Beyond Mentoring: Alternative Sources and Functions of Developmental Support

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Content analyses were used to explore alternative sources and functions of developmental support other than mentoring among nonfaculty university employees. The majority of participants reported that they had an alternative source of developmental support outside of a mentoring relationship, that the developmental functions (i.e., kinds of support) provided by these sources varied, and that there were differences in sources and functions by participant age and gender. The alternative source of support most frequently mentioned was coworkers. The results also suggested that alternative sources of support may provide many of the functions associated with traditional mentors, although the full range may not be represented.

Kram (1985) defined a developmental relationship as one that “contributes to individual growth and career advancement” (p. 4). One type of developmental relationship that has received much attention in the career development literature is mentorship. Mentorships have been recognized as an alliance that can facilitate the development of skills and competencies that enhance performance and career development (e.g., Allen & Poteet, 1999; Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Scandura, 1992; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Mentoring has generally been defined as a relationship between a senior and junior employee in which the senior employee provides developmental functions (i.e., kinds of support) such as coaching and sponsorship, but relationships that provide career development support may be formed with individuals at all levels of the organization. Indeed, the relationship constellation proposed by Kram (1985) suggests that in addition to mentors, developmental functions can also be provided by other individuals such as family members, supervisors, peers/coworkers, subordinates, and friends from outside of work. Higgins and Thomas (2001) recently expanded this research with their examination of the effects of the composition and quality of a “constellation” of developmental relationships on protégé career outcomes. This work was important in that the authors recognized that individuals can have multiple concurrent relationships with others that serve developmental needs. However, their study did not address what the full range of alternative sources providing developmental guidance might be and what functions these sources might serve.

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We believe that reliance on sources other than traditional mentors is likely to be more important to individual career development in today's career context. In the past, career success was primarily tied to internal network sources of organizational power and career path structures. Contemporary career paradigms suggest a greater need to cultivate a broad variety of developmental alliances that span boundaries both in and outside of the organization (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Eby, 1997; Thomas & Higgins, 1996). Moreover, individuals who work for small organizations or who are self-employed have limited access to traditional mentors (Dansky, 1996). For these reasons, individual connections to occupational networks are likely to become increasingly important mechanisms for learning and determinants of career outcomes (Tolbert, 1996). In addition, professional societies are beginning to play an active role in retraining and in creating job opportunities for members (Dansky, 1996; London, 1996). Each of these relationships can provide a unique source of career development support and opportunity for learning (Ibarra, 1993).

**Influence of Gender and Age on Mentoring**

Although research indicates that women are as likely as men to report having a mentor, it seems probable that women may be more likely to develop alternative sources of career development support because of factors such as structural segregation and greater perceived barriers to obtaining a mentor (Kram & Hall, 1996; Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1991). For example, several studies have suggested that women may be more likely than are men to develop mentoring relationships with their supervisors because of restricted access to higher ranking mentors in other departments (Ragins, 1989, 1999; Ragins & Cotton, 1991). Moreover, Ragins (1999) speculated that because of gender role stereotypes, men may underreport mentoring relationships and the functions provided by their mentors as a way of maintaining the self-perception and social perception of career independence and status. Accordingly, if Ragins's (1999) conjecture holds true, men may also be less likely to report using sources of developmental support outside of traditional mentorships.

It is possible that the use of alternative forms of support may also vary by age. Changing demographics in the workforce coupled with the demise of linear career paths as the norm suggest that more people will have multiple jobs or even multiple careers during their lifetime and that there is an increasing likelihood that organizational newcomers will be older (Kram, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1996). However, because the prototypical protégé is younger and the prototypical mentor is older and more experienced, older newcomers may either avoid seeking out a traditional mentor or may be passed over by potential mentors (Finkelstein, Allen, & Rhotton, in press). Accordingly, it may be particularly important and necessary for older individuals to seek alternative sources of support for career enhancement and growth.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study was to extend research on mentoring relationships in several ways. First, using a qualitative research strategy, we asked participants to identify their sources of career development support
other than mentoring relationships. We thought that gathering this data was important as a means of cataloging the full range of developmental sources being used. This information may be useful to career counselors in suggesting resources to individuals who are seeking career development support outside of mentorships. Second, we asked participants to describe the functions provided by these alternative sources of support. Kram (1985) described two major functions provided by mentors. *Career-related functions* are those that focus on success and advancement within the organization and include sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging assignments. *Psychosocial functions* focus on the enhancement of sense of identity, competence, and effectiveness in the professional role and include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. The present study provided the opportunity to determine to what extent the career and psychosocial mentoring functions typically associated with mentoring relationships would also be associated with alternative developmental sources. From both an applied and a theory-building perspective, it seems important to ascertain how alternative sources of career development support might differ from mentoring relationships to help establish the utility of the support from alternative sources. Finally, we investigated how these sources and functions varied in relation to employee gender and age. Although our study was designed to be primarily exploratory in nature, we tested the following specific hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Women would be more likely to report alternative sources of developmental support than would men.

Hypothesis 2: Older individuals would be more likely to use alternative sources of developmental support than would younger individuals.

**Method**

**Study Design and Sample**

Data from this study came from a larger research effort examining developmental relationships. Participants were 88 professional employees of a large southeastern university: 58 women, 26 men, and 4 respondents who did not report gender; ages 23 to 64 years (*M* = 43.46, *SD* = 10.67). Most participants were Caucasian/White (*n* = 78), median level of education obtained was some graduate work (based on seven ordinal response categories ranging from *some high school to graduate work*), average job tenure was 3.58 years (*SD* = 4.74), and average organizational tenure was 5.5 years (*SD* = 5.8).

We mailed surveys to the campus address of 635 professional-level (nonfaculty) employees. Completed surveys were returned directly to us. Reminder postcards were mailed approximately 4 weeks after the initial mailing. Seven surveys were returned as not deliverable. Five individuals returned surveys indicating that they were unable to participate. The response rate for the study was 14%. Participants held job titles such as program coordinator, director of health administration, and director of financial services.

To enhance the possibility that we would identify the full range of sources for career development support, we used a qualitative research strategy. The basis for the current study came from participants’ responses to two open-ended questions: “In addition to having a mentor, from what other sources
have you received support that has helped you learn, grow, and develop on the job?” and “What sorts of functions did these alternative sources provide?”

Content Analysis Procedure
The data were initially analyzed using content analysis. The purpose of the content analysis was to derive meaningful categories of alternative sources of support and the functions provided by these sources. The first step in the content analysis process was to transcribe all of the responses. We then independently grouped and categorized the responses that were similar in meaning. Kram’s (1985) relationship constellation and mentoring functions were used as a priori categorization frameworks, but we also left open the possibility that alternative categories could emerge from the data. The unit of analysis was a phrase, and each phrase could only be assigned to a single category (Weber, 1990). We independently coded each comment. Initial agreement concerning the categorization of all comments was 83%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results
In this section, we report the general results of our content analyses. In subsequent sections, we provide results of tests of the hypotheses. Most participants (75%, n = 66) reported having at least one alternative source of support. The average number of alternative sources named by participants was 1.33 (SD = 1.19). Individuals who reported having a mentor were less likely to report having at least one alternative source of support (r = -.23, p < .05) and a fewer number of alternative sources (r = -.23, p < .05).

A total of 107 comments were made regarding the nature of the sources of support. Based on the content analysis, nine categories emerged from the data: coworkers (n = 30), education and training (n = 19), membership in professional associations (n = 17), family members (n = 14), outside friends (n = 12), self-instruction (n = 10), supervisors (n = 7), subordinates and support staff (n = 5), and religion (n = 2).

A total of 114 comments were made regarding the functions provided by these alternative sources of support. Eight categories were identified: skill development, education, and knowledge (n = 24); coaching (n = 21); support (n = 15); job-related feedback and sounding board (n = 14); new perspectives (n = 12); challenge and growth opportunity (n = 11); affirmation and encouragement (n = 10); and networking (n = 7).

Type of Support and Functions
Given that each of the various sources of support might emphasize different developmental functions, we next examined what type of career development support was most likely to be provided by each of the sources. Because of the low base rate for many of the sources reported, we limited this analysis to the four most common: coworkers, education, professional associations, and family. Of the participants who reported coworkers as a source of support, 20% (n = 6) credited them with providing skill development, 33.3% with coaching (n = 10), 36.7% with support (n = 11), 23.3% with feedback (n = 7), 16.7% with new perspective (n = 5), 23.3% with challenge (n = 7), 16.7% with affirmation (n = 5), and 10.0% with networking (n = 3, 10.0%). Education sources of support were reported as providing
skill development (n = 10, 52.6%), coaching (n = 4, 21.1%), feedback (n = 2, 10.5%), new perspective (n = 4, 21.1%), challenge (n = 2, 10.5%), affirmation (n = 2, 10.5%), and networking (n = 4, 21.1%). Professional associations as a source of support were reported as providing skill development (n = 8, 47.1%), coaching (n = 3, 17.6%), support (n = 2, 11.8%), feedback (n = 4, 23.5%), new perspective (n = 4, 23.5%), challenge (n = 4, 23.5%), affirmation (n = 2, 11.8%), and networking (n = 4, 23.5%). Family was reported as providing skill development (n = 3, 21.4%), coaching (n = 3, 21.4%), support (n = 5, 35.7%), feedback (n = 5, 35.7%), new perspective (n = 5, 35.7%), challenge (n = 2, 14.3%), and affirmation (n = 5, 35.7%). In summary, the most common alternative source of support, coworkers, was reported as most likely to provide support and coaching. Education and training as well as professional associations were major sources of support for skill development. Those who cited family members as an alternative source of career development support credited them with providing support, feedback, new perspectives, and affirmation.

**Gender Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis 1 proposed that women would be more likely to report alternative sources of career development support than would men. We conducted chi-square analyses and t tests to examine gender differences in reports of alternative sources and functions. Results indicated no significant differences in the proportion of men (76.9%) and women (77.6%) who reported an alternative source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) < 1.0$, ns. Moreover, women did not report using a significantly greater number of alternative sources of support ($M = 1.41, SD = 1.15$) than did men ($M = 1.27, SD = 1.28$), $t(82) < 1.0$, ns.

Next we created two categories of support, those that were relational (coworkers, professional associations, family, friends, supervisor, subordinates, religion) and those that were nonrelational (education and training, self-instruction) to determine if there were gender differences regarding the reporting of relational versus nonrelational types of support. No significant differences were found regarding the number of relational sources of support reported by women ($M = 1.05, SD = 1.05$) and by men ($M = 0.92, SD = 1.16$), $t(82) < 1.0$, ns. Nor were significant differences detected concerning the number of nonrelational sources of support reported, $t(82) < 1.0$, ns (men, $M = .35, SD = .49$; women, $M = .36, SD = .55$).

We next computed chi-square analyses to examine the data for gender differences regarding reporting of each of the sources of support. Only categories with 10 or more responses were included in these analyses. The results indicated no significant differences in the proportion of men (23.1%) and women (12.1%) who reported family as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 1.66$, ns; in the proportion of men (26.9%) and women (20.7%) who reported education and training as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .40$, ns; in the proportion of men (11.5%) and women (15.5%) who reported friends as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .23$, ns; in the proportion of men (23.1%) and women (39.7%) who reported coworkers as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 2.18$, ns; in the proportion of men (15.4%) and women (22.4%) who reported professional associations as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .55$, ns; and in the proportion of men (7.7%) and women (13.8%) who reported self-instruction as a source of support, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .64$, ns.
The next set of analyses involved testing for gender differences in the functions provided by the alternative sources of support. Only categories with 10 or more responses were included in these analyses. Men (23.1%) were marginally more likely to report that their alternative source(s) provided them with new perspectives than were women (8.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 3.30, p = .07$; while women (20.7%) were more likely to report that their alternative source(s) provided them with support than were men (3.8%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 3.89, p < .05$. Women were also somewhat more likely to report that their alternative source(s) of support provided them with coaching (22.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 2.65, p = .10$, than were men (7.8%). No significant differences were detected concerning skill development (men = 26.9%, women = 25.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .01$, ns; challenge (men = 7.8%, women = 22.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .97$, ns; acceptance (men = 15.4%, women = 8.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .86$, ns; and feedback (men = 23.1%, women = 13.8%), $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 1.11$, ns.

Age Hypothesis Testing
Hypothesis 2 suggested that older individuals would be more likely to use alternative sources of developmental support than would younger individuals. Individuals who reported having an alternative source of support were slightly younger ($M = 42.61$, $SD = 10.49$) than were those who did not ($M = 46.65$, $SD = 11.04$), but the difference was not significant, $t = (79) 1.40$, ns. To examine age differences in the sources of support identified and functions provided, correlations were computed for categories with 10 or more respondents. Only the significant correlations are reported. Younger participants were marginally more likely to report self-instruction as a source of support than were older participants ($r = .21, p < .10$). Regarding the functions provided by alternative sources, only one significant finding emerged. Older participants were more likely to report that their source of support provided coaching than were younger participants ($r = .24, p < .05$). In summary, the results indicated that age generally was not related to the use of alternative sources of support or to the functions reported that were provided by alternative sources.

Discussion

Alternative Sources of Support
The purpose of this study was to extend the literature on developmental relationships by identifying sources of support outside of traditionally defined mentoring relationships. Several interesting findings emerged. As noted previously, the relationship constellation proposed by Kram (1985) suggested that in addition to mentors, family members, supervisors, peers/coworkers, subordinates, and friends from outside of work could all provide developmental functions. All five of Kram’s (1985) sources were reflected in our study. Four others—education and training, membership in professional associations, self-instruction, and religion—were in addition to the sources identified by Kram. It should also be noted that the focus of Kram’s (1985) work was on relational sources of support. Two of the sources mentioned by our participants, education and training and self-instruction, were nonrelational in nature.
Kram (1985) described two major functions provided by mentors: career-related and psychosocial. The functions that were provided by the alternative sources of developmental support that we found in our study can also be grouped into career-related and psychosocial functions. Specifically, skill development, education, and knowledge; coaching, job-related feedback and sounding board; new perspectives; challenge and growth opportunity; and networking are consistent with the functions characterized as career-related by Kram (1985). Support and affirmation and encouragement fit the rubric of psychosocial functions. Some of the functions associated with mentoring were notably absent from those reported in the present study. Specifically, role modeling and protection did not fit any of the groupings that emerged in the present study.

The most common alternative source of support mentioned was coworkers, which was cited by 34% of all participants. The frequency with which individuals rely on peers for career development support suggests that additional research examining the dynamics and effectiveness of such relationships would be worthwhile. In addition to research that would compare peer relationships with traditional mentorships, such as that conducted by Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy (2001), it would be informative to examine how peer relationships augment more traditional mentoring alliances. Specifically, similar to the work begun by Higgins and Thomas (2001), it would be helpful to examine if peer relationships add value beyond traditional relationships and vice versa.

The results also revealed that a substantial number of individuals reported that membership in professional associations is a source of career development support. This is consistent with protean and boundaryless career concepts that emphasize greater occupational commitment rather than organizational commitment and the importance of cultivating developmental alliances outside of one’s organization (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). In addition, the results indicated that employees not only think of other individuals as sources of career development support, but they also consider nonrelational means of learning such as course work and continuous education as important sources. This finding is consistent with the growing realization that employees must embark on a journey of lifelong learning in order to stay competitive in today’s workplace (Hall, 1996).

Our results also suggest that alternative sources of support provide many of the functions associated with traditional mentors, although the full range may not be represented. Analyses examining what functions were provided indicated that alternative sources vary in the ways that they support individual development. This is consistent with mentoring research that has shown that different types of mentoring relationships may be more apt to provide certain functions than others (e.g., Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993; Noe, 1988). Our finding that, among the alternative sources, coworkers were credited with being the most common provider of support and coaching is in line with previous work by Ensher et al. (2001), who found mentors to be superior in vocational and role modeling support but no better than peers in providing psychosocial support. As advocated by Kram (1985), individuals should consider what their developmental needs are, which career and psychosocial functions would correspond to those needs, and who in the organization can and would be willing to provide those functions. We would also recommend the
consideration of individuals outside the organization as well as any potential nonrelational sources to fulfill desired functions.

**Gender and Age Differences Regarding Functions Reported**

The results revealed several gender differences concerning the types of functions provided by alternative sources. Specifically, men were more likely to report that they had gained a new perspective from their alternative sources of support. On the other hand, women were more likely to report that they had derived support and coaching. A next step might be to explore the extent to which individual career needs drive this process. It may be that men and women differ in their mentoring needs.

We turn now to our exploration of age differences regarding sources and types of developmental support. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find age to be related to the number of alternative sources used. However, the finding that older participants reported coaching as a function provided by their alternative source(s) more than did younger participants could indicate that older people may be more comfortable with the term coach rather than the more paternal connotation of the word mentor.

**Implications for Career Practice**

The results have several implications for career practice. Relationship building and learning through others have been cited as critical for success in today’s workplace (Hall, 1996; Kram, 1996). Some employees may not be aware that their career development needs can be satisfied by means other than traditional mentoring relationships. The results of the present study can be used by career practitioners to help demonstrate the viability of connecting with a broad array of individuals, both in and outside the organizational setting, to fulfill career development needs. As suggested by Lee and Johnston (2001), career counselors should discuss with clients what they might gain from developing relationships with others. The present research also underscores the importance of considering nonrelational sources of developmental support. Our findings are consistent with some of the suggestions offered by Dreher and Dougherty (1997), who advocated the use of career management and assessment systems (CMAS) as a substitute for career-oriented mentoring. Elements of CMAS include nonrelational forms of developmental support such as career development workshops, job rotation, and skill inventories. Employees should be made aware of the variety of developmental tools available for career development and the specific support functions the various tools offer.

**Limitations and Future Research**

An advantage of qualitative research is the richness of the data that can be captured. However, there are also criticisms associated with this method that should be recognized. Specifically, there is the possibility that the researchers’ value system, beliefs, and academic interests may inappropriately influence the conclusions drawn from the data (Van Maanen, 1979). Data overload is another possibility that can result in researchers missing key information and overemphasizing some findings (Huberman & Miles, 1993; Krippendorf, 1980). In the present study, we tried to avoid such potential pitfalls by each of us analyzing the data independently. Another limitation is that all participants were employed at a single university, hence we cannot be sure of the extent to which the results
might generalize to employees in other types of organizational settings. Given that the participants in our study were well-educated employees within an academic setting, educational opportunities may have been a particularly salient alternative form of developmental support. Additional research is needed to determine the extent to which our findings are applicable to employees in other types of organizations.

The purpose of the present study was to initiate a closer examination of sources of career development support other than mentoring relationships. We found that the majority of individuals do seek sources of support other than mentors. One critical future research challenge is to examine the relative efficacy of the various forms of support as related to objective and subjective indicators of career development and success. Moreover, research examining the efficacy of various common combinations, or "portfolios," of support might prove fruitful. This may become increasingly important as protean careerists become more widespread and traditional mentorships become more difficult to cultivate. Finally, we recommend integration of the social support literature with that of alternative mentoring relationships (McManus & Russell, 1997). Social support has been found to buffer the negative effects of stress across a variety of settings (e.g., Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1991). It would be interesting to examine how using a variety of sources for career development support might also help mitigate workplace stress. We hope the results of the present exploratory study provide food for thought to encourage the continued study of alternative sources of career development support.

References


