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Mentoring and Coaching in Transport and Logistics Higher Education: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Mentoring is widely accepted as a developmental process for personal growth and career advancement. Its functions are often carried out within the context of a long-term, continuous and supportive relationship between a skilled or more experienced person (mentor) who serves as a role model to teach, sponsor, encourage and counsel and a less experienced individual (mentee). Although some evidence exists to support the idea that, where mentoring practices are applied in higher education, students tend to perform better as scholars and experience higher confidence and morale, mentoring is still under-utilised when used as a way to help support individuals' personal and professional development. Meanwhile, larger organisations tend to invest significant resources on talent management activities (CIPD, 2015), as a means to identify how such activities are being utilised to develop current assets within organisations, develop leadership, support change or bridge the gap of insufficiently qualified graduates in industry.

This paper presents a structured literature review on mentoring and coaching including similarities and differences in each approach and their appropriateness in transport and logistics higher education. It provides an understanding of each concept and suggests relevant applications as an effective means of maximising the potential of existing and prospective students and employees. Finally, it discusses the extent to which "mentoring and coaching" can be used in transport and logistics higher education as a developmental approach to provide students with a competitive edge when entering the workplace.

1. Introduction

In any organisation, public or private, people represent an increasingly important resource. Mentoring and coaching practices, in some form or other, have now become embedded in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. Both mentoring and coaching use training to equip individuals with a specific set of skills or appropriate behaviour. Currently research on mentoring and coaching is limited in the field of transport and logistics. Nevertheless, there is an on-going and increasingly emerging discussion about the shortage of skilled professionals entering the industry which emphasises the importance of developmental practice to meet the increasing needs for well-educated employees. The biggest Research and Innovation Funding Framework in Europe, Horizon 2020, in its Framework Programme 2016-2017 in Smart, Green and Integrated Transport, recognised the importance of Assessing Future Requirements For Skills and Jobs Across Transport Modes and Systems.

Unlike mentoring, coaching is emerging as a temporary practice and goal-directed interaction between the coach and coachee. Such practices are common in business

between leaders and managers when interacting with their employees in order to improve their performance. It is argued that coaching is less apparent in higher education as it is expensive and resource intensive. Both mentoring and coaching use training to equip individuals with a specific set of skills or appropriate behaviour. Currently research on mentoring and coaching is limited in the field of Transport and Logistics. Nevertheless, there is an on-going and increasingly emerging discussion about the shortage of skilled professionals entering the industry which emphasises the importance of developmental practices to meet the increasing needs for well-educated employees.

The intention of this paper is to understand the role of mentoring and coaching practices in UK higher education and its application in transport and logistics courses which could underpin skills development and employability in order to meet the entry-level employment requirements. Many researchers such as Baker (2015) argue that higher education lacks the framework to help make the connection to professional outcomes and demonstrate the direct and indirect impact of mentoring and coaching practices. While mentoring and coaching emerge from different roots, both terms are similar “in nature and must be considered in their own individual social context to be differentiated” (Bruner, 1990; Garvey, Stokes and Megginson, 2014, p.30).

Meanwhile, Sodi & Son (2008) investigated further the gaps between employers’ demands in transport and logistics jobs and the content of transport and logistics related courses, in order to prepare undergraduate students to face the challenges of the industry. Mentoring and coaching, by working on any skill deficit, can help people enhance their skills and knowledge when entering the marketplace (McGurk, 2010) with a potential for application to support students in developing their career prospects. In addition, they provide potential solutions to meet the increasing needs for well-educated employees by employers in the industry.

2. Employability, Learning, Training and Talent Management

Argos and Ezquerro (2014) define employability as a complex and polysemic concept which measures an individual’s potential (Kulkarni and Chachadi, 2014). Hillage and Pollard (1998) suggest employability concerns the gain and retention of fulfilling work whilst a more recent dimension was proposed by Fugate, Kinicki and Ashford (2004): “pro-active adaptability” – in terms of social, personal and career prospects. The changing shift in the labour market from lifelong employment to lifelong learning is forcing employees to become more dependent on willingness, capacity and mobility training in order to enhance people’s “ability to be employed” (Asonitou, 2015). In the meantime, the move to a knowledge-based economy, has contributed to a larger demand for intangible assets (Nilsson and Ellstrom, 2012), also generating new challenges at work. Thus, employability has become increasingly prominent at both, national and international levels, and its definition has evolved over time.

Nowadays, employability encompasses the ability for individuals to transit from the world of education (or unemployment) to a job. It is not unexpected that employability entails the ability to transfer from one job to another. In principle, developing skills and focusing on talent helps in securing “supply of highly skilled labour” (Nilsson and Ellstrom, 2012, p.32).

Higher education institutions play a significant role in the development of soft-skills which are defined as the most valuable skills in graduates’ professional careers. Talent management has been the recent focus in academic literature, as companies focus on the need for more talent, especially in times of complex environments, high levels of competition and uncertainty. As discussed by Nilsson and Ellstrom (2012), human resources strategies have recently taken a greater interest in talent management in order to capture and ensure transfer of knowledge intensive organisations. Mentoring and coaching has entered the educational setting to support students’ employability and skills development. However, there is very limited evidence as to transport and logistics courses taking the opportunity to fully adopt mentoring and coaching practices to further enhance employability for undergraduate students in the transport and logistics arena. Although mentoring and coaching is largely seen as a developmental mechanism, its ability to reach out to industry’s

needs has not been investigated. This only reinforces the originality and the necessity for the research to be conducted.

3. Mentoring and Coaching

Mentoring and coaching are recognised as common practices in the academic and business world and have developed as a trend in recent years (CIPD, 2015). These disciplines became subject of widespread experimentation, especially in the USA (Clutterbuck, 1991), where they were acknowledged for their positive impact on student satisfaction, retention, tenure and promotion (Allen and Eby, 2007; Ambrose, Huston and Norman, 2005; Eddy and Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Mullen and Kennedy, 2007). Coaching appeared to be a relatively new concept compared to mentoring and has yet to attract much attention over the last ten years. Mentoring and coaching researchers and scholars are entertaining the debate on “one size fits all” definition; for example, Irby (2012) explores the difference between mentoring and coaching in that mentoring is generally long-lasting and involves a shared relationship with a focus on the deeper development of the individual, whereas coaching is typically focused on a performance event of an individual. Mentoring and coaching are essentially a dyadic relationship (Bean, Lucas and Hyers, 2014) in which mentors and mentees, coaches and coachees engage in a dialogue (Garvey et al., 2014).

a. Mentoring

Mentoring activities are generally found in all sectors of society on a volunteering and paid basis, although coaching tends to be paid (Garvey et al., 2014). In its classical sense, mentoring refers to “a relationship between a younger adult and an older, more experienced adult [who] helps the younger individual learn to navigate the adult world and the world of work” (Kram, 1985, p.2). Further attributes can be added to the definition to embrace the core elements of reciprocity (between mentors and a mentees, also called protégés), developmental benefits and consistent interactions over some period of time (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban & Wilbanks, 2011). Similar to coaching, mentoring can be described as a developmental process (Loots, 2009) whether in a supporting relationship, a teaching-learning relationship, or a career-development mechanism (Brew, 2003) and can occur in a formal setting as part of mentoring programmes, or, most frequently, informally (Mullen, 2008). Mentoring, at its best, could be a life-changing relationship that generates mutual growth, learning and development (Bean et al., 2014). Ragins and Kram (2007) further support this argument in that mentoring has the capacity of transforming individuals, groups, organisations and communities.

The satisfaction of relationships depends on the nature of the interaction between the mentor and the mentee (Erdem and Aytemur, 2008) and the ability of students to learn (Wilkes, 2006).

Even though both practices in their respective actions have been effortlessly contributing to desirable outcomes in their implementation in higher education, mentoring (Eby, Durley and Evans, 2006; Neilson and Eisenbach, 2003 and Zey, 1989) and coaching (Ridler, 2011; de Haan, 2012) have relied on limited evidence to the extent of their impact. Many researchers (such as Kochan, 2013; Bell and Treleaven, 2011) stress that these activities are still under-utilised when used as a way to help support students’ personal and professional development (Rose et al., 2005) and that mentoring programmes and relationships can only be understood by looking more closely at the multiple environments (e.g. socio-structural, political, interpersonal, policy) in which they operate (Bettinger and Baker, 2014). Mentoring researchers have repeatedly called attention to the extent of administrative support, both financially and in “spirit”, to maintain mentoring relationships (Bean et al., 2014, p.57), not to mention a trusting relationship (DeLong, Gabarro and Lees, 2008) which limits its ability to become a norm on a wider scale.

b. Coaching

Coaching is a developmental and powerful tool used to develop skills and enhance performance (CIPD, 2015). Brunner (1998) provides an insightful comment on the meaning

of coaching which can take many forms and brands from sports coaching, life coaching, executive coaching, team coaching and brief coaching/solution-focused (Garvey et al., 2014). It works on the principle that the 'learner' drives the agenda. The contribution of mentoring has focused on personal growth (Sosik and Lee, 2002), career advancement (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz and Lima, 2004; Bozeman and Feeney, 2007; Fletcher and Ragins, 2007; Haggard et al., 2011) and performance improvement (Garvey, 2012) in order to help people in transition. As Levinson, Darrow, Klein and McKee (1978) reported on the latter for mentoring, so Ridler (2011) suggests that coaching is employed to help people in transition and change. Unlike mentoring, coaching is emerging as a temporary practice and goal-directed interaction between the coach and coachee. Such practices are common in business between leaders and managers when interacting with their employees in order to improve their performance. It is argued that coaching is less apparent in higher education as being expensive and resource intensive.

Meanwhile, the changing educational culture has led institutions to implement socially-based and action-oriented strategies (Fullan and Scott, 2009) to retain students (Loots, 2009). In this context, the establishment of a mentoring culture in higher education has been most suitable to support development and change, a culture which prizes mentor-mentee relationships as described by Gladwell (2006). The profound influence of organisational culture on people, processes and business practices is relevant in Zachary's work (2005). In addition, benefits of these activities rely on the creation of the emotional connection (Langer, 2010) which can surpass demographic differences (Mullen and Huting, 2008; Rhodes, 2002). Higher education institutions tend to cover mentoring and coaching and their variations, in "bundles" (Baker, 2015) when undertaking career development initiatives including mentoring programmes, employee network groups, internships, and career track for high potential employees.

4. Application to Transport and Logistics Higher Education

Transport and logistics courses are offered worldwide and are particularly popular in the UK. The changing nature of the industry's needs for the UK's long term ambition to develop skills in the transport and logistics sector (CILT UK, 2015) has led institutions to rethink the curricula content to represent the diversity of transport and logistics offerings. Leitch's report (2006, p.6) provides evidence about the lack of skills that industries, including transport and logistics, were suffering. This is also evidenced through the rapid "expansion of university courses in transport and logistics in recent years" (Jordan and Bak, 2016). Van Hoek (2001) highlighted the complexity of the educational scene which leads academics to update the content and level of teaching to support the transition of graduates from "lecture rooms to management offices" (Van Hoek, 2001, p.507).

Since 2001, increasing pressures and challenges have hit the transport and logistics arena, which inevitably placed an imperative on institutions and provision of undergraduate course providers (Lancioni, Forman and Smith, 2001), although the author similarly emphasized the lack of contribution from industry to support these activities.

In academia, the implementation of mentoring programmes have been directed at non-traditional students according to the work of Langer (2010) or most commonly, through the use of peer-mentoring (Loots, 2009). While the importance of transport and logistics has taken a greater prominence in the globalisation of [education] and businesses (Basnet, 2000; Lorenz, Toyli, Solakivi and Ojala, 2013) in recent years, academic research in transport and logistics rarely focused on developmental process to further develop transport and logistics managers (Stank, Paul Dittmann and Autry, 2011). Bowersox (2002) recognises the need for graduates to hold an understanding of cross-functional approach to enter the industry. The transport and logistics industry has evolved and continues to experience major challenges. With a growing population of ageing workforce in transport and logistics industry (Cole, 2011), employers ought to keep up with the pace of change, skills, capabilities and knowledge among industry leaders. There has been considerable debate and discussion about skills shortages in the industry and the change of their nature (Murphy and Poist,

2007). The attraction and education of future professionals into this fast-paced career has been identified by van Hoek et al. (2002) as a critical challenge.

5. Challenges and issues in the transport and logistics industry

Mentoring and, more so, coaching enjoyed a boom period between 2000-2009 when much was written and published about the role of mentoring and even more so about coaching, but that has since somewhat subsided due to the nature of how 'trends' work and the outcome of the 'credit crunch' of 2009 that led many organisations to downsize and divert resources to core areas of the business. In recent years, the so called high potential in-house development schemes such as mentoring and coaching are described among the most commonly used and "most effective talent management activities within an organisational setting" (CIPD, 2015, p4). In the business world, from human resource policies to practices, developmental initiatives have left their footprint to support the alignment of employees to achieve goals (Baker, 2015) and cement learning especially in times of change.

Wiggans (1994) identifies mentoring in organisations under different forms which are either in the company's staff development or in-service training programmes, while others use mentors as part of positive action schemes to encourage and retain staff. Mentoring and coaching activities tend to support organisations in enhancing productivity and increase transfer of learning where employees had the right skills in place; whereby it strengthens the link to organisational performance (CIPD, 2015). As Bloch's definition suggests, mentoring is used in industry as an effective means of maximizing potential (Bloch, 1993) and empowering prospective leaders in view of their professional growth (Hudson, 2013). As an experienced individual, a mentor is dedicating time, interest and emotion in supporting a mentee (Peluchette and Jeanquart, 2000). Clutterbuck and Megginson (2009) further support the idea of seniority and knowledge transfer of the industry, the organisation and the role. In such a context, learners make their own decisions and benefit from the experience of their mentors.

Coaching does not depend on the achievement of any business goals for its success but it is close to mentoring in that it is linked to performance and attainment (Garvey et al., 2014). Coaching occurs as and when required on the basis of skills and performances enhancement and is generally characterised by a shorter relationship. Secondly, unlike mentors, coaches do not need to have direct experience of the formal occupational role or circumstances and the process is more structured in nature between the coach and the learner. Megginson and Whitaker (2003) argue that mentoring is designed to develop in a more flexible style over a longer period of time and is very much focused on the learner driving the agenda (McKenna, Smith, Poole and Coverdale, 2003). As a result, the activity of coaching is defined as a short-term development with a specific outcome where coaches dictate the learning outcome of the person being coached. In more recent years, mentoring practices were seen in industry as an enabling tool to help shape the next generation of professionals. Even though such practices exist, mentoring and coaching in the transport and logistics industry starts occurring in places where skills needs developing (Van Hoel Chatham and Wilding, 2002) – yet limited academic support are addressing the links between mentoring and coaching practices to bridge the gap. Evidence of mentoring practices was provided for early researchers to enhance employees' productivity (Muschallik and Pull, 2016). Coaching, however, has grown more quickly in the business world than it has in academia. Indeed, coaching programmes have not formally been utilised by universities, and more specifically in the transport and logistics higher educational sector. Lessons are drawn from mentoring practices in higher education in attempting to connect individuals and organizational needs (Baker, 2015). However, and perhaps even more importantly, in many cases this is not identified and recognized as mentoring and coaching. To date, there is no evidence on how such developmental practices, existing infrastructures, framework and culture could help in embracing mentoring and coaching in higher education for undergraduate students as an important addition to respond to the industry's challenges.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although many attempts have been made by researchers, academics and industrials to come to a unified definition of the term “mentoring and coaching”, difficulties remain in identifying a commonality between both terms, which only go beyond “a sincere desire to help students succeed” (Roberts, 2000; Langer, 2001; Miller 2002) and a focus on skills development as a core element of both. The transport and logistics higher education sector has shown an improvement in developing talent management practices, more so for mentoring programmes. Nowadays, coaching is mainly applied in the industry sector with evidence of return-on-investments. Such programmes are costly and support-intensive which therefore limits their suitability to immediate educational settings.

The transport and logistics industry faces its own challenges whereby an ageing employee population has reinforced the need to transfer knowledge to younger generations and develop existing and future human resources to help the firm adapt to a changing world. Human resource development practices could be intensified earlier in the development of individuals through their higher education courses so the transition to this fast-paced environment would support the industry’s emerging needs. Alternatively, the transport and logistics industry, by identifying mentors and coaches at senior level management would facilitate the adoption of such programmes, if not internally, it could be used as a strategy to help the firm gain a competitive edge.

There is scope for further research into Coaching and Mentoring per se and, more specifically, applying mentoring and coaching practices to the transport and logistics higher education sector. Findings from this research could assist in retaining and supporting students on Transport and Logistics courses and help these courses prosper. This paper presents a structured literature review on Mentoring and Coaching. This is necessary in order to conceptualise the terms. Further research will need to focus on empirical data, in particular, to examine how Coaching and Mentoring is used by Transport and Logistics Higher Education providers and to establish the effects these have had on students’ performance.

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