E-Mentoring: Is it good for Entrepreneurial Learning?

Kevin R. Hunt & Glen Atherfold

The Authors

Kevin R. Hunt, *Entrepreneur,*
Circle Squared Europe Limited
PO Box 326, REIGATE, Surrey
RH2 7WN, England
KevinH@circle-squared.com
www.circle-squared.com

Glen Atherfold,
Small Business Service, DTI, UK Government
Berkeley Square, Cross Lanes, GUILDFORD,
Surrey GU1 1YA England
Glenatherfold_sbs@seeda.co.uk

Abstract

Electronic Mentoring or E-Mentoring, although becoming established in some fields, is still relatively new in the area of supporting entrepreneurs; the Small Business Service[1] (SBS) and South East England Development Agency[2] (SEEDA) were the first to test this innovative approach with entrepreneurs. Combining the core principles of mentoring with today's technology will enable E-Mentoring to offer a more cost effective approach for funded business support and increasing the availability of mentoring. This paper aims to stimulate the debate amongst academics, policy makers and entrepreneurs; it will review some of the literature on E-Mentoring and the approach to learning that entrepreneurs have hitherto traditionally taken.

Key Words: Entrepreneur, E-Mentoring, Electronic Mentoring, Learning Styles

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[1] Small Business Service, an agency of the UK Government, Department of Trade & Industry, see www.sbs.gov.uk
[2] SEEDA is the development agency responsible for the SE of England, see www.seeda.co.uk

Introduction

This paper explores the question, "Can entrepreneurs learn through E-Mentoring?"

To address the question posed the paper will review the literature around preferred learning styles; E-Mentoring in a business environment and the results from the evidence offered from two pilot programmes. It will then endeavour to link the outcomes from the literature with the results derived from the evaluations. The first business E-Mentoring program referred to in this paper is MentorsByNet piloted in the South East of England, and a subsequent program that was trailed in the London region of the UK using a common approach. Both were independently evaluated utilising the same methodology for comparative purposes.

When using the term "entrepreneurs" in the context of this paper it refers to both mentors (entrepreneurs who have volunteered their time to assist other entrepreneurs) and mentees who have applied to take part in the programmes.

This paper argues that E-Mentoring supports the learning styles of this group of entrepreneurs, because of its immediate nature as well as the variety and flexibility of the subject matter making it timely and 'entrepreneur-centric'.[3]

The Case for Mentoring

Mentoring relationships are not new: many of us can think of examples of where an individual has influenced us in a positive way at some point in our lives. Bennis (2004), while discussing his view of the seven stages of leadership, reiterates the importance of having a mentor at various stages of a leader's personal development, from the very first stage through to the mature stage when perhaps, the mentee becomes the mentor!

Mentors may play a number of roles such as coach, friend, and counsellor. Since the late 70's there has been considerable debate around the value of individuals in mentoring relationships where the focus of attention is placed on the quality of the

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[3] The authors recognise that the evidence used to support the analysis and conclusions rests on entrepreneurs who have voluntarily participated in E-mentoring programmes piloted in the United Kingdom (UK) and thus were self selecting.

mentoring relationship (Higgins & Kram: 2001). This is emphasised by Eby (1997) who often refers to mentoring as "an intense developmental relationship".

Stokes (2003) discusses the strongly interpersonal relationship between mentee and mentor in which a safe place exists for the mentee to explore and grow. This is further supported by Alred & Garvey (2000:146):

> "A mentor is sensitive to the emotional and intellectual aspects of the mentee's world. Offering empathy is a basis for establishing trust in the mentoring relationship, a condition for learning that goes beyond the routine and the instrumental."

The mentor acts as a confidante and, as Clutterbuck & Megginson (1998) put it; will offer 'help…in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking'. Mentoring relationships can be highly structured or fluid in design allowing the relationship to move in any direction the mentor and mentee agree, but always in support of the mentee's goals. In recent times mentoring has been identified as an important learning activity in a variety of contexts (Hansford, Tennet & Ehrich: 2002), such as businesses and the more traditional learning environments.

As in all aspects of mentoring, more critical questions are now being asked about the quality and effectiveness of mentoring relationships Stokes, Garrett & Hunt (2003). Ragins, Cotton & Miller (2000) draw our attention to the dangers of so-called 'marginal mentors' and McAuley (2003) explores what he refers to as the 'ambivalence' of mentoring, employing psychoanalytic constructs such as transferences and counter transference between mentor and mentee.

Stokes e*t.al.* (2003), raise a number of questions, specifically about e-mentoring. Firstly, can e-mentoring - as an alternative mode of mentoring – enable mentoring relationships of sufficient depth and quality so that benefits can be gained? Related to that question, we can also ask whether e-mentoring can overcome some of the difficulties experienced in traditional didactic mentoring relationships. If the answer to both questions is 'yes' then e- mentoring has a great deal to offer to the field of mentoring and coaching.

Although there appears to be no common definition assigned to this relatively new term, there is little known on the subject, as demonstrated from the literature review that follows, E-mentoring is a term rapidly gaining in popularity..

In many traditional didactic cases where mentoring programs were reported to have negative outcomes, success appeared to have been jeopardised by lack of time, lack of training; the negative attitudes of others or poor matching of mentors and mentees (Hansford e*t. al.:*2002). We will explore how some of these problem areas can be alleviated through E-Mentoring.

What is E-Mentoring?

A Review of E-Mentoring Literature

While there has been a veritable explosion of online mentoring websites and opportunities within a wide variety of professions, very few academic articles to date have addressed this phenomenon Ensher, Heun & Blanchard (2003). Stokes *et.al,* (2003) also identified that as yet, there is relatively little empirical evidence to constitute a thorough exploration of what e-mentoring is and whether it works or not.

Perren (2002), in a piece of research commissioned by the authors during the development phase of MentorsByNet programme, identified a limited number published articles, supporting the view that few academics have sought to address this area of research to date. This looked primarily at the research of e-mentoring and its relevance to entrepreneurs.

To date any research on E-Mentoring immediately runs into a barrier over the definition: Kasprisin, Single, Single & Muller (2003) point out that, e-mentoring "…has also been popularly termed telementoring, cyber mentoring and on-line mentoring…". Perren's (2002) review identifies use of the internet, using email and list servers and non face to face methods of interaction as being key aspects of e-mentoring. Although the literature in this area is relatively sparse, some definitions are offered for e-mentoring. For example, Single & Muller (2001) define e-mentoring as:

> "a relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using

electronic communications , that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, whilst also assisting in the development of the mentor".

This is useful as a starting point but is, arguably, not hugely differentiated from many definitions of traditional mentoring: the same could be said of others offered in Perren's (2002) review. Gibb (1994) argued that mentoring cannot be explained through a single universal definition, an argument that can equally be applied to E-Mentoring.

After an extensive literature search Perren (2002) identified 20 papers that initially looked to be relevant to both E-Mentoring and Entrepreneurs, however further analyses reduced this to three core papers, a brief summary of each follows:

- Evans and Volery (2001) - this article looks at providing "business development services, such as training... and networking" through the internet by asking 'experts' "from around the world." Three success factors are found: 1. Internet communication is perceived as "second-best" to face-to-face; 2. So face-to-face contact is needed as a primary form of communication, internet provision is not a substitute; 3. The management of the internet site and program is a key factor".
- Stokes (2001) - this article is one of the most focused on the topic of the review as it looked at the feasibility of introducing a UK on-line tele-mentoring advisory scheme based on the Distance Learning Advisory Service in the Netherlands. Focus Groups were used to ask owner-managers what they thought about the idea. Owner –managers saw computers as a vital part of their businesses, but there was a wide range of application of computers and levels of confidence varied. Issues of trust, flexibility of delivery of support and time were repeating themes. Owner-managers also thought that face-to-face tutorship and networking with peers was important and they liked the idea of directed tutorship/mentoring rather than just brainstorming.
- Sullivan and Duffy (2000) - this article builds on Sullivan (2000) and reports some of the same issues. This summary will concentrate on the additional features of the article that look specifically at e-mentoring. A range of e-tools are suggested that could support entrepreneurs and facilitate e-mentoring including: email, email with attachments, as-synchronous electronic

discussion forums (not in real time) and synchronous teleconferencing (in real time). Discussion forums could allow entrepreneurs to share and discuss concerns and mentors could make contributions. Teleconferences are normally arranged at a pre-arranged time, it is suggested that the "role of the mentor is to assist focusing the group on a topic of discussion and ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to contribute". A teleconference could also be used for a "problem clinic" where mentees bring forward their live problems for consultation either with their mentor alone or with other mentees.

Stokes *et. al.* (2003) are critical of Perren's review and the contributions that existing research makes to e-mentoring. The emerging view is that current research falls short of a robust evaluation of the area, largely due to the lack of data. Those who have published on the subject have tended to balance low cost and flexibility of e-mentoring schemes against the limitations that e-mentoring has when dealing with more complex interpersonal issues. As a result, there have been calls for e-mentoring to be seen as a supplement to, but not a substitute for face to face mentoring. However, the paucity of research limits the extent to which this can be claimed with confidence.

Beech & Brockbank (1999) offer another perspective when considering the issue of power and how the imbalance of power may be overcome through e-mentoring. They consider how face-to-face interactions may be distracted by visual clues, and issues related to setting, context, and atmosphere may hamper communication. They conclude that as e-mail and text based messaging are leaner communication channels that allow for more direct information transfer, it could remove contextual issues.

Stokes *et. al.* (2003) conclude that e-mentoring, due to the 'leanness' of text based communication, might compel the participants to focus more on the substance of the message than on the style, status etc of the person delivering it. This therefore adds an additional research question to those already contributed: can e-mentoring offer additional benefits which go beyond those offered by traditional mentoring? Stokes *et. al. (*cites Hawkridge's, 2003) article, which is based on his eighteen years experience with the Open University, offers some additional ways in which text based communication might hold sway over face-to-face interaction. These advantages seem to stem from the recordable nature of the text which, unless special effort is

made to record face to face sessions, is not usually used in those sorts of interactions. As the text is available, this enables all parties to make sense of the contributions by "synthesising and summarising, drawing threads together, watching for and correcting conversational drift, spotting good ideas" and so on.

It has become apparent from the literature that many authors believe E-Mentoring is a suitable means of support for the traditional physical mentoring relationships, rather than a relationship that exists solely through the use of technology. The definitions offered earlier also appear to be inappropriate to the authors, who offer the following definition:

> "*E-Mentoring uses technology to facilitate the development*
> *of a supportive relationship for experimentation & personal*
> *development in a safe, convenient & timely environment;*
> *helping both mentee & mentor to grow*"

An Overview of the Practice

Electronic mentoring has been developed based on the possibilities unique to information and communications technology. The common feature of electronic mentoring programmes is the independence from geography and time constraints for connecting mentoring participants which we will see later.

The approach for E-Mentoring in a business to business environment was originally conceived by Kevin Hunt, (one of the authors) whilst in post as Regional Director, SBS with the belief that mentoring could be made available to a greater number of entrepreneurs through an approach adapted for technology. The concept was tested against published research (see Perren: 2002). A full market analysis was also commissioned using similar approaches through the web from which two principal schemes were identified (www.mentornet.net and www.apesma.asn.au/mentorsonline) from where learning was taken to aid development, . From this approach MentorsByNet[4] (www.mentorsbynet.org.uk) was developed and the learning was shared with Business Link for London and a second, smaller pilot, was established.

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[4] MentorsByNet a programme operated by Business Link Surrey and funded by SEEDA & SBS

The market analysis from both public and private organisations as well as educational institutes, throughout Europe and North America showed that the concept and value of mentoring is becoming a widely accepted practice. It was also apparent that E-mentoring is also slowly making an appearance on a variety of scenes, such as areas of social needs, but little in business.

It was therefore perceived that a more flexible and over time a relatively inexpensive approach to delivery, could open up the benefits of mentoring to a much wider audience. Many face-to-face schemes exist, but these can normally only handle relatively few in number. Thus many entrepreneurs have otherwise been excluded from face-to-face mentoring schemes due to the time, distance, social and financial constraints impinging upon them through running a small business. As already mentioned E-mentoring is in its infancy, but could, some believe, lead to a worthwhile addition to the services provided to entrepreneurs through the public funded business support organisations.

It is widely recognised that entrepreneurs such as business leaders are often in a very isolated position (among others Bennis: 2004) and the Sunday Times: 2003:19), and not all feel they can turn to their board of directors (assuming they have them) for advice or guidance while sole traders are in the same position frequently having few options as to where they can seek help.

One of the key aspects of the programme's success has been its ability to attract mentors on a voluntary basis, from the pool of existing entrepreneurs. It was recognised by many of the mentors that they benefited from the relationship, as referred to earlier by McAuley (2003). The uniqueness of the programme from the mentor's perspective was the convenience factor and that it required just small amounts of time.

The following are the core elements of the MentorsByNet program:
- The pilot supported programmes offered by intermediary business support organisations rather than going direct to market, in this instance through the Business Link Network of the SBS

- Entrepreneurs at various stages of their life were recruited as volunteer mentors and support was offered free to mentees
- All forms of technology could be used to support the process, such as web based email, instant relay chat, web cam, discussion forum, phone & texts, etc.
- Geographical location WAS NOT used as a determining factor when matching candidates to mentors.
- The pilot would support a three month mentoring relationship, (a minimum of six months was preferred but was limited to three due to funding timescales)
- As face-to-face meetings were not considered part of the process, a process of facilitating the relationship was developed
- Online training was provided to both mentee and mentor to ensure standards were maintained
- Ongoing evaluation and feedback was sought
- Usage volumes would be captured

A follow up programme is currently underway with 6 month relationships and enhancements to the processes and technology applications, resulting from feedback and progress in take up of broadband internet connectivity in the UK.

How do Entrepreneurs Learn?

Since the early 90's it has been thought that the capability of organisations, thus the people within from sole trader to many, that to learn is necessary for success in today's complex, challenging and constantly changing environment, Senge, (1990), Argyris (1999) and Handy (1996). With this focus on learning, much has been written about the entrepreneur or entrepreneurship, here we will take a look at a limited selection of the literature.

Much effort has gone into trying to understand the learning styles of entrepreneurs but Deakin (1999:22) feels "we do not understand how entrepreneurs learn, yet it is accepted that there is a learning experience from merely establishing a new enterprise". He goes on to conclude that being an entrepreneur is in itself a learning experience and thus the ability to learn from experience involves the concept of double loop learning: a process of examining why the problem occurred and to learn from that process (Senge:1999).

Kirby (2003) re-enforces the concept of learning by doing and reminds us of Kolb's learning cycle: concrete experience → observations and reflections →formation of abstract concepts and generalizations → testing implications of concepts in new situations, back to concrete experience. For the entrepreneur most of this learning takes place in one individual who addresses all the stages: this is referred to as experiential, Marsick & Watkins (1990) coming from an "implicit" perspective. Kirby (2003) also discusses the entrepreneurship types and considers the impact of different learning styles that may be attributed to them, for instance the 'innovator' will be more creative and will require stimulus, as opposed to the 'change agent' who may require more practical support.

The subject of "adaptive" and "generative" learning is discussed by Sullivan (2000) and introduces the notion of 'bring forward' experience rather than waiting for and learning from it. Sullivan (2000:2) also cites Williams's model of organisational learning that incorporates four common individual characteristics of learning:
1. goal directed
2. experience based
3. learning that impacts on behaviour
4. learning that impacts upon the culture of the organisation

When the characteristics are viewed with Rae's (2000:6) findings of five broad career stages we can begin to see how the needs for learning change through the life cycle and appear to be dependent upon the individual entrepreneur's stage at any given time, thus the learning is circular with previous stages being revisited when entrepreneur moves into new ventures. This is further supported with Boyatzis's theory of self directed learning, Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2002:110), based on the principles of open loop learning, which implies that to understand the learning styles and needs of entrepreneurs it is necessary to attune to their immediate and long term goals.

Thus learning can be viewed as a continuum, but one that shifts with events for entrepreneurs and thus has to be flexible. Based on the evaluations we can see that E-Mentoring does support this type of approach for learning and would therefore appear to be effective at coping with the changing requirements.

Results from 2 Pilots

The SBS SE Team (the authors) commissioned an independent evaluation of the two pilot programmes that were being operated in the SE of England through Business Link for Surrey and London through Business Link for London. The independent evaluation was carried out by a team led by Professor David Megginson of Sheffield Hallam University. The following section contains the relevant findings.

MentorsByNet Programme (MBN) South East England

Evaluation methodology

The research was carried out in two phases - in the form of pre- and post-programme e-mailed questionnaires. The questionnaires were based on the one sent out by APESMA (Australia), for comparative purposes, as well as covering additional aspects that were of interest to the sponsors of MBN and the researchers.

On both occasions questionnaires were sent out to mentees and to mentors at the same time, but differently worded.

The decision to send out both a pre- and post-questionnaire instead of just a post-programme one was founded on the desire to evaluate and compare pre-programme expectations with post-programme views grounded on experience.

A preliminary analysis of the pre-programme questionnaires was undertaken using the industry standard computer package for analysing data called SPSS. A preliminary report was produced. The data was analysed looking at both frequency of response as well as any significant correlations using the Spearman rho method.

Percentage of respondents - pre- and post-programme

	Pre	% of population	Post	% of population
Mentee (out of a possible 46)	19	41%	23	50%
Mentor (out of a possible 41)	19	46%	24	59%

All percentages cited in the final report were of the total number of respondents in each category (pre and post; mentee and mentor) in the survey.

Questionnaire response rates are often an issue in this type of evaluation research. Estimates of what is a 'reasonable' response rate vary but many studies cite 30% as

being typical. This study had a response rate of over 50% which was gratifying. The size of the pilot means that the number of responses was modest; nonetheless conclusions can be drawn about the success of the programme.

Significant correlation between responses to different questions in the mentee and the mentor post-questionnaires

In sifting through the colossal number of inter-correlations between responses to questions we have:

1. Focussed only on correlations significant at the .01 level of probability (i.e. there is a 99% of probability that the link is more than pure chance).

2. In selecting from the still large number of significant correlations, we have started from key output variables (satisfaction, development, recommend to others) and studied which input variables (scheme features) they are linked with.

<u>*Emerging themes*</u>

Email-based mentoring

- In the pre-programme questionnaire 84% of mentees and 70% of mentors affirmed that the fact that MBN was an email-based programme encouraged them to participate. Post-programme mentee response had slightly increased to 90% while mentor response had slightly decreased to 63%.

- 65% of mentees and 71% of mentors cited issues of location and timing as reasons why the e-mentoring programme was preferred over traditional face-to-face mentoring meetings.

- Pre-programme 74% of mentee and mentors expected to supplement their email contact with other forms of communication while 48% of mentees and 79% of mentors said that they did this. This largely was in the form of telephone conversation.

- In line with the APESMA study a number of participants indicated that, while e-mentoring was convenient and flexible, it was not completely ideal. Many commented that their partnership either did or would have benefited from being supplemented by other forms of communication such as telephone

(mentees 48% and mentors 67%) and face-to-face (especially in the early stages) to develop a sense of rapport and trust.

- 13% of mentee respondents and 17% of mentor respondents found no issue with this mode of conducting a mentoring relationship. Some other issues raised around email-based mentoring were its impersonal nature, time taken and continued commitment to the relationship. This, once again, is in line with the findings of the APESMA study.

Summary of key success factors

One of the purposes of the evaluation was to identify *key success factors* in running e-mentoring programmes for SMEs. In reviewing the finding of this study together with the APESMA results we identified the following:

1. The importance of appropriate matching

2. The degree of desire that participants have to be involved in such a scheme in the first place

3. Establishing programme goals at the outset - mentee lead

4. Programme duration of at least 6 months

5. Pre-programme training which helps participants to manage their expectations

6. Setting a communication plan at the outset of the programme and regular contact between mentoring partners

7. Supplementing email-based communication with other modes of communication

8. Assisting mentees to sustain motivation - e.g. frequent facilitators messages of prompts and encouragement

9. Participant commitment to programmes and making the effort to give some priority to the relationship

10. Establishing a good mentoring relationship (e.g. rapport and trust)

Case Study Two: Business Link for London Programme

One of the key objectives of the Business Link for London (BL4L) E-Mentoring pilot programme was to assess whether e-mentoring will add value as part of the BL4L

Start-up core offering and, if appropriate, can then be established across London for BL4L and/or their partners. Other objectives of the pilot were to assess how e-mentoring provides a resource-efficient way of delivering customer satisfaction and whether it might enhance traditional business support services.

The programme was conducted over three months, involving 18 mentoring partnerships. It concluded at the end of July 2003 and a independent comprehensive evaluation was undertaken which measured areas such as perceived experience of the programme, programme outcome, satisfaction with contact frequency, and satisfaction with programme guideline notes. These are areas that the Business Link Surrey and Australian APESMA programme measured so we were able to use these schemes as benchmarks. In line with the BLS scheme but filling a gap in the APESMA survey this evaluation measured perceptions of benefits from the scheme; concern for the practical relevance of the programme; responses about focusing on the realisation of specific goals and plans; and perceptions of the benefits of the e-mentoring programme.

In the first instance, it is prudent to once again, discuss some issues that may have impacted on the Business Link for London scheme in comparison the BLS programme.

- The first issue is that of resource allocation. Whilst the BLS scheme has been used as comparative data for the Business Link for London analysis, it must be acknowledged that, due to the differences in the financial resourcing of the projects, that comparison can only ever be approximate in nature. With financial backing of a modest £22K, the Business Link for London scheme, by necessity, is small in scope and only modest scale can realistically be expected from this.

- The second issue to rise is that of the initial implementation of an Instant Messenger System (IMS) as a way for the mentees and mentors to communicate. Due to time and monetary constraints this *booking system* proved to be too complicated for the majority of users. This process of was therefore mothballed four weeks into the programme and may have impacted on participant's making initial contact with their mentoring partners.

Whilst there was a 'reasonable' return rate (approximately 47%) of evaluation questionnaires, compared with a typical response rate of 30%, it should nevertheless be pointed out that a significant number of scheme participants have not returned their evaluation forms. It is difficult to tell what that means in terms of the views of the

scheme as this set of participants have not articulated their views, but this must temper any general conclusions that can be drawn about Business Link for London as a scheme.

One of the strengths of using survey/questionnaire research is that it enables trends to be identified in participants' responses and exposes any weak points/areas requiring change by the scheme. On the other hand, it does place some constraints on understanding 'why' certain individuals have given certain answers. An additional feature of this evaluation was that the BLS and APESMA schemes were being used as a benchmark. Therefore, there needed to be sufficient compatibility between the evaluation instruments, which limited the degree to which certain questions could be tailored to fit the Business Link for London scheme. We therefore used data from a focus group in addition.

The overall effectiveness of the Business Link for London programme can be judged by the positive responses to the post-programme questionnaire. Some of those findings were as follows:

- 75% of mentees and 57% of mentors described their e-mentoring experience as a positive one. Although this is less than the experience in the BLS programme (mentee 95% and mentor 79%) and the APESMA scheme (mentee 82% and mentor 80%) it is an indication that participants felt more than less positive about their experience.

- 89% of the mentors in the scheme and 50% of the mentees indicated that they would participate in a similar programme at some time in the future. This compares to 84% of mentors and 91% of mentees in the BLS programme.

- In line with the findings of the BLS programme over 60% of mentees and over 55% of mentors cited convenience, flexibility and ease as the major benefits of email-based mentoring while as many as 75% of mentees (and over 20% of mentors) indicated there was an element of impersonality about this type of communication. This compared with 30% of mentee and mentor responses from the BLS scheme.

Overall feedback from participants has been both broadly positive as well as explicit about the benefits as illustrated by the following:

Are There Policy Implications?

It is evident from the learning from the two pilots that there are likely to be implications and great opportunities for Governments with publicly funded business support programmes to consider.

Enterprise is central to the success of any economy. The dynamism of individual entrepreneurs drives the innovation, competitiveness and growth of an economy (A Government Action Plan for Small Business: Making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business: 2004; Action Plan: The European Agenda for Entrepreneurship, 2004). Increasingly Governments are recognising e-channels as one of the key routes to market in a wider approach to cost effective business solutions. Assuming connectivity is in place the e-channels accessibility makes it an increasingly attractive option available to Governments.

Learning styles need to fit the needs of entrepreneurs and therefore there are implications for publicly funded business support. E-Mentoring should be considered as one of many options in a wider e-enable offer – more so in countries eager to develop cost effective means of engaging a wide audience at relatively low cost.

Conclusions

From the reviews of both programmes and the literature, it can be seen that mentoring is generally felt to be a good approach to learning. The pilot programmes have demonstrated that entrepreneurs found this of significant benefit, the same might be said for the traditional didactic relationships, but mentoring delivered using technology was seen to provide the benefits in a more timely and convenient way.

E-mentoring for the development of entrepreneurs is still in its infancy, but the work undertaken in the UK has demonstrated that there is a huge potential for Government Bodies to effectively support and engage entrepreneurs through this medium. For evolving economies this ought to represent a cost effective and efficient approach for the provision of mentoring, which is seen as high quality business support, and one that is not dependent upon geographical boundaries.

Governments need to consider realigning their policies, which hitherto have been focused around physical delivery of programmes with a narrow focus and little flexibility. E-Mentoring could offer the opportunity for policies to become more responsive to the individuals needs within a cost effective and timely manner for entrepreneurs, who are seen as the new wealth drivers in today's economies.

So can entrepreneurs learn, effectively, through E-Mentoring? On the basis of the evidence from the evaluations of both Mentors by Net and Business Link for London pilots, we believe that E-mentoring is both an efficient and effective means of learning for entrepreneurs. It has been shown that entrepreneurs will often shift their requirements for knowledge as events change within their own business environment, thus the mentor can also shift ensuring that the learning areas remain applicable to their needs.

Furthermore, as the mentors are entrepreneurs in their own right, they also recorded positive learning outcomes from this approach, both from the relationship and the mentor training that supported them.

This can be seen from the following quotes from participants:

'I found the project rewarding in that it gave me an opportunity to improve my communication skills in imparting my knowledge and experience.'

'I think it is a worthwhile thing to do, as both parties can benefit.......'

'This has been a valuable learning experience for me.'

'Great idea, great service, helped with my isolation.'

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Post Script

The second phase of MentorsByNet began in October 2003 and by March 2004 has circa 300 entrepreneurs registered on the programme with circa 100 active relationships underway. The programme has seen mentors register from New Zealand, Hungary, USA, and Ireland with many UK based mentors registering from outside of the SE Region. A programme has also been started aimed specifically at the rural and farming communities.

The authors welcome feedback and discussion:

Kevin Hunt   KevinH@circlesquared.com

Glen Atherfold   glenatherfold_sbs@seeda.co.uk

See also   www.e-mentoringeurope.com