build relationships

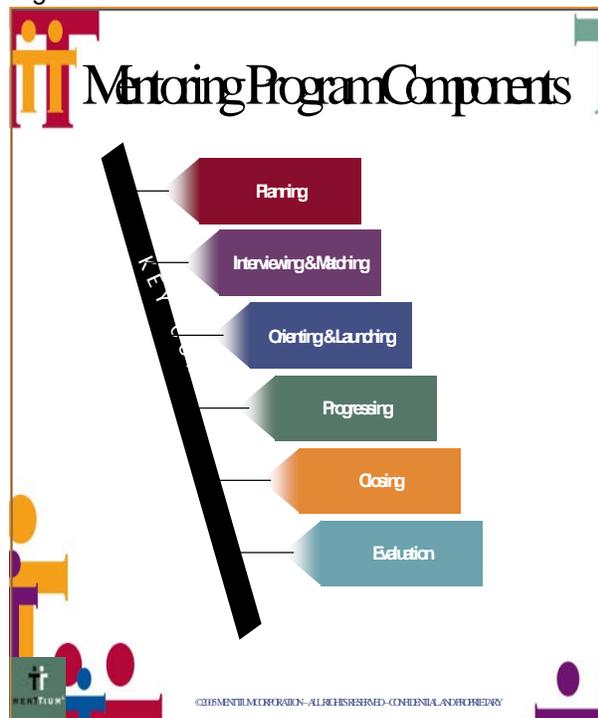
Challenges can be overcome. In the case of virtual mentoring, Dr. Sue Stanek, a Consulting Partner at MENTTIUM, says it's important to remember that, as with more familiar mentoring programs, VM has the same objectives – it simply requires a different approach. For example, if two objectives are learning together and building a relationship, the face-to-face approach would be to attend an event together. In a VM model, the approach might be to share movies, books, music or other media, and/or to discuss and report on events that each party has attended. As another example, if the objectives were to

picture each other's world, do job shadowing, and obtain feedback, in the face-to-face model the participants could simply visit each other's work place. In a VM program, this could be replaced by sharing images, "virtual job shadowing," shared documents, and sharing reactions to these initiatives.

## THE COMPONENTS OF A MENTORING PROGRAM

A virtual mentoring program comprises the same components as more familiar mentoring initiatives.

Figure 1



Yet there are special considerations for virtual mentoring programs due to the different approaches necessary to ensure VM success. These will be examined below in the context of the six components in Figure 1.

### PLANNING

Planning is the process of establishing the program framework. In VM, two important criteria must be considered:

- Mentee/mentor must have experience with virtual interactions

- Mentee/mentor must be available at program launch time

### INTERVIEWING AND MATCHING

This is the process of actually creating the mentoring partnerships. Two considerations relevant to VM are:

- Interviewing – assess the openness of both parties to a virtual relationship

- Matching – ideally, mentee/mentor should be no more than two time zones apart

### ORIENTING AND LAUNCHING

This is the process of educating participants on expectations and providing the tools for their success. If possible this should be done face-to-face. If not, a blended approach that allows for one-to-one voice and partnership time can be used. This phase is the time to discuss the benefits of VM, as well as its challenges and the solutions to them.

### PROGRESSING

This is an important component of VM, because it's the process of ensuring optimal program success. Best practices in this phase include:

- Two-month checkpoint 'phone calls
- Regular development/checkpoint experiences (webinars are a useful tool)

- Regular reminders, tips, best practices, and success stories related to virtual experiences

### CLOSING

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This is the process of ensuring future applications of learning. It should be conducted face-to-face whenever possible, since it is based on clear directions on how to close out the relationship. These directions may include:

- Parameters for future contact
- Summarizing what has been learned
- Reporting back to management

## EVALUATION

Evaluation is the process of measuring participant satisfaction, partnership success, process effectiveness, key learnings, and organizational impact. It is the time to relate the experience and its outcomes, as well as share tips for future participants in a VM program.

## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR VIRTUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Dr. Stanek's experience in VM has resulted in a set of very practical tips for ensuring the success of a VM program:

Lock-in pre-scheduled meetings. This counters the natural tendency of "out-of-site, out-of-mind" and helps overcome the reluctance of dealing with distance and time.

Be prepared. Formal meetings should be planned around an agenda. The notes of the previous meeting should be reviewed. It is also good to discuss successes and challenges since the last meeting, virtually share photos, and talk about common, or similar, experiences.

Follow up. Send an email that summarizes the meeting and reviews the action to be taken by both parties.

Be proactive about travel. Meet in person whenever possible

Talk frequently in the first few months. Frequent communication is vital to building a relationship,

avoiding misunderstandings, and clarifying roles and responsibilities.

It's also important to keep the learning process moving. One tip Stanek suggests is to forward non-confidential voice mail, email, and documents, then discuss different local reactions and perspectives. This practice can include a discussion of the implications and consequences of business news or trends from each partner's unique geographical and cultural perspectives.

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## CONCLUSION

Given the state of today's communication technology, developing and implementing a virtual mentoring program is an entirely achievable goal. Not only that, the widely recognized benefits of mentoring programs can play a crucial role in retention, succession planning, and leadership development, not to mention a role in developing high-potential talent. Mentoring plays an important part in talent management, an increasingly vital consideration in light of a global talent shortage. Organizations that want to maintain or improve their competitive posture on the global stage will benefit from virtual mentoring programs.

Based on the Human Capital Institute webcast; *Going the Distance: Virtual Mentoring*, February 27, 2007

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## PRESENTER

Sue Stanek, Ph.D., Consulting Partner, MENTTIUM

Dr. Sue Stanek brings with her over 20 years of experience supporting organizations to achieve their business results through the development of people. She has delivered virtual mentoring sessions both cross-corporately, and within companies that have virtual mentoring partnerships worldwide. Throughout her career, Sue has worked in product development, product management, sales management, and as an internal and external consultant. While in sales management, Sue's division broke records on volume and profit margins while also exceeding organizational goals in customer satisfaction (as a division, and as an individual). Most recently, Sue has focused her contribution to organizations as an independent provider of organizational development, training, and coaching solutions. Sue partners with businesses in the areas of planning, leadership, culture change, team building, sales and service development, and maximizing individual performance. She teaches leadership courses at Concordia University, having earned her Ph.D. in Training and Development at the University of Minnesota.

## MODERATOR

Bill Craib, Vice President, Communities, the Human Capital Institute

Prior to joining the Human Capital Institute, Bill was the Founding Director of AIRS Human Capital Solutions, and served as Director of Training and Curriculum Development from 1997 to 2003. An early Internet adopter and advocate of its far-reaching potential, Bill developed his practical experience by establishing an Internet-centric executive search practice focused on telecommunications. This endeavor helped lay the groundwork for the significant contributions he has made to the core curriculum of AIRS. Bill earned a BS Degree from the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and spent 10 years as a journalist working for several media

organizations, including ESPN and the Rocky Mountain News, before entering the recruiting industry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This White Paper is made possible by MENTTIUM, sponsors of HCI's Mentorship Strategies Track.

## ABOUT MENTTIUM



The global leader in today's corporate mentoring models, MENTTIUM Corporation offers comprehensive internal, virtual and cross-company mentoring programs that support the importance of human capital - the most powerful component of building a competitive company in today's marketplace. MENTTIUM works closely with organizations to design and implement mentoring solutions that attract, develop and retain top talent. MENTTIUM's strategic approach delivers powerful mentoring experiences that are linked to business objectives and targeted to positively impact the performance of individual employees and the long-term viability of organizations. To learn more about MENTTIUM's products and services, please visit [www.mentium.com](http://www.mentium.com).

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