

# Critical trends and shifts in the mentoring experiences of professional women

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Women have made great strides in terms of workforce participation. Recent statistics indicate that 47% of the total U.S. workforce is now female<sup>1</sup>. The percentage of women in managerial positions in the United States has risen from 32% in 1983 to 49% as of 1997, with more gains by women expected in the years to come<sup>2</sup>. Yet in spite of the progress that women have made in advancing their careers in organizations, there are still barriers preventing them from reaching the upper echelons in significant numbers. A recent survey commissioned by the Committee of 200 (C200) provided a report card of how businesswomen are faring in relation to their male counterparts<sup>3</sup>. The C200 Business Leadership Index is composed of data from 10 key areas synthesized into an overall index; the index consists of 10 scores, each one based on a 10 point scale. On this scale of 1 to 10, with parity with men equaling 10, the overall index number was 3.95. C200 suggests that increased access to mentoring for women may be one step toward achieving gender equity. In this article, I explore the impact of informal mentoring on the career experiences of women in the corporate sector.

## Historical Perspective on Mentoring

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While early studies of mentoring focused on the career development of young men in relation to more seasoned male colleagues, a number of questions were raised about how women's experiences of mentoring may differ or mirror those of men<sup>4</sup>. Subsequently, two studies focused specifically on the career experiences of women were published in the early 1980s<sup>5</sup>. More recent research has expanded the field by exploring dimensions, characteristics, and outcomes of mentoring relationships for women<sup>6</sup>. Results from the current literature on women's mentoring experiences suggest that mentoring continues to hold an important role in the lives of working women. For example, research from Catalyst suggests that corporate women feel that mentoring relationships are critical to their success<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, in their study of 1,200 corporate women, they found that mentoring is significantly connected to career-related success. At the same time, lack of access to mentoring is one of the most widely reported barriers to career advancement<sup>8</sup>. Although the past two decades have seen an increase in the research on women's mentoring experiences, there are still a number of questions that remain.

## Background: The Survey

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The web-based survey, a collaboration between Simmons School of Management and Compaq Computer Corporation (now HP), explored these areas with women who attended Simmons's 2002 Annual Women's Leadership Conference<sup>9</sup>. We received responses from 427 women. Many of the women (82%) reported that they had been involved in an informal mentoring relationship—an indication of the prevalence and importance of this important developmental relationship. The women included in the survey work in a wide range of industries, including technology, finance, health care, and manufacturing. They are mostly middle to senior level managers with a mean age of 42 years; 60% earn more than \$75,000 annually; 45% have a graduate or professional degree; 39% are working in organizations with 20,000 or more employees. They have an average of 20 years of work experience, and 62% are in a committed relationship (including marriage or committed relationship with same or opposite sex partner).

## Changing Roles in the Provision of Mentoring

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The question of "*Who is acting as a mentor to professional women?*" produced a number of interesting findings. When asked about the gender of their mentors, respondents indicated that 60% were female. In past studies of mentoring, women have reported that their mentors were

primarily male. For example, in Thomas's research, white men predominated as mentors for study respondents<sup>10</sup>. Men typically have had access to resources and positional power necessary to provide the support given in a mentoring relationship. Women are much more likely to be involved in cross-gender mentoring relationships than men are; in one study of three R&D organizations, 53% of mentored women had cross-gender mentors compared to 20% of mentored men<sup>11</sup>. The implications of women being involved in more cross-gender mentoring relationships than men is noteworthy; the extant research clearly indicates that relationships that cross lines of gender require more effort to sustain than do same-gender relationships<sup>12</sup>. What are the implications of more women being mentored by other women? Findings from this study provide an opportunity to address questions raised by this demographic shift.

## Women Receiving Mentoring from Other Women.

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The large number of women who reported other women acted as their mentors is a shift from prior studies and may signal that more women are in positions where they may act as mentors. Respondent demographics suggest that the women who participated in this survey are well prepared and positioned to make changes in organizations. Respondents were highly educated, members of affluent households, and key stakeholders in their organizations. That our respondents reported such a high level of participation in informal mentoring bodes well for the future; research suggests that those who have been mentored tend to go on to act as mentors<sup>13</sup>. The fact that our respondents looked to other women for support and guidance through their various career paths is compelling and may be a tremor of the quake that is needed to crack the glass ceiling. While the glass ceiling is not yet broken—we know that there are still gender equity issues in organizational life—perhaps this sample of women provides a taste of what is yet to come.

## Women Acting as Informal Mentors

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Not only did the women participating in this sample receive informal mentoring from women, they also acted as informal mentors to their colleagues. Almost 77% of our respondents indicated that they act as an informal mentor in the workplace. This finding challenges findings of several studies from the early 1990s, which suggested that although more women were in positions to act as mentors, they were not taking on this role to the degree one would expect<sup>14</sup>. These researchers point to a reluctance of women to take on the role of mentor for other women. The "queen bee" syndrome, which happens when women at the top are not willing to mentor those coming behind them, is offered as one cause. Another cause cited was more systemic in nature, indicating that the culture and structure of corporations inhibit female mentors from reaching out to potential female protégés. Our findings indicate that, indeed, women do seem to be taking up the role of mentor in greater numbers. This finding represents a shift over the past ten years. It is important to encourage and support women to continue this trend, as mentoring may be a process that helps break systemic barriers that women face in organizations.

## Supervisors Mentoring Direct Reports

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A third interesting survey finding surfaced when we asked the question, "*Who is your informal mentor?*" Traditionally, mentors have been senior-level managers who have taken an interest in the careers of junior employees who are not their direct reports. Yet almost 40% of those who had informal mentors indicated that their supervisors are their mentors. This unexpectedly high percentage has multiple implications for women who are building their constellation of support.

This finding is especially significant because the mentoring literature generally has suggested that supervisors should not be informal mentors. There is an inherent conflict in having someone who evaluates your performance and has considerable control over your career options in your organization also acting as a mentor. This finding suggests a change in the traditional order, a paradigm shift in developmental relationships. It may be that, for a myriad of reasons, supervisors are now being pulled into the mentoring role more frequently.

As companies continue to constrict through downsizing, supervisors may be the people best positioned to offer critical mentoring support to women in their careers. As architects of their career journeys, women should consider the particular role that supervisors may hold in guiding that journey, while also being mindful of the challenge of multiple and potentially conflicting roles inherent in the supervisor position. The fact that supervisors may act as mentors also has implications for human resource specialists. Supervisors may need to develop or hone special competencies in preparation for employees who look to them as mentors. These are issues that merit further attention, in both research and applied efforts.

## Shifting Importance in the Functions of Mentoring

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Traditionally, mentoring has been said to occur along two dimensions: career and psychosocial. Career functions are aspects of the mentoring relationship that focus on navigating the environment and moving ahead within the organization. These functions include protection, promotion, access to challenging opportunities, and exposure. Psychosocial functions are aspects of the relationship focused on the development of clarity and competence in protégés. These functions include counseling, coaching, acting as a friend, and role modeling. In more recent research, the role modeling function has emerged as a separate entity<sup>15</sup>. As was the case with Scandura's study on mentoring, a factor analysis of the mentoring items from our survey yielded the same three factors. I believe that the emergence of the role modeling aspect of mentoring as an entity separate from the career and psychosocial functions is significant for women. The importance of a role model—someone you respect who has achieved goals to which you are aspiring and is a source for strategies for both success and survival—is important in women's career development. As studies have indicated, women want to see examples of other women succeeding without sacrificing everything else in their lives. For example, Boyd discussed a survey of 20,000 female employees at Arthur Anderson; that survey was done to gain insight into why women were leaving. Results from the survey indicate that women wanted more guidance from senior managers on how to succeed, and they wanted to see proof that senior women could make it to senior posts in the company<sup>16</sup>. Ragins and McFarlin found that junior women were more likely to perceive role models among their female mentors than among their male mentors<sup>17</sup>.

The presence and predominance of the role modeling function is particularly important if the sample demographics are taken into consideration. This sample represents a group of women who are well educated, well paid, and well positioned within their organizations. Given their position, they are uniquely poised to take advantage of (or benefit from) this particular dimension of mentoring relationships. For them, it is important to see examples of how to effectively navigate their careers.

## Career Outcomes and Their Relationship to Mentoring

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Several important career outcomes were positively associated with informal mentoring. Respondents with informal mentors reported a greater number of promotions and a higher

promotion rate than those who did not have informal mentors. Respondents who reported higher levels of informal mentoring also reported that the relationship was helpful to them in reducing stress. Those with an informal mentor were more satisfied with their careers than those who did not have one, and 86% of respondents indicated that their informal mentoring relationships were professionally productive. These results, which have been found in other studies of mentoring,<sup>18</sup> confirm the importance of informal mentoring and its potential to contribute to the career advancement and satisfaction of women. But as I explored the effects of mentor gender on organizational outcomes, the study findings were not so straightforward. Women who had female mentors reported a greater number of promotions than those who had male mentors<sup>19</sup>. Yet, women who had female mentors also reported significantly lower personal income than those with male mentors. These findings raise an interesting point. Why is it that women who have female mentors are not earning the same personal income as those who have male mentors? A number of potential explanations compete for prominence in terms of explaining this finding. Are women not talking about money? Are male mentors better positioned hierarchically within their organizations such that their protégés gain access to more financial remuneration? Is there a built-in gender inequity around men's and women's salaries? Even if women are talking about money, are they starting from a lower figure than they would with their male mentors? O'Neill and her colleagues ask whether sex-balanced organizations would look the same as traditionally male-dominated ones in terms of gender, developmental relationships, and access to resources<sup>20</sup>. Our finding around the differential effect of mentor gender on outcomes (greater promotion rate but lower salary) suggests that their question is an apt one; as we have women advancing in organizations, we will need to consider how relationships may shift as a result.

## Future Avenues of Inquiry: Implications for Practice and Research

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### *Look in More Depth: Qualitative Research.*

This research raises a number of questions around women being mentored by other women. As a relatively new area of inquiry, a flexible data collection method that allows unexpected aspects of the phenomenon to surface is suggested<sup>21</sup>. What leads these women to act as mentors in their organizations? What do they gain as they take on that leadership role? How does having your supervisor as a mentor differ qualitatively from having another advanced organizational member (who does not have formal evaluation responsibilities) act as mentor? These questions are best explored using a qualitative approach.

### *Look Across Span of Time: Longitudinal Research.*

Cross-sectional surveys provide one perspective, but they are static. As we consider the fluid nature of career paths and the porous character of organizational boundaries, it will be important to explore how mentoring relationships unfold across the career span of women. The rules are changing—it is critical to collect data that allows us to have a sense of how these rule changes will affect women vis-à-vis past conceptions of women's careers.

### *Look Across Diverse Populations: Heterogeneous Samples.*

Although I did conduct analysis looking at the differences between white women and women of color, there were no significant differences between those two groups. I suspect that we don't have any findings because we don't have enough variation in the cell sizes to see a difference. Future research should make every effort to recruit a diverse sample of women. This may not necessarily be easy or cost-efficient; researchers who are truly interested in understanding the experiences across a spectrum of diversity will need to be amenable to taking the extra steps necessary to reach a diverse pool of potential research participants.

Most respondents in our study reported that their informal mentors were White (approximately 88%). This finding mirrors what we see in the mentoring literature; studies generally report that mentors are 85%-97% White. We are still in the infancy mode in terms of our understanding of the mentoring experiences of women who are not White. There is a real need to gather data with mentors of other races, since we do not know what happens when the mentor is not White. Yet another aspect of diversity that has received little attention in the mentoring literature is the dimension of class. The current research on mentoring does little to elucidate what happens to those outside of managerial ranks. What about the experiences of women who are at lower levels in the organization? We need to examine the experiences of women across the spectrum of race, class, and organizational level.

***Managers as Mentors: Human Resource Implications.***

This finding has significant HR implications. How do we train managers to also be mentors? How do those roles conflict with one another and what can we do to ameliorate that conflict? Supervisors can't act as mentors to each and every employee they support; the leader-member exchange literature suggests that there are probably some members of the work group that appeal more to the mentor-supervisor than others.<sup>22</sup> So it will be important for women to develop other sources of support in addition to the mentor-supervisor. A constellation of support, including peers and other advanced organizational members, can provide some of the psychosocial mentoring functions that a mentor-supervisor may not be able to provide.

## Conclusion

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Mentoring has been suggested as one powerful tool to assist women in breaking the glass ceiling. Findings from this research study support this proposition. For women in our sample, mentoring was associated with positive career outcomes, including higher promotion rates and greater career satisfaction. These research findings highlight the importance of the role model function for women. Finally, we confirm that women are also acting as mentors to others in their organizations. As these research findings indicate, mentoring remains an important developmental relationship from which women in contemporary organizations can benefit.

*Notes*

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9 This research was a partnership between Simmons School of Management (SOM), its Center for Gender in Organizations and Compaq Computer Corporation (now HP). The survey was designed by Stacy Blake-Beard, Natalie Matus, and Deborah Merrill-Sands of the SOM and implemented with the assistance of Jack Jurras and Greg Herr of Compaq, who also provided technical support.

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13 Ragins, B.R. & Scandura, T.A. (1999). Burden or blessing? Expected costs and benefits of being a mentor. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20 (4), 493-509.

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19 This finding approached significance at  $p < .06$ .

20 O'Neill, Horton & Crosby, 77.

21 Kram, K.E. (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26 (4), 608-625.

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