Formal Mentoring Programs and Organizational Attraction

Tammy D. Allen, Kimberly E. O’Brien

This study was designed to test if formal mentoring programs enhance organizational attraction. Participants were 190 undergraduates looking for a job related to their major. Results indicated that participants were more attracted to an organization when it was depicted as having a formal mentoring program than when it was not so depicted. Drawing on the learning and development literature, we also tested the extent to which this finding was moderated by individual differences. Results indicated that learning goal orientation was a moderator. Specifically, individuals with greater learning orientation were more attracted to the organization when it was depicted as having a formal mentoring program than when it was not so depicted. No interaction effects involving self-efficacy for development or proactive personality were found. The results represent one of the first attempts to empirically support the benefits of mentoring at the organizational level.

Mentoring is touted as having numerous organizational, as well as individual, benefits (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Wilson & Elman, 1990). However, the vast majority of research examining the benefits of mentoring has focused on protégés (see Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004, for a review) and, to a lesser extent, mentors (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Allen & Eby, 2003; Bozionelos, 2004; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). In an effort to capitalize on the known benefits of mentoring, a growing number of organizations have implemented formal mentoring programs (Douglas & McCauley, 1999; Eddy, Tannenbaum, Alliger, D’Abate, & Givens, 2003). These programs are thought to benefit the organization, as well as the individual mentoring participants. Among the benefits thought to accrue to organizations is enhanced employee recruitment (Catalyst, 1993). However, this assumption has yet to be subjected to empirical testing. Indeed, we are not aware of any published
research that has examined the extent to which the availability of a formal mentoring program relates to applicant attraction to the organization.

Accordingly, we conducted this study with two primary objectives in mind. First, we examined the extent to which job seekers would be attracted to an organization that offered a formal mentoring program versus an organization that did not. Applicant attraction to the organization is defined as an applicant’s interest in pursuing employment opportunities with the company (Rau & Hyland, 2002). Formal mentoring (versus informal mentoring) was the focus of the study because formal mentoring programs represent a specific human resource development practice. Another question is whether formal mentoring programs are universally appealing or more appealing to a subset of job seekers. Thus, we also investigated if individual differences moderated the relationship between formal mentoring program availability and organizational attractiveness.

The Appeal of Formal Mentoring Programs

Job seekers may be attracted to an organization with a formal mentoring program for several reasons. One is that the benefits of being mentored have been widely publicized. The popular press is filled with articles with titles such as, “The Power of Mentoring: Finding the Right Advisor Can Give Your Career a Boost” (Maeglin, 2003), “A Mentor Is a Key to Career Success” (Doody, 2003), and “Find Yourself a Mentor” (Myers, 2003). Moreover, popular business leaders such as Jack Welch and Lee Iacocca have publicly attributed their success to having a mentor (Hung, 2003). In addition, career management strategies include the advice that it is important to establish mentoring relationships with others during early career (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000). Career counselors are advised to help clients understand the positive benefits of having a mentor and to seek such relationships (Lee & Johnston, 2001). This is based on career and life stage theories that suggest that establishing a mentoring relationship with others is a critical developmental task that individuals face during the early career years (Schein, 1978; Super, 1957, 1980). Thus, it is likely that early career job seekers have been informed of the importance of developing mentoring relationships.

Although empirical evidence that supports a relationship between formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness is lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that a formal mentoring program is an effective recruitment tool. For example, Messmer (1998) quoted a report from Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. indicating that new employees credited Burlington’s mentoring program as a deciding factor in their choice of employment with the organization. And Phillips-Jones (2004) stated that college recruiters report individuals are more likely to be attracted to organizations with planned mentoring programs in place than to organizations without such programs.
From a theoretical perspective, the existence of a formal mentoring program may have a symbolic impact on potential employees. The symbolic action perspective has been used to describe why other types of human resource practices such as family-friendly benefits are attractive to employees (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Specifically, organizational practices that are discretionary can promote the image that the organization cares about its employees (Pfeffer, 1981). Mentoring programs may be attractive because they send the message to potential employees that the organization is committed to developing its employees (Catalyst, 1993). Moreover, social justice theories used primarily in organizational research predict that individuals will have more favorable reactions to organizations perceived as treating employees with care and concern (Greenberg, 1990). Offering a mentoring program is a way for organizations to demonstrate such concern. Accordingly, we propose the following:

**HYPOTHESIS 1.** Individuals will be more attracted to organizations that have a formal mentoring program than to organizations that do not have a formal mentoring program.

**Individual Differences as a Moderator**

We hypothesize that individuals generally will be more attracted to an organization with a formal mentoring program than to one without, but it also seems likely that formal mentoring will be more attractive to some individuals than to others. As Fagenson (1992) noted, becoming a protégé is not a random process. Not every individual is motivated to assume the role of protégé. Specifically, research indicates that dispositional characteristics relate to the likelihood one will engage in a mentoring relationship. For example, Turban and Dougherty (1994) reported that those with an internal locus of control were more likely to initiate mentoring relationships than were those with an external locus of control. Fagenson found that individuals high in need for achievement were more likely to report having a mentor than were individuals low in need for achievement. Similarly, Aryee, Lo, and Kang (1999) found that the ambition to succeed aspect of type A personality positively related to protégé-initiated mentoring.

What binds the dispositional variables important to the formation of mentoring relationships is an underlying orientation toward learning and development. Research regarding learning and development theory consistently shows differences in the extent to which employees seek and participate in development and learning activities (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; Noe & Wilk, 1993). Clearly, participating in a formal mentoring program is a specific form of human resource developmental activity.

Job applicants may infer the values of an organization based on the organization’s recruiting materials (Honeycutt & Rosen, 1997). Organizations that
have formal mentoring may be viewed as valuing employee learning and development. Hence, employees who also value learning and development may perceive a greater person-organization fit with such organizations (Judge & Bretz, 1992). This is important in that perceived person-organization fit has been identified as a factor that influences organizational attraction. Accordingly, we used the learning and development literature as a theoretical guide to inform our selection of individual difference variables to examine. Specifically, we focused on learning goal orientation, self-efficacy for development, and proactive personality.

Learning Goal Orientation. Individuals who possess a learning goal orientation desire to develop themselves by improving their ability, acquiring skills, and mastering challenging situations (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). Individuals with a learning goal orientation tend to be proactive in their learning and mastery of activities. They focus on developing abilities by acquiring new skills (Elliot & Dweck, 1998). These individuals are interested in developing their skill and ability and believe that such development is possible (VandeWalle, 2001). Brett and VandeWalle (1999) suggest that individuals with a learning goal orientation are more likely to want to participate in training activities and other developmental activities to be able to apply what they learn.

Godshalk and Sosik (2003) described mentoring as a learning and competence development goal-driven process. Similarly, learning goal–oriented individuals are motivated by competence development. It has been suggested that learning goal orientation is related to participation in development activities. Individuals with a learning goal orientation have positive attitudes toward learning and are willing to invest in learning and development activities (Maurer, Mitchell, & Barbeite, 2002). Maurer et al. (2002) found that individuals who believed they were capable of improving their level of abilities were more likely to participate in off-the-job developmental activities. Similarly, Birdi, Allan, and Warr (1997) found that employees who were generally motivated to learn were more likely to participate in work-based development activities and career planning. As such, it seems likely that formal mentoring programs will be especially attractive to learning goal–oriented individuals because these programs provide them the opportunity to learn new skills, develop competency, and master skills:

Hypothesis 2. Learning goal orientation moderates the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction will be greater for those with more learning goal orientation than for those with less learning goal orientation.

Self-Efficacy for Development. The important role of self-efficacy in predicting intentions and choice has been well established in the literature (Bandura, 1997; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Generalized self-efficacy “represents individuals’ perception of their ability to perform across a variety of situations”
Individuals who are more confident that they can perform an activity are more likely to engage in the activity.

Self-efficacy for development is a more specific form of self-efficacy. Individuals with high self-efficacy for development believe they are capable of developing and improving their skills (Maurer, 2001; Maurer et al., 2002). Notably, self-efficacy for development consistently has been related to intentions and participation in training and development activities (Maurer et al., 2002; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Noe & Wilk, 1993). In addition, Maurer and Tarulli (1996) found self-efficacy for development related positively to attitudes toward an employee development program. Access to a formal mentoring program represents a unique opportunity for career development. It seems likely that individuals with high self-efficacy for development will be more motivated to participate in a formal mentoring opportunity than will those with a low self-efficacy for development. Thus, individuals with high self-efficacy may find the availability of such a program especially attractive:

**HYPOTHESIS 3.** Self-efficacy for development moderates the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction will be greater for those with more self-efficacy for development than for those with less self-efficacy for development.

**Proactive Personality.** The proactive personality is a personal disposition toward proactive behavior that is intended to identify differences among people regarding the extent that they take action to influence their environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 1995). Those with a proactive personality are less constrained by situational forces and tend to create change in their environment. They identify opportunities and act on them; they show initiative, take action, and persevere until they bring about meaningful change.

Research indicates that proactive individuals are more likely to engage in career management activities such as career planning and obtaining career support (Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, & Tag, 1997; Morrison, 1993) and more likely to participate in organizational initiatives (Parker, 1998). Moreover, several studies have linked proactive personality with career initiative and success (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). The existence of a formal mentoring program should be particularly attractive to individuals with a proactive personality because they tend to identify and take advantage of the career opportunities made available to them:

**HYPOTHESIS 4.** Proactive personality moderates the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction will be greater for those with more of a proactive personality than for those with less of a proactive personality.
Method
The following paragraphs describe the study’s method.

Participants. Participants were 190 undergraduate students taking psychology courses who were seeking a job related to their major. We emphasize that the student sample was not chosen for convenience in that participation was limited to those in the process of seeking a job. However, the use of psychology students was based on the fact that this was a population readily accessible to us through the psychology department’s research pool. The sample was ethnically diverse (48.4 percent white, 17.9 percent black, 17.9 percent Hispanic, 10.5 percent Asian, and 5.3 percent other) and predominantly female (81.1 percent). The average age of the participants was 22.37 years ($SD = 4.44$).

Procedure. Participants were brought to the lab in small groups and were told that the purpose of the study was to review a recruitment brochure developed by a company with which we were consulting. Upon entering the lab, participants were informed of their rights as research participants and completed informed-consent forms. They were alternately randomly assigned to the no-formal-mentoring program condition ($n = 95$) or the mentoring program condition ($n = 95$) and received the respective version of the brochure. After reviewing the brochure, participants completed a questionnaire that contained the study measures. They were then thanked and were free to exit the lab.

Materials. A brochure depicting a fictitious corporation (ABC Corporation) modeled after that created by Rau and Hyland (2002) served as the stimulus. For the purpose of this study, we conducted a review of existing job postings to determine the manner that organizations typically describe mentoring practices in their recruitment materials. A search of www.monster.com was performed, using “formal mentoring program” as the keyword. Advertisements that met this criterion were examined to develop the description of the formal mentoring program used in the recruitment brochure.

The manipulation was embedded in the brochure. The brochure was six pages (both versions) and described the organization as would actual recruitment literature. Two versions of the brochure were printed, in which the two conditions were depicted by either the presence of a formal mentoring program or no mention. Whereas the control condition stated that the organization offered “a variety of training and development activities for our associates,” the experimental condition described the mentoring program as follows:

We offer a variety of training and development activities for our associates including a **formal mentoring program** [bold type was used in the brochures] for all new employees. The mentoring program is designed to help new employees establish important relationships that support them in
navigating ABC Corporation and in pursuing their own personal development goals. The program has 4 strategic goals:

- Develop leaders from top to bottom
- Support career development
- Develop and support diversity through the organization
- Strengthen ABC culture

It should also be noted that other employee-focused information was provided regarding the company that was held constant across the two conditions. This was done to help ensure that the mentoring program was not the only salient employee practice depicted in the brochure. For example, the following statement was included:

At ABC, you will earn a competitive base salary and benefits package. . . . New associates receive two weeks of vacation and eight paid holidays. Other important benefits include medical and dental benefits, life insurance, long- and short-term disability insurance, accidental death and dismemberment insurance, an employee assistance program, and a 401(k) plan.

**Measures.** The following paragraphs describe the measures used in the study.

**Organizational Attraction.** We used the five-item measure developed by Rau and Hyland (2002) to assess organizational attraction (for example, “I would sign up for a campus interview with this company”). Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Higher responses represent more attraction. Rau and Hyland reported a coefficient alpha of .96. In our study, the coefficient alpha was .97.

**Learning Goal Orientation.** Eight items from the goal orientation measure developed by Button, Mathieu, and Zajac (1996) that assess learning goal orientation were used. Participants responded to items such as “the opportunity to learn new things is important to me” using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Higher responses signify a stronger learning goal orientation. Across three studies, Button et al. reported coefficient alphas of .79, .81, and .85. In our study, the coefficient alpha was .82. Button et al. also provided confirmatory factor analytic construct validity evidence. Specifically, the authors reported that a two-factor model that distinguished between learning goal and performance goal orientation fit the data better than did a single-factor model. Additional validity evidence was found in that the predicted pattern of correlations was supported. As expected, college grade point average, age, theory of ability, and self-esteem were positively correlated with learning goal orientation.

**Self-Efficacy for Development.** A four-item measure developed by Maurer and Tarulli (1994) was chosen. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Higher scores indicate a greater
degree of self-efficacy for development. Maurer and Tarulli reported an alpha of .77. A three-item version of the measure used in Maurer et al. (2002) yielded a coefficient alpha of .62. In our study, the coefficient alpha was .60. Maurer et al. also provided criterion-related validity support in that self-efficacy for development related to the expected outcomes of developmental activity both on and off the job.

Proactive Personality. Proactive personality was measured with a shortened version of Bateman and Crant’s seventeen-item measure (1993; for example, “If I see something I don’t like, I fix it.”). A ten-item version was introduced by Seibert et al. (1999). Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Higher scores represent a more proactive personality. Seibert et al. reported a coefficient alpha of .86. In our study, the coefficient alpha was .82. Seibert et al. provided criterion-related validity evidence in that proactive personality related to the expected outcomes of objective and subjective career success. Moreover, self-report and spouse reports of proactive personality were significantly correlated.

Manipulation Check. Participants were asked to indicate if they agreed that the company offered a formal mentoring program. Responses were reported on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Results

The following sections describe the results of the manipulation check and the hypothesis testing.

Manipulation Check. A t-test performed to examine the effectiveness of the formal mentoring program manipulation was significant (t = 6.40, p < .001). The results indicated that participants in the experimental condition (M = 4.32) were more likely to report that the organization had a formal mentoring program than were participants in the control condition (M = 3.39). Thus, the experimental manipulation was deemed effective.

Hypothesis Testing. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. As is standard, alpha was set at .05. Hypothesis 1 stated that individuals would be more attracted to

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<th>Mean</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Proactive personality</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.52**</td>
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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

Note: The mentoring program is coded 0 = no program, 1 = mentoring program. *p < .05. **p < .01.
an organization with a formal mentoring program than to an organization without a formal mentoring program. This hypothesis was supported \((t = 2.27, p = .02)\). Participants in the formal mentoring condition \((M = 3.86)\) were more attracted to the organization than were those in the control condition \((M = 3.46)\).

Hypothesis 2 stated that learning goal orientation would moderate the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction would be greater for those with more learning goal orientation than for those with less learning goal orientation. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test this hypothesis. Regression results are shown in Table 2. Providing support for hypothesis 2, the interaction was significant \((F \text{ change} = 5.52, p = .02)\). A plot of the interaction based on the procedures described by Aiken and West (1991) is shown in Figure 1. As expected, individuals with greater learning orientation were more attracted to the organization when it was depicted as having a formal mentoring program than when it was not depicted as having a formal mentoring program. The existence

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**Note:** Mentoring program is coded 0 = no program, 1 = mentoring program.

\*p < .05. \**p < .01.
of a formal mentoring program made little difference to those with less of a learning orientation.

Hypothesis 3 stated that self-efficacy for development would moderate the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction would be greater for those with greater self-efficacy for development than for those with less self-efficacy for development. As shown in Table 2, this interaction was not significant ($F$ change $= 1.91$, $p = .17$). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 stated that proactive personality would moderate the relationship between the availability of formal mentoring and organizational attractiveness such that attraction would be greater for those with more of a proactive personality than for those with less of a proactive personality. Hypothesis 4 (see Table 2) was not supported ($F$ change $= 1.36$, $p = .25$).

**Discussion**

Although formal mentoring programs are frequently touted as beneficial to organizations, most research has focused on benefits to the individuals involved. The study presented here represents one of the first attempts to
empirically support a benefit of mentoring at the organizational level. As hypothesized, the results indicate that the availability of a formal mentoring program can significantly influence organizational attraction. Moreover, we found evidence that formal mentoring programs may be more attractive to some individuals than others.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, in a departure from anecdotal evidence, this study provides empirical support for the speculation that one benefit of formal mentoring may be greater employee attraction to the firm. Job seekers are more attracted to organizations that indicate they offer formal mentoring than to organizations that do not. These results also provide support for the symbolic action perspective (Pfeffer, 1981). Organizations that send signals of concern by offering programs aimed toward employee development, such as formal mentoring, may increase their attractiveness to job seekers.

We based our selection of individual difference variables to investigate as moderators on theory concerning individual learning and development. Results revealed that individuals with greater learning goal orientation were especially attracted to the organization depicted as having a formal mentoring program. This finding is important in that learning goal orientation has been associated with the desire to work hard (VandeWalle, 1997), put forth greater effort (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999), and perform better (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999; VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Thus, organizations may be able to attract employees who will bring the most value to the organization by offering formal mentoring.

Contrary to expectations, we did not find significant interactions with the other two individual difference variables examined. Self-efficacy beliefs develop based on one's previous experiences and skills (Maurer, 2001). Perhaps our sample of participants, who were in the initial stage of their career, had yet to develop clear self-efficacy for development perceptions. In retrospect, it also seems possible that individuals with strong career self-efficacy may not be particularly drawn to organizations with a formal mentoring program because they believe in their own ability to find an informal mentor if needed or believe they can be successful without the guidance of a mentor. With regard to proactive personality, perhaps it relates more to taking advantage of immediate developmental opportunities. That is, proactive individuals may act readily when given a choice regarding whether to participate in a formal mentoring program but may not prospectively see the benefits. It might have been valuable to ask participants their degree of interest in participating in a formal mentoring program at the end of our questionnaire. Research investigating the dispositional variables that directly relate to the propensity or desire to participate in formal mentoring programs could be worthwhile knowledge to organizations with formal program initiatives.
Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Many organizations have begun to adopt formal mentoring programs as a way to develop their workforce (Douglas & McCauley, 1999). As the ability to grow and adapt becomes critical to organizational competitiveness, formal mentoring programs are a way to build a competitive advantage through the development of human and intellectual capital. The results we report here provide good news for organizations that invest in such programs. Not only does mentoring relate to individual employee learning and development (Allen et al., 2004), but the results also suggest that organizations that offer formal mentoring may profit from their efforts in the form of attracting a larger and more attractive applicant pool. Including information in recruitment materials regarding the mentoring program may strengthen organizational recruitment efforts.

Although our choice of individual difference variables was limited to those that were theoretically linked to employee learning and development orientation, the results also suggest that formal mentoring programs may have a broad appeal in that only one of our three individual differences variables acted as a moderator. Future studies are needed that test other individual difference variables to better determine the unique versus broad appeal of formal mentoring programs.

The results of this study set the stage for several avenues of future research. Our results indicate that when all else is equal (such as pay and benefits), individuals will be more attracted to an organization with a formal mentoring program than to one without such a program. A next natural step in the line of research would be to examine the relative impact of formal mentoring compared to other factors known to influence organizational attraction such as pay and geographical location. In addition, our study sought to identify when formal mentoring will be most attractive by examining individual differences as moderators. Further research is needed to examine proposed process variables, such as concern for employees that can help explain why formal mentoring programs are attractive to job seekers.

Future research is needed to empirically validate other suggested organizational benefits of both formal and informal mentoring. For example, formal mentoring programs are frequently suggested as a way to retain valued employees (Catalyst, 1993; Zey, 1984). Although research has examined the relationship between individual turnover intentions and mentoring (Allen et al., 2004), no data exist examining the actual retention rates of individuals involved in mentoring. Mentoring is also touted as an effective means of facilitating succession planning (Catalyst, 1993; Zey, 1984), yet no hard data exist to support this assertion.

Limitations to the Study

Limitations to this study should be recognized. One is that all of the participants came from a single university. Moreover, our sample was overrepresented by females and was composed of college-educated individuals who would soon
be on the job market. Thus, the extent to which our results generalize to other populations, such as older workers anticipating a job change, is uncertain. Another limitation is that although our independent variable was experimentally manipulated, the dispositional and organizational attractiveness variables were collected from the same source at the same time, raising concerns regarding the potential influence of common method variance. However, the dispositional variables were examined as moderators, and common method variance is an unlikely explanation for significant interaction effects (Evans, 1985). Moreover, none of the individual difference variables exhibited a significant correlation with organizational attractiveness. Thus, it seems unlikely that common method bias had an influence on the results. The small- to medium-effect sizes associated with the significant results might also be viewed as a limitation. However, even small increases in the application pool, especially if consisting of desirable employees such as those with a greater learning orientation, can have substantial utility for employers. Finally, it is recognized that participants in this study were responding to information based on a fictional organization. It seems important to take this research further by examining actual job acceptance rates of organizations with formal mentoring programs in comparison with other organizations.

Conclusion

This study represents an important extension of the mentoring literature by being the first to provide empirical evidence of the benefits of mentoring at the organizational level. In future research, it will be important to establish whether mentoring relates to other organizational outcomes. Given the growing use of formal mentoring programs, research along these lines seems long overdue.

References


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