

BT Ethnic Minority Network's E-mentoring Programme

by Zulfi Hussain

In 2001, I designed, developed and launched an e-mentoring programme under the auspices of BT's Ethnic Minority Network (EMN). The e-mentoring programme was designed to enhance the capabilities of a conventional mentoring programme, which had been in existence for over seven years and was recognised as the largest of its kind in Europe.

BT EMN e-mentoring began as a pilot in June 2001 with four matched pairs of mentors and mentees – Belfast/Leicester, Leeds/Cardiff, Leeds/Glasgow, and Luton/Bristol - to enable good coverage of the UK.

The e-mentoring scheme was formally launched at the BT EMN annual conference of October 2001. Since then the programme has grown steadily and is currently seen as one of the most pioneering programmes of its kind, which makes full use of all the different types of technologies available such as email, audio and video conferences, net meeting and even text messaging.

The aims of both the conventional and the e-mentoring programmes are to “develop individuals particularly from ethnic minorities and help them discover their capabilities, understand the culture of the organisation, remove barriers, break the glass ceiling, enhance their careers and achieve their full potential. However, the e-mentoring programme provides ‘global reach with a local touch’, by overcoming time and distance barriers, and adding a truly cross-cultural dimension”.

Programme management

A small team of volunteers manages the e-mentoring programme. Each owns and manages one of the key activities such as managing the database of participants, promoting the programme, recruitment of mentors and mentees, and the all important matching process.

Since the team members are spread across the UK, their meetings are generally held by regular audio conferences but they do meet occasionally face-to-face, if and when required, for example, to resolve any issues and make improvements to the programmes.

The recruitment of mentors and mentees is done in various ways, including face-to-face discussions, adverts in internal publications, via BT's intranet and through campaigns organised by EMN and the various BT business units.

Mentors and mentees who wish to join the programme are asked to complete an online application form on the EMN web site. They are asked to provide their contact details, business unit, grade, training and qualifications, achievements in the last two years, hobbies and interests, and the characteristics of the mentor/mentee with whom they wish to be matched.

Matching and support

Mentors and mentees are matched on a regular basis to achieve best results, taking into account grade, location (where appropriate), shared interests, career aspirations and development needs.

The matches are never made merely to get people off the waiting list. The policy is to wait until a best match can be found to avoid premature failure of the mentoring relationship and any disappointment.



A letter of introduction is sent by email to the mentor and mentee, asking them to make contact with each other. They are also encouraged to prepare for the first meeting to establish the ground rules of the relationship, and to agree joint aims and objectives.

The programme management team provides ongoing support for mentors and mentees, via the telephone, email and if required, face to face meetings. Formal training workshops are also run on a regularly basis.

Conventional vs e-mentoring

The fundamental strategy and procedures for conventional and e-mentoring are pretty much the same but the BT experience has shown that e-mentoring offers opportunities for mentors and mentees which would not otherwise be possible. These include:

- a global reach which provides a greater range of cross-cultural and multi-national exchange, enriching the experience of mentors, mentees and BT
- flexibility and no restrictions on time and location as a limiting factor in the matching process
- participation of a much wider talent from around the world

Monitoring and lessons learnt

The e-mentoring programme is monitored using anecdotal feedback, verbal and written reports.

Lessons learnt to date include:

- expectations of both the mentor and mentee need to be managed carefully, to avoid disappointment
- the roles and responsibilities of the people managing the programme need to be clearly defined
- all procedures need to be robust end-to-end, with the matching process efficient and as swift as possible
- careful matching is crucial to the success of the mentoring relationships
- the continual “cleansing” of the database is “an absolute must”
- the programme needs to be promoted at every opportunity, particularly to recruit new participants
- ongoing monitoring and regular review is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, make improvements, and measure the benefits

Benefits

The programme has provided considerable benefits for the mentees, mentors and BT as follows:

- The benefits to the mentees have included improved self-confidence, learning to cope with the formal and informal structure of the company, the receipt of career advice, extensive networking opportunities and of course managerial tutelage.
- The mentors have also gained from the mentoring relationship. Benefits have included improved job satisfaction, a greater insight into their own level of knowledge, a new perspective on BT and the Business Case for Diversity (provided by the Mentee).



- There is no doubt that BT has gained by having a workforce with improved motivation, improved communications and a leadership development programme that not only develops participants but also ensures that key cultural values are passed on.

Conclusions

My experience as an e-mentor and discussions with other participants in successful e-mentoring relationships have convinced me that e-mentoring is not an inferior substitute for traditional mentoring. Rather, it is simply a different approach to mentoring and can be as effective – and in some cases, potentially more effective – than traditional approaches.

I have found that like other approaches within mentoring, e-mentoring clearly has more useful application in some circumstances than in others. For example, when mentor and mentee are geographically separated, especially if they are in different countries or even different time zones, then e-mentoring provides a practical way of ensuring frequency of interaction between mentor and mentee. Under these circumstances traditional mentoring would not be practical at all.

I believe that using a wide range of media can enrich the e-mentoring relationship considerably.

In addition to e-mail and telephone, there is considerable potential for document exchange and even text messaging. For example, the mentee can text the mentor for assistance as and when required and also give the mentor a lot of satisfaction by sending a text message which reads - Thanks for your help. I tried the solution we discussed and it worked!"

E-mentoring in my view provides a truly global reach and helps to overcome time and distance barriers, and adds a truly cross-cultural dimension.