

Workplace mentors benefit female employees more than men

October 13 2015

The success of online networking sites such as LinkedIn illustrates the popularity of building a wide-ranging contact list. Yet when it comes to raising one's profile within the workplace, female employees stand much to gain from formal, face-to-face mentoring programs, according to a new study.

In the paper, "Network Intervention: A Field Experiment to Assess the Effects of Formal Mentoring on Workplace Networks," (*Social Forces*, Volume 94, Issue 1, September 2015), Assistant Professor Sameer Srivastava of UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business documents the results of a [field experiment](#) involving 139 "high potential" employees at a software development lab for a U.S.-based company in China.

The paper reports that women gained more [social capital](#) from affiliation with a high-status mentor than their male counterparts.

Srivastava says that formal mentoring can expand professional networks in a variety of ways—for example, by building social skills and providing access to the elite members of an organization. Notably, simply being publicly affiliated with a high-status mentor appeared to benefit women more than it did the men in the program. Qualitative interviews pointed to one main reason: women experienced a greater increase in visibility and legitimacy as a result of their mentor affiliations than did male participants. As a result, women became more attractive network partners for their colleagues.

"It is well understood that networks form organically. In contrast, I am interested in understanding how managers can actively shape workplace networks," says Srivastava. "In this company, as in many other comparable companies, technical employees tended to build relatively small networks, mostly within their own groups. Senior leadership believed that the people who did well in the organization were those who had not only depth but also breadth of social capital."

The company had been experimenting with different ways to help employees develop this breadth of social capital and tried, among other things, a formal mentoring program. The program assigned employees to shadow a more senior person in another part of the organization for about a dozen days over a two-to-three-month period.

During this time, the protégés attended meetings with their mentors and worked on short project assignments. The senior employees' objective: transfer some of their organizational social capital to their protégés.

"Most mentoring research is based on cross-sectional surveys that are ill-suited to assessing whether formal mentoring programs actually work. The goal of this study was to provide more credible evidence about whether these programs can work, and if so, for which kinds of employees," says Srivastava.

The study provided this evidence by comparing the size of participants' reported networks before and after their mentoring assignments. Srivastava then assessed this change relative to a control group of employees with similar past performance and perceived potential who did not participate in the program. He also compared network changes across two groups of employees who participated in the program at different times.

Because the study was based on one particular organization and set of

[employees](#), Srivastava says that care must be taken in generalizing the findings to other contexts. Nevertheless, he believes the findings support the idea of formal mentoring programs as a means of addressing differences in the kinds of organizational networks that women and men tend to form, which, in turn, contribute to gender inequality in the workplace.

More information: sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/94/1/427.full?etoc

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Workplace mentors benefit female employees more than men (2015, October 13)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-10-workplace-benefit-female-employees-men.html>

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