

## **Introduction**

The IMechE Benelux branch has launched a series of events in 2017 with the goal to stimulate a debate about how demographic and technological changes will affect the workplace of the future.

The events are in the format of a Discussion Café where members of several Engineering Institutions are invited to share their experience and opinion on the topic of:

### **Generations in the Workplace.**

The IMechE represents numerous different industries, and with a low population density in the Benelux, it was difficult to gather sufficient interest in industry specific events. The topic of Generations in the Workplace affects every industry, and therefore was an opportunity to connect with all IMechE members and members of other Engineering Institutions in the Benelux region including the IET and IMarEST and the Royal Aeronautical Society.

The conclusions from each Discussion Café are summarised in a report that is available via the IMechE website. Future Discussion Cafés will be planned based on the findings of the past events. The conclusions from the debates are also used in setting the Benelux branch strategy for the forthcoming years.

At each Discussion Café, there are two ways to participate in the debate; the first is to attend the event in person and enjoy the company of fellow Professional Engineers and discuss together face to face, the other is to share opinion via 4 pre-defined questions in an on-line survey.

At every Discussion Café, one sub theme is selected to enable a more focused debate. For the third event, the sub-theme was Mentoring.

## **Executive Summary**

Mentoring is important because the knowledge of how to get a job done depends not only on the technical skills built up over a career, but on the knowledge of the company culture and processes. Mentoring is most often defined as a grey-to-green process, but that is not always the case. When an employee changes department or company, they will need someone who can help and guide them regardless of their age or experience. Older workers are better equipped to search for a mentor themselves in such a situation because they have more experience in finding the sources of information.

Mentoring needs a set of clearly defined competences and levels of achievement. Where mentoring is part of a mentoring programme, the competences need to be defined and maintained centrally to ensure that the same standards are applied to all mentees. And once the standards have been set, the mentors need to be trained to apply the standards in a fair way.

Good mentors need to have a set of skills and the first of those is the ability to listen. A mentor helps the mentee to achieve his potential. Unless the mentor listens to the goals of the mentee, he cannot help. The second important skill is to have patience with the mentor and not try to do all the work for them. There needs to be trust between both the mentor and the mentee before the team will work most efficiently.

The Mentor also needs to be available to help the mentee. Someone who is too busy to spend the time will be a benefit to the mentee. As well as having the time, the mentor needs to have the authority to help the mentee with his long-term goals. It was here that the discussion saw the biggest problem. The mentor should not be the mentee's line manager. There is a conflict between the goals of the department and the full potential of an employee that might lie outside the current department. It was seen as beneficial to both the company and the mentee if the mentor is independent and senior to the department manager.

### **What we discussed in the past**

The first Discussion Café focused specifically on the older workers' needs and skills. The second event turned the focus onto the younger workers and their needs and skills. The older workers have gained lots of experience in both the technical and the soft, inter-personal domain. While the technical knowledge is at risk of being codified in Artificial Intelligence systems at some point of the future, the ability to work with people, and the knowledge of how to work outside the official "rules" of an organisation were seen as key skills that would be as valuable now, as in the future.

The younger workers have a strong desire to gain as much experience as possible, in the shortest possible time. It has often been quoted that the new generation of employees want to make an "impact" at work and they don't value the time needed to develop the skills needed. It was also noted, however, that the young don't know what they need to know because they lack the broad background of past experience.

There is therefore a clear knowledge demand between the older workers that do know what they need; who can help them; and who know how to get things done, and the younger workers who want to learn. The question is, how to manage the knowledge transfer correctly and efficiently. This is the reason that mentoring was selected as the sub-theme for the third Discussion Café.

### **Defining mentoring**

One of the first points that was raised was the fact that knowledge transfer is not always from grey-to-green as the past Discussion Cafés lead us to believe. The good example of starting a new job, no matter at what point of your career. In the first few days, there is a steep learning curve for the new employee. The on-boarding process only introduces the basic corporate processes, but it does not explain where the informal knowledge is found. Having a mentor who can assist with the integration process is beneficial for both experienced workers and novices.

One of the first steps that happens in a new work environment is to map the knowledge available. This means both identifying who in the new organisation knows what, but also benchmarking what you know and where it fits into the new organisational structure. Older workers are better equipped to ask the right questions and to manage the integration of their own knowledge into the new

environment because they have the experience of past projects and can assess what they don't know and therefore, what they need to learn. For younger workers, a mentor who can help them navigate a new workplace would significantly speed up their learning process and especially help the younger workers appreciate the holes in their knowledge portfolio.

The participants at the event in Breda also discussed the mentoring process and looked at some of the requirements and difficulties. At the start of the mentoring process a clear definition of the goals is needed along with a description of the levels of performance. The fundamental purpose of mentoring is to assist the mentee to achieve their long-term career potential. Irrespective of whether this mentoring is part of a formal company mentoring programme or a more informal process, we live in a time where measurements and KIP's are used to track everything we do; and mentoring is no different. We want to know that the time invested is valuable and a key way to do that is to track the performance of the mentee towards their goals. This was reflected in the comments from the on-line survey.

**How can you measure the success of mentoring? –  
“The growth of individual in profession aspect and the  
output generated by the organisation.”**

On-line response (18-35 year old)

To be able to monitor progress, a set of standard competencies and achievement levels are needed. The Engineering Council UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC) was used as an example of how this is done in mentoring engineers towards Chartered Engineer status. The UK-SPEC sets out a clearly defined set of competencies with examples of what achievement means.

In formal mentoring programmes like the Engineering Council in the UK, these competencies and levels should be defined centrally, and not by each mentor individually. All mentors in the programme must then use the same agreed standards. A clear set of standards is especially important for mentor-mentee relationships that cross organisational boundaries.

It was seen as relatively simple to mentor the technical skills and to set up grades of competency. But the opinion of the debate was that even the inter-personal skills can be quantified by identifying what is unacceptable performance and what is the role model, then different grades can be set in between. The same process can be applied to all the skills that the mentee needs. So long as both parties agree on the definition and the levels, the mentoring can take place.

In many cases where mentoring is already implemented in a large organisation the goals of the programme are often included set as part of the annual appraisal system for core organisational competencies. However, it was noted that these competencies are likely to be limited to the competencies needed for the current job function rather covering than long term development needs of the mentee.

**“My ‘bad’ mentor talks to me about changes in the  
corporate level, generally keeps the conversations at a  
much more abstract level.”**

On-line response (18-35 years old)

Although the mentor should have sufficient experience in the work needed, and be able to develop respect with the mentee, it is not automatic that the person assigned as mentor would be capable to do the job. Mentors also need to be trained on the key elements of being a mentor, what is the purpose and how to keep the mentee motivated. Where there are multiple mentors and mentees, the system needs to be seen as fair. Once the standards have been set, the mentor needs to be trained on the meaning of the standards and how to apply them so that everyone can set the same standards for each mentee.

### **A good mentor...**

The mentor's role is to discuss with the mentee and establish a unique development plan and then set the milestones for what level of each competency is needed and by when, then these milestones become the core of the mentoring process. This has to be a unique one-to-one discussion.

Many characteristics of a good mentor were proposed, both on the online survey and in the live discussion. The response that was most frequent was that the mentor should be a good listener.

**"a listener and guide for young staff who allows them to experience and make mistakes rather than a person that shows how things are done."**

On-line response (51-65 years old)

The purpose of a mentor is to help the mentee. By listening to the needs and problems of the mentee, the mentor can give the correct response. The inverse of this was a mentor who just wants to show off about that they can do: A teacher is not a mentor.

A second popular point that was raised was that the mentor needs to have patience with the mentee. If the mentor has the experience, they could do the work in a fraction of the time that the mentee will need, but instead of doing the work themselves, they should sit back and let the mentee learn from their own actions.

**"When the mentor does not simply tell the student how things are, but shows it to him and is open for discussing how they came to be like this and if there should be another way. Good mentoring is hands on mentoring."**

On-line response (18-35 years old)

A good mentor needs empathy. If the mentee feels like the mentor is listening and understands their needs, then there can be trust in the partnership. That trust was seen as equivalent to the Doctor-patient relationship where the mentor does not reveal the details of the mentoring discussions to third parties unless it is to the benefit of the mentee.

There is more to building trust in the partnership and other factors were also expressed. For example, the mentee needs to have respect in the experience of the mentor and confidence that the mentor can give good advice and assistance. When we asked for good practices in this respect, numerous online responses indicated that the mentor should be a role model; they should be able to give practical advice and hints, and always fulfil their promises. In the opposite direction, the mentor has to appreciate the work ethics and attitude of the mentee, nobody likes to waste their time on somebody who they don't think is committed enough.

Another element in the relationship is the availability of the mentor. The availability had two aspects, the first one is simply dedicating some of their time to the mentee. If the mentor is always too busy to listen and advise, then there is no purpose in the relationship. The second element was the hierarchical distance between the mentor and mentee. If the distance is too great, there was a feeling that the mentor wouldn't understand the real needs of the mentee, and the advice would be too high level and abstract.

An example was given of someone with two mentors, the formal mentor was at the executive level and the informal mentor was in a senior position, but still close enough to the front line to understand the problems and needs of the mentee. The mentee in this example saw the relationship with the latter mentor as far more practical and therefore useful.

**"A good mentor is around one to two levels higher hierarchy wise or to put it in a different way the mentor should be at the level where the mentee would like to get to in a relatively short time (I would say up to 3 years) - the idea is to keep it realistic and useful."**

On-line response (18-35 years old)

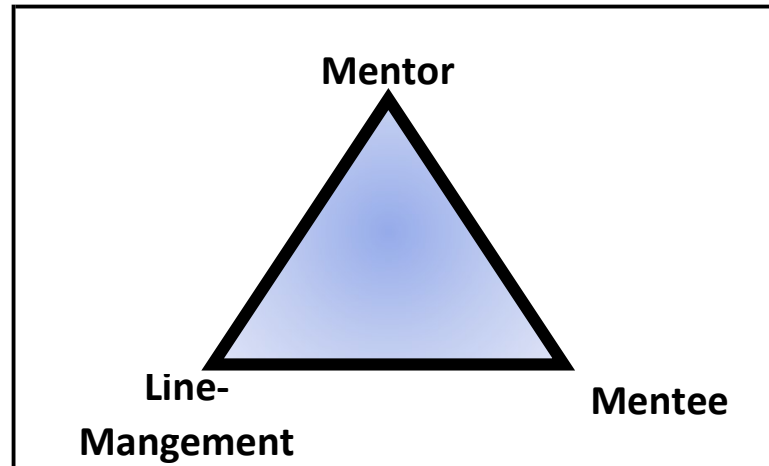
A good mentor is someone who looks after the interests of the mentee. As we have already discussed, to build trust, the mentee needs to believe that the mentor will give the best advice for the mentee. In the discussions, it was commented that the mentor should have the courage, and also the authority to challenge the mentee's line management to protect him from excessive daily workload if that will prevent the mentee from developing correctly.

### **Success and demand**

The discussion above implies that the mentor is independent of line management. This is the ideal situation, but it is far from common practice. The line management is the first level of human resources, and is responsible for not only achieving the department workload objective, but also in developing the staff abilities. A line manager can be a mentor, but the discussion highlighted several problems with this situation. The goal of the mentorship programme is to help the mentee to achieve their full professional potential. If the mentee development needs a career rotation out of the department, this could set up a conflict of interest with the line manager who would have to sacrifice the short-term performance of the department for the long-term benefits for the company.



Secondly, if the mentor is the line manager, then after the mentee has been rotated to a new position, the new line manager will take over the role of the mentor and both parties will again have to build trust and set goals and milestones. The third point is that the line-manager who is only 1 level higher in the organisation (instead of 3 steps higher) and therefore they will not have the same helicopter view of the organisation and its broader needs and possibilities. Without the broader view, the ability of the line-manager to make the correct long-term decisions for the mentor would be more difficult.



The opinion of the debate was that the flatter this pyramid, with the mentor being more and more like a line-manager, the less effective the mentoring process will be.

**“Organisation becomes more agile, adaptive as transfer of knowledge/practice is facilitated by mentoring. Individual 'feels' more empowered and accepts more accountability for his own success.”**

On-line response (18-35 years old)

The final part of the debate looked at how to create a demand for mentoring in an organisation. There were several responses from the start small and grow organically, to the idea of making this part of the appraisal system of both new starters and senior experts. The key element that came back many times in the responses was the need for a culture of mentoring. Building a culture takes time and commitment, especially from senior management.

With a clear need for knowledge, and more importantly experience, transfer from older and more senior workers to the next generation of workers, more experienced workers are the ones who need to proactively set up the mentoring process, define the standards and establish the culture where sharing of experience and knowledge is the standard way of working.

### **The next Discussion Café**

The fourth Discussion Café will look more deeply into the ways that the culture can be established. Older workers with many years of experience have their established ways of communicating and networking. Much has been said in the media about the new, connected generation and their new ways of communicating, both in terms of message and medium.

**On the Monday 11<sup>th</sup> September, at 18:30,  
Den Haag  
The Netherlands.**



**Venue tbc.**

You can participate in person (see details [here](#)) or via the on-line survey (click [here](#))

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