

Formal mentorship programs connect baby boomers, gen-Y employees

Xerox initiative engages different generations, gains momentum across divisions

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In an era where employees are expected to produce more with less, organizations are looking for innovative ways to transfer knowledge, engage employees and support a high-performing work environment. Formal mentoring programs are becoming increasingly popular as one way of connecting experienced baby boomers with younger, less-experienced gen Ys in order to build a learning organization.

In its most basic form, mentoring is a trusted relationship between a successful professional who works with another professional who seeks to grow and advance his professional and personal skill sets.

Mentoring can take several forms — formal, informal, reverse — and each has its own advantages and challenges. Formal mentoring programs are important because they demonstrate organizations value the development of the younger generation's skills while acknowledging and harnessing the expertise of experienced employees.

Organizations that implement formal mentoring programs typically focus on developmental mentoring where the aim is to support the mentee's learning and development through the acquisition of new knowledge, behaviours and attitudes.

Mentoring is an ongoing, long-term process. It's about taking employees from where they are to where they want to be. Mentoring is not a one-way conversation. It's about facilitating positive change through open conversations in a safe environment for both mentor and mentee.

A well-structured mentoring program offers numerous benefits, including:

- elevated knowledge transfer
- enhanced professional and personal development of employees

- increased retention
- lowered turnover costs
- increased productivity and performance
- acquired knowledge about other parts of the organization
- an opportunity for management to showcase leadership skills
- improved communication and relationships with colleagues and customers
- first-hand knowledge about how younger employees think and work
- an organizational culture of shared knowledge
- a strong and positive employer brand.

Xerox responds to gen Y

While a well-structured program can achieve many positive outcomes, it's important that an organization be realistic about what it will achieve and manage expectations internally. Xerox Canada developed a formal mentoring program in 2011 to respond to the desires of gen-Y employees for greater guidance and direction on how to build a successful career within the company.

One of the challenges for the project team was to ensure all stakeholders were clear on the scope of the program (what could and could not be achieved through mentoring) and how it differed from other performance-based coaching and development initiatives.

The project champions emphasized that mentors don't develop people, rather, they support mentees to learn by sharing experiences and asking mentees great questions, challenging their decision-making and expanding their problem-solving skills.

By clearly delineating the purpose and scope of a formal mentoring program, the project team was able to set a clear direction as to the value the program brings in shaping the organizational culture and how it complements other developmental pro-

grams.

As Xerox Canada recognized, mentoring and coaching take different approaches. Employers need to be careful not to overpromise the impact a program can have on the direct, everyday performance of employees. While a successful program can enhance employees' career development, it may not necessarily impact their ability to perform job-related tasks. That is achieved through coaching, training and other performance-management activities.

Once there is internal evidence a formal mentoring program will meet an organization's needs, the following five-step process should be used to design and develop the program:

- Develop a business case, including the

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Top 9 characteristics of effective, formal mentoring programs

- mentor/mentee matching based on skill and development needs
- formal mentoring goals are outlined, tracked
- minimum time commitment — typically one year
- formal structure for mentoring relationships
- formal training provided to mentors and mentees
- mutual accountability — mentors and mentees
- program links to business strategy, goals
- consideration of generational expectations of mentors, mentees
- internal resource dedicated to administering the program.

what, why and how.

- Design the program, including all the elements that need to be incorporated.
- Develop and market the program, including training, internal communications and marketing to recruit mentees and mentors.
- Implement the program, including a pilot.
- Evaluate the program, including capturing feedback throughout the pilot and full roll-out.

Xerox Canada used this process to build and pilot its mentoring program. The program gained momentum across divisions before being launched company-wide. In order to cultivate an environment where mentoring could be successful, the organization ensured the program incorporated:

- organizational focus — shared understanding of Xerox's purpose and objectives
- skill development — training that supports a learning-focused organizational culture
- flexible design — addressing conflicting work schedules, time zones and physical limitations
- diversity issues — effective mentor-mentee relationships across age, gender and language.

From a generational perspective, it was important to incorporate design elements that would engage mentors and mentees. To appeal to baby boomers' need to add

value and differentiate themselves, the program tapped into mentors' desires to share their experiences. The Xerox program is designed so mentors act as a sounding board for mentees' goals and draw upon their tacit knowledge to help the mentee successfully navigate within the organization.

To align to gen-Ys' expectations that the program focus on their individual learning needs — not what the mentor wants to teach — the program allows mentees to choose their preferred mentor from three matches. The matching is based on their specific developmental goals (aligned to the organization's competencies) and allows for matching based on demographic data.

For gen Ys, it's imperative to create a successful mentoring relationship based on two-way respect and feedback. To achieve that goal, mentees at Xerox participate in a formal training program that outlines their accountabilities and responsibilities for leading the mentoring relationship, how to establish specific mentoring goals and how to be accountable for achieving them.

The program also supports managers who want to progress in the organization by being able to include mentorship as one of their development activities in their professional development plans.

This reinforces the importance of the pro-

gram and allows new managers at Xerox to enhance their skills by participating in the program and learning about themselves.

In addition, the program was designed to promote and encourage cross-functional and department matching, so a manager in one area of the business could mentor a mentee from another division. This approach increased awareness of business operations and broader career opportunities as well as acknowledging all mentors, regardless of role, could positively contribute to a mentee's professional development.

Building a formal mentoring program that allows for flexibility to address mentor and mentee needs, measures and tracks results, and aligns to generational expectations will be a key driver in improving retention, engagement, knowledge transfer and employer branding.

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