SUCCESSES AND STUMBLING BLOCKS

The Creation of a Mentorship Program for Internationally Trained Professionals[1]

ABSTRACT

This article describes a mentorship program that was developed by the Employment Help Centre to assist newcomers in their integration into the local labour market. It outlines a number of "lessons learned" that could be applied by other organizations wishing to develop a similar program.

JACKIE CRAWFORD

Jackie Crawford graduated with honours from Brock University with a major in Canadian Studies. She has worked in the employment assistance field for ten years with a focus on programs assisting the internationally trained. Currently she is a Project Manager with the Employment Help Centre in St. Catharines and Welland, managing a program for the internationally trained and a program for mature workers.

You are by now familiar with the story that Canada is wasting its imported talent: your pizza delivery man mentions that he was once an engineer in India or the lady who cleans your office was a lawyer in Columbia. You have been on a waiting list to see a doctor for three years, but in our counseling offices, we see Sudanese doctors eager to work but not able to. Many view these situations as a shame, but think that there is little they can do.

The Niagara Region is well aware of the problems that newcomers and immigrants face. In addition to the immigrants that the Niagara Region receives, 15% of Canada's refugees enter at the Fort Erie border and settle in the surrounding cities including St. Catharines and Welland, in Southwestern Ontario. This is a significant number for one region, particularly given the unique needs of refugees. Five years ago, the Employment Help Centre in St. Catharines asked "What can we do about the challenges facing immigrants?" The Centre eventually received funding for a program to help internationally trained professionals move towards licensure and certification; one unique part of this program was the inclusion of a mentorship component.

The goal of the program is to help the internationally trained obtain licenses or employment in their original professions or to gain employment in related fields. We recognized this would be difficult and time-consuming, given the power of the regulatory bodies, so we appointed an advisor responsible for communicating the interests of the internationally trained to the regulatory bodies. The role of the advisor is to work with regulating bodies to advocate for change in their systems.

We also called upon our community to help retain our imported talent. It was a call to action, and our goal was to match internationally trained professionals with Niagara residents in the same field of work. We were excited about the program and sought to find programs in communities comparable to those in the Niagara region. There were few such programs in comparable communities, so we turned to a successful mentorship program at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. The positive energy of the program helped us develop our own program, a program that has had considerable success. Of course, there were many stumbling blocks, which I outline below and share with others who may wish to develop a similar program.

Humble beginnings and mixed messages

We enlisted the assistance of community agencies, newspapers and the radio stations to find Niagara residents who could help internationally trained professionals learn about work in their field in Niagara. This lead to our first – and perhaps surprising – stumbling block: too many mentors, not enough mentees. We had anticipated that finding mentors would be the more difficult task, so we had focused our efforts here, with less attention devoted to introducing mentees to the program. Our next difficulty was that it was difficult to make matches because although we had several volunteer mentors, many were in "unique" fields, including ice sculptors, authors and human resources specialists, while our mentees were engineers, nurses, doctors and lawyers. We learned quickly that it is more effective to undertake a needs assessment of the mentees that you have and then target your mentor search in those specific sectors. We immediately developed relationships with the local health boards and engineering chapters. This helped us resolve our matching problem.

We then began to receive feedback from the mentors and learned that some were experiencing what I have heard referred to as "compassion fatigue." Mentors sympathized with the barriers and roadblocks faced by mentees and felt as though they would "never be able to get this guy a job." Had

we provided mentors with the impression that they were responsible for finding mentees a job? Our expectation was that the mentor would teach the mentee about working in the field in Niagara, would help the mentee develop networks within the community, and would provide some résumé tips to help the mentee tailor his or her résumé specifically to the sector. If the mentor helped the mentee find a job, this was of course a bonus, but it wasn't expected. We thus learned the importance of communicating the goal of the mentorship program and developed mentorship and mentee training workshops so that participants could learn about the expectations of the program.

During these training workshops, we discussed issues that might arise in a mentee/mentor relationship, including the obvious cross-cultural issues, as well as cross-gender mentoring issues. Indeed, on the mentee application form, participants are asked if they would prefer a mentor that is of the same gender as them. We also discussed employer expectations in Canada. Many of our male mentees suggested that they would not be able to work for a female manager, while many of our female mentees offered that they were looking for employment in organizations that were more "female dominated," such as social services. Some mentees were very flexible in their mentor preferences as long as the relationship was in a professional capacity. These mentees were not especially interested in making a lifelong friend, but were more concerned with gaining a lot of information in a short period of time.

Generation gaps were another issue. Some mentees suggested that they would prefer to be mentored by an elder, while other mentees offered that they could not be mentored by someone younger than themselves regardless of the mentor's high employment status or experience.

During our workshops, we would also present various scenarios. One question that always got a laugh was: "What would you do if your mentor asked you out for dinner or for drinks?" It was an important question to ask and allowed us to open up the discussion around appropriate versus inappropriate behaviour. Given that participants are looking to gain something different from the mentorship program, the application form, sign-up packages and workshops were extremely useful.

Workshops were led by our mentorship coordinator who was responsible for collecting data about the participants, recruiting all the mentees and mentors, and making the appropriate matches. The most important aspect of this role was to guide the mentee/mentor relationship and be a sounding board for participants. Just two mentor relationships were discontinued, and the reason was the same in both cases: the mentor was extremely motivated to help, but the mentee was not taking the commitment seriously. Our mentorship coordinator intervened in these relationships, given the mentor's personal, professional and financial contribution to the relationship, and the mentee's failure to show up for paid engagements and follow up with the mentor and our organization. We did not want to lose these committed mentors, so we made more appropriate matches for them.

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Fine-tuning the program: communication breakdowns

Mentor feedback also alerted us to our next stumbling block: "I just can't understand him." This we heard from many mentors. We had included a language level requirement for mentee participation in the program, and as mentioned earlier, our Centre assists many refugees for whom, in most cases, English is not their first language. Although we were accustomed to working with newcomers with various accents and levels of language fluency, our mentors were sometimes less able to understand the mentees. As a result, we were matching mentees and not realizing that they might have communication problems with their mentors. We thus included a suggested language level requirement for mentee participation in the program. We found that often, when asked, mentees would admit that it would be best to wait and participate in the mentorship program after they had increased their language levels.

Number crunching

One realization that we had not considered when setting the goals for our program is that not all internationally trained professionals want to be mentored! Some newcomers don't have the time to be mentored; they want to concentrate on language studies, or they just want to get a job. We had mistakenly assumed that all internationally trained professionals participating in our free employment program would want to access our free mentorship program. As such, we noted in our program proposal that 100% of our participants would be mentored. We learned that services must be tailored to the needs of participants, and many of our clients simply did not want the one-on-one, longer-term relationship that our mentorship program was providing. Many clients wanted shorter meetings or wished to participate in a group setting. Based on this, we created Group Mentorship meetings where professionals in engineering, nursing or accounting fields in our community would come and speak to groups of five to ten mentees. These groups usually met three or four times, and often one-on-one meetings were arranged when a mentee needed specific help.

A recipe for success

About six months into the program, we realized we had something to be proud of. Agencies from all over the region enquired about taking advantage of our program for their clients, and the community was involved in

creating a solution for a problem that, thus far, governments had been unable to solve. The engineering mentorship program was particularly successful because of the commitment of the mentor who led group and individual mentorships. He was concerned about the problems faced by internationally trained engineers and, along with our job developers, visited employers to outline the advantages of hiring an internationally trained engineer, as well as encouraging his previous employers and contracting partners to hire our mentees. He led courses in project management, as this was his specialty before retiring, and because he had worked all over the world, he contributed his cultural sensitivity and optimism. He did this as a volunteer and, in return, he gained friendships and a new understanding of what it is for a newcomer to live in this country. He assisted more than 60 mentees before illness forced him to reduce his participation in our program.

In addition to the commitment of our volunteers, networking, graduations and rewards were other ingredients in the success of program. We learned early on that every mentor brings with them at least two or three networking connections that could be useful to our mentees. This allowed us to significantly increase our mentor family. Mentors noted that they appreciated that we would contribute articles to newspapers and community magazines about the contributions of our mentors. Recognition was important and included certificates of appreciation, Christmas cards, business cards and business card holders, leather portfolio cases, pens and stationary. Mentees who graduated from our program and found employment in their fields were encouraged to "give back" to the program and participate in the program as a mentor. Clients appreciated hearing success stories from people who were involved in the program.

Outside forces

We then encountered yet another stumbling block: participation drop off. Where were all the clients? At one time, we easily had 30 international clients a month and then suddenly, workshop rooms were empty. The implementation of the Safe Third Country Agreement, which came into effect in December 2004, likely contributed to the decline in participants, which we noted shortly after the Agreement was implemented. Many viewed the Safe Third Country Agreement as a "closing of the border to refugees," and following its signing in December 2002, hundreds of refugee claimants crossed the bridge in Fort Erie wishing to enter Canada before "the bridge closed." Many of these refugees sought employment assistance from our Centre and were linked to our program. However, after the implementation of the Agreement, our intake numbers slowly declined to between 10 and 15 international clients per month. Of these, only six to eight were trained in a profession or trade.

Evaluation

Evaluation is key to a successful program and most "program gurus" suggest that the evaluation criteria be defined before the start of the program. We began our program with such an evaluation, but after a year, we realized that there were just three important questions to ask:

1. Did the mentee and mentor achieve the goals they had set at the beginning of the program?
2. Did they feel that the mentorship coordinator had made an appropriate mentee/mentor match?
3. Were they satisfied with the mentorship component of our program? Would they recommend it to others?

Doing it for the right reasons

As we head into our fifth year of programming, we have successfully matched over 400 mentees and mentors through group mentorship or one-on-one relationships. There is no "right way" to create a mentoring program; you begin by designing a program that will help your organization achieve its goals and that matches its values. At the Employment Help Centre, we wanted to help internationally trained professionals enter the careers and professions that they enjoyed before arriving in Canada. The licensure process is lengthy, and we were concerned that we would lose the talent that we saw among internationally trained professionals who visited our Centre each day. This program helped give some hope to newcomers who felt like they were "spinning their wheels" in this country. We also aimed to encourage and give confidence to our mentees, who often felt that their time in Canada was being "wasted," or who were embarrassed about their survival jobs. Moreover, some mentees noted that they were losing their partner's respect because they "couldn't make it in this country."

Our community residents really rose to the challenge. Feedback from our evaluation forms highlighted that 86% of our mentee participants were satisfied with our program. The feedback contained thank you notes, and mentees were pleased with the networking connections they were able to make through the program. Seventy percent of our participants became employed through our program, and 68% of those employed gained employment in the field of their original training or related training. Indeed, we do not seek to employ our internationally trained clients in survival jobs; we are working towards employment in their original professions and careers. Our mentorship program has been a great complement to our employment centre, and we base our success on the fact that we started out doing this for all the right reasons.

Note

[1] This article is dedicated to Boyd Henderson, an incredible mentor and friend to our organization who passed away on January 3, 2006, and to retired Executive Director Rudi Masswhol, whose passion and commitment for aiding the internationally trained certainly led the way in this region.