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Shifting the Shape of Mentoring

By Laura M. Francis

Rockwell Collins creates a global mentoring culture by listening to employees' needs and embracing cutting-edge technology.

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Mentoring for the masses. The free exchange of knowledge. Open learning connections.

These concepts thrive as realities at Rockwell Collins, a communication and aviation electronics solutions company. "We want mentoring to be available to everyone in our organization," explains Kelly Kennedy, senior learning solutions specialist at Rockwell Collins. "We know mentoring can have a strong influence on our employees in positive ways, and the unique development opportunities it can provide are boundless."

Using an e-mentoring system from Triple Creek Associates, Rockwell Collins instituted a mentoring program that is open to all salaried employees—a total of roughly 16,000 eligible individuals worldwide. They offer mentoring programs that address numerous initiatives and learning needs, ranging from a directed match program for developing their leadership bench strength to an open self-selection program targeting development of talent across the enterprise.

There is a far-reaching and multipronged mentoring approach that supports their growth as a company, particularly as they expand internationally. The global nature of their mentoring program means that knowledge-sharing flourishes beyond geographic and business unit boundaries, and their open attitude toward who can be involved in mentoring means that learning connections occur across silos and departments.

The company empowers employees to seek out their own mentors based on their individual, unique development needs. "Our global program helps foster a mentoring culture," Kennedy says. "This then supports our goal of ensuring an open and inclusive work environment for everyone, which ultimately supports our enterprise goal for talented and motivated people."

Rockwell Collins has nearly tripled participation numbers since the program launched in 2007, with 3,341 mentees and 2,381 mentors in the e-mentoring system as of June 2009. Attaining numbers such as these can be attributed to thorough planning and strategic support. "Mentoring is recognized as a major development tool in our leadership roadmap," says Jacy Haefke, manager of leadership and organizational development at Rockwell Collins. This targeted connection with an integral piece of Rockwell Collins' leadership initiative helped position the mentoring program as a core support tool for development.

"We have top-down leadership support that started with our CEO and executive leadership team during the pilot of the self-selection mentoring program," says Haefke. Garnering this type of executive leadership support proved invaluable not only in the success of the pilot, which involved 2,200 people, but also in reaching large participation numbers in the years since.

Transfer of valuable knowledge

Exposing more and more people to the e-mentoring program helps Rockwell Collins in its drive to foster a culture of mentoring, as well as in its goal to support the development of talented and motivated employees. Survey results of participants also show that e-mentoring helps with the transfer of valuable knowledge—a critical skill in today's fast-paced global organizations.

In 2007, Rockwell Collins' mentees were asked to rate the ways mentoring allowed them to contribute to the success of the company. They identified three top areas:

- receiving or providing encouragement, motivation, or support
- helping me understand a different point of view
- gaining or providing valuable knowledge, skills, or experience from another person.

When asked the same question in 2009, mentees rated the top three areas as

- gaining or providing valuable knowledge, skills, or experience from another person
- building or expanding my network
- helping me understand a different point of view.

This result reveals a shift in mentees' reason for participating, from encouragement and support (2007 result), to sharing valuable knowledge (2009 result). Knowledge transfer is a primary objective in most learning and development initiatives. Since the mentoring program is primarily driven by the participants themselves, this means that employees are proactively identifying what they need to learn and finding the resources to help them develop in that area. This in turn puts Rockwell Collins on track to continue developing as a learning organization.

"Every employee can benefit from mentoring, both in the giving and receiving of knowledge," says Randy Emelo, president and CEO of Triple Creek Associates. "The broad use of this practice can help speed up knowledge transfer and provide a way to bring new learning into the organization."

Emelo asserts that the need for knowledge sharing will only continue to grow, but the way in which it occurs will need to shift to match the expectations of a diversified workforce. "The ability to learn from others through relational connections is rising in importance. There is an ever-growing need for people to be connected to one another, to learn from one another, and to share insights with one another," he states. "This is, in fact, how people prefer to learn—from other people. E-mentoring helps pave the way for expansion into this social learning realm, and Rockwell Collins offers a prime example of how to achieve solid outcomes."

In the 2009 survey conducted by Rockwell Collins, mentees reported that building or expanding their networks was one of the top ways that mentoring allowed them to contribute to the company's success—a result that did not make the top three in the 2007 survey. This shift could indicate the increased value employees are placing on having broad networks and multiple sources for knowledge sharing.

Particularly in times of increased uncertainty, employees want to be connected to others in the organization. The mentoring program provides a way to accomplish this, along with moderate structure, just-in-time resources, and alignment with the company competencies.

Lessons learned and best practices

Just as learning never ends for employees who engage in mentoring, the program administrators also learned some valuable lessons during the pilot and subsequent rollout to a global audience. These lessons learned have directly translated into best practices for Rockwell Collins' mentoring program and have provided a foundation for expanded use of mentoring throughout the organization.

Constant and creative communication. Because Rockwell Collins started with a focused pilot when they first launched the program, they put an emphasis on communicating about mentoring opportunities for employees up front and in all of their initial messages. However, they did not have a plan in place for continued communication once the program launched. They quickly recognized the need for a sustainable training and communication plan that would ensure that consistent, continuous communication occurred around the mentoring program. This training and communication plan became the cornerstone of the Rockwell Collins administrators' efforts.

One piece of their plan involved creating message templates that could be reused, easily updated, or customized as needed. Another part of their plan involved training. They began to offer a "getting started" webinar each month, hosted by a mentoring facilitator who reviews Rockwell Collins' mentoring philosophy, expectations for mentees and mentors participating in the program, and tips for using the e-mentoring tool.

"Establishing this information and education up front is important to employees so that they understand the expectations and goals of mentoring at Rockwell Collins and feel comfortable with the e-mentoring tool," says Kennedy. "The webinars also give us a chance to talk with employees about promoting the program to their colleagues so that we continue to encourage participation throughout the enterprise."

Familiar faces. Another challenge related to the communication plan was the fact that Rockwell Collins' program has a global audience. According to Kennedy, for their international offices, it is best if the messages come from the leaders in those areas, providing a regional contact and a recognizable name for participants. People are more inclined to listen to a message from someone they know, she adds. Because of this, Kennedy co-hosts webinars for their international locations with a familiar face from that specific area.

Employee networks. In their efforts to foster an organization of openness and inclusion, Kennedy and her team approached various employee networks to see how the mentoring program could fit into those niche markets. They hope that these direct conversations with group representatives will lead to commitment and participation from these groups, such as what they've experienced with the onboarding program.

Participants in that program receive an email invitation to the "Getting Started" webinar during their eighth week of employment. They can also hear about the mentoring program during quarterly presentations given to the new employee network.

Kennedy's intent is to continue these positive trends with other employee network groups—for example, having the Latino employee network and the African American employee network learn about the mentoring program through "getting started" presentations at network meetings. They would also like to place a link to the e-mentoring portal on the networks' intranet sites, providing direct and easy access to the e-mentoring tool straight from a network group area that members frequent.

By bringing mentoring to various internal markets and positioning it as a resource for members, administrators can continue to build and support a mentoring culture throughout Rockwell Collins.

Program integration. Making the mentoring program available through various avenues and

connecting it to numerous initiatives is another way Rockwell Collins achieved success with their program. "Mentoring is not meant to be a stand-alone practice," says Emelo of Triple Creek. "It is meant to be used throughout an employee's lifecycle, in connection to the many development opportunities that companies already have in place."

Using mentoring solely as its own unique program only isolates it from the employee development that needs to happen. Emelo suggests instead that organizations identify places where mentoring could potentially enhance the outcomes of employee development initiatives that are already embedded in an organization and its culture. "This allows them to build a mentoring culture on a pre-existing foundation, rather than starting a mentoring program that has no natural connection to current processes and programs," he says.

Rockwell Collins connects the mentoring program to their performance review and development plan process, as well as to their leadership development program. In the performance review and development plan process, a mentoring message and link to the e-mentoring portal is included with each communication on an annual basis. They also plan to include links to the program in their virtual Rockwell Collins University that launches in October 2009. In addition, Rockwell Collins plans to tie their mentoring program to their leadership development program by including a mentoring "commercial" at the end of all leadership development courses and by promoting mentoring as an expectation of leadership development program participants.

"Participants in our leadership development programs are encouraged to use mentoring, both as mentees and mentors, to assist them in their development," says Kennedy. "We also set the expectation that they encourage others to get involved in mentoring," she says, describing a cascading approach to use and recruitment.

"This type of after-program use is perfect for group mentoring, where participants can continue their collective learning and knowledge sharing once the classroom portion of the training ends," says Emelo.

Executive leadership support. Kennedy and Haefke both acknowledge that they could not have gotten this far without executive leadership support. Securing vocal, involved mentoring advocates among the upper echelons of leadership helped position the program as a vital piece of the Rockwell Collins organizational culture.

Mentoring was never expressed as a stand-alone program that only served a small population of the workforce, but instead has always been positioned as an integral process that could influence many important programs and all employees at Rockwell Collins. "We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to grow personally and professionally," says Kennedy. "All employees should have the chance to build the skills, knowledge, and attributes that, in turn, will help Rockwell Collins sustain and enhance our competitiveness in the marketplace."

The idea of "mentoring for all" is alive and well at Rockwell Collins today, and their success is proof that mentoring can be for the masses. T+D

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