

# **APPROACHING THE PROCESS OF MENTORING FROM THE SIDE OF EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES IN THE DIMENSION OF HUNGARIAN PRACTICE (BOTH SIDES OF THE COIN)**

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## **Abstract**

The practice of knowledge management in these days is one strategic field of corporate management. Establishing, developing, preserving and transferring knowledge require several tasks and activities from the organizations. One method of transferring knowledge is mentoring, where knowledge-sharing and learning is fulfilled between the mentor and the mentored person.

In Hungary the process of mentoring is not yet a wide-spread practice in the life of organizations; therefore we considered it highly important to get to know and to reveal the features of the Hungarian practice regarding the issue. This year we have initiated an extensive qualitative research in order to examine the mentoring process and its characteristics from both sides, from the side of the employers and from the side of the employees. Our aim was also to see whether the mentoring system is suitable to the system of knowledge management. We were curious to know how the interviewees see this method of knowledge transfer from the two sides of the coin, what the similarities and differences are from the two aspects as regards this practice.

**Key words:** mentoring, knowledge-sharing, mentor, mentored person, human resource management, knowledge management

**JEL Code:** J24

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## **Introduction**

By today the justification of knowledge-management is undoubted in the life of organizations. The knowledge-management practice operating within the organization gives support to the companies to suit the requirements of the market more successfully and to position

themselves effectively and productively in the global competition (Jasimuddin-Zhang 2011). With the help of knowledge-management it is possible to identify, to map, to develop, to document, to utilize, to preserve and to transfer (Bencsik, 2013) explicit and tacit knowledge accumulated in the organizations (Polányi, 1962). Although it can be stated that due to the rapidly changing economic situation the up-to-date practical knowledge has been over-valued (Oláh – Hutóczki, 2012)

However experts say that modern HRM (human resource management) has to suit the requirements of knowledge-based organizations as well (Chivu- Popescu, 2008). Therefore it is not by coincidence that the cooperation of human resource management and knowledge-management strategy can be a number one factor from the aspect of the company's competitiveness. Finding, exploiting, preserving and developing the valuable knowledge-base of the company is the common aim of the two fields; moreover forming them into a system and operating them is or can be one of the strategic tasks of the company. For instance it was Haesli and Boxal (2005) who highlighted some pre-conditions in one of their studies, which are necessary to preserve the human capital as the source of the basic competencies and therefore source of the sustainable success. This is already part and aim of the knowledge-management as well, thus it is about the mutual cooperation of the two fields.

Knowledge-sharing is an important step of knowledge-management, which can be fulfilled in different ways (directly or indirectly), but by all means it has to be about the knowledge-sharing and transferring between participants (Bencsik, 2009). The process can be either a one- or two-way process, while knowledge-sharing can be realized between the individuals and groups (Argote and Ingram, 2000).

One form of knowledge-sharing is the so-called mentoring process, which is quite fashionable nowadays and where the knowledge-transfer is carried out between one mentor and his mentored person. The study of Kram described mentoring in its classical interpretation in 1985, where the author defines mentoring as the group of activities, where there is teaching, supporting and helping and which is provided by a highly qualified leader to his mentored person. Based on the approach, the mentor mainly supports his mentored person in his career while this help has influence on the psycho-social development of the mentored as well. According to Bell (2002) the mentor is an educator, a leader who provides help to his mentored person in extending and developing his knowledge.

Apart from the classical interpretation, there are more modern approaches of mentoring as well, where youngsters provide support to their senior colleagues, for example

in the field of IT; moreover there are views which are about mutual learning processes and knowledge-sharing (Harvey-McIntyre-Heames-Moeller, 2009).

The question is how knowledge-transfer can be interpreted both from the aspect of the organizations and from the aspect of the employers. Are the views and goals from the two sides the same and where are the differences if there are differences at all?

In order to answer the above question, a research- involving in-depth interviews- has been carried out this year. The interviews were made with different Hungarian organizations and their employees about the issue how the participants of the process (the mentored persons) and how the organizations as employers see this method of knowledge-sharing.

## **1 The method of the research**

Our research this year was based on in-depth interviews, where the authors asked the employers and the employees about mentoring as one formal and informal method of knowledge-sharing. Those results of some interviews made with organizations serve as the base of the present paper where there was mentoring practice operating. Although the research examined companies of different size, at present the circle of investigation has narrowed to big companies (15 organizations). At the same time, as regards the employees 'side, only those interviewees could get into the assessment who had already participated at any mentoring practices and estimated their practice successful (30 respondents). The interviews were made one by one with all the respondents, thus basically people could not influence each other. The answers were recorded, and later comparisons were made in excel tables. The questionnaire of both group of respondents contained similar group of questions. Therefore the questions focused mainly on 3 topics, which are summarized in the following table:

**Table 1 The structure of the questionnaire during the interviews made with organizations and employees**

Questionnaire/Respondent	Features of the sample	General description and definition of mentoring practice	The symbiosis fields and system-operation of mentoring process and corporate knowledge-management
Employees	Organizational activity  Technical knowledge, learning willingness of the interviewee  Knowledge-capital differentiating the interviewee on labour market	Determining mentoring process  Features of the mentoring process  Requirements made for the participants of the mentoring process	The existence of corporate knowledge-management  The linking points of mentoring protocol to knowledge-management  The determining role of organizational culture for mentoring processes
Employers	The employment and activity structure of the organization  Organizational knowledge base	Defining and characterizing the mentoring processes in the operation of the organization  Spontaneity and/or organizational protocol during mentoring  Advantages and disadvantages of mentoring system	The integration of mentoring system to the organizational fields, especially to knowledge-management

Own table

In the following the results of the research will be introduced along with the question-groups:

## 2 Introducing the results of the research

The motivation of this year's research was provided by the results of a previous quantitative research.

The previous research of the authors (Bencsik-Juhász-Kovács, 2014) studied the knowledge-sharing willingness of people; to what extent are they unselfish in this regard, whether it is

better to give or to get in the field of knowledge. It is not the aim of the present paper to show the results of the research in details, the authors simply intend to summarize some experiences.

The examination showed that the knowledge-sharing willingness of the participants could be evaluated as medium and basically they were not initiators in sharing tacit knowledge and did not show high willingness. While during knowledge-transfer the respondents were not characteristically interest-oriented with friends, acquaintances and with strangers, the same cannot be stated in case of formal connections and colleagues. The study also supported that the given life situation (on what field the respondents were active, whether they were students or workers or unemployed) did not significantly determine either the knowledge-sharing willingness or the expectation in exchange for that, while in case of the genders it could be justified that females were more open in knowledge-transfer and were more ,generous ‘as regards the expectations.

The in-depth interviews were carried out based on the experiences of the above research. The specification of the sample was the following:

As it was previously mentioned, from the side of the employers there were 15 organizations, which employed 250 people or more. Based on their field of activities, more areas could be distinguished, thus there were employees mainly from service industries (financial, IT sector, transportation, strategic), from agriculture, from vehicle-industrial production and from trading. There was only one company from the governmental sector; all the other companies were private enterprises.

There were 30 participants from the employees ‘side in the research and the majority of them was 30 years old or younger (27 people). 70 of the respondents had university degree and almost 50% of them were working for big companies. These employers were mainly from service industries, from IT sector, from education and from vehicle industry, etc.

The interviews made with both sides showed that all the participants considered the knowledge of human capital primarily important in the strategic operation of the organization and they agreed in its importance of competitiveness on labour market. One of the employees had the following opinion about the value of human capital:

,Our company deals with distributing vehicle-industrial appliances and it employs about 400 people in Hungary and in the surrounding countries. At present the market is full, the increasing potential is low, and the aim is to keep the positions. The basic requirements

towards our employees are university diploma and at least an intermediate language exam in English. The company has already accumulated significant knowledge in the region by getting to know the demands of the already existing and the potential circle of customers, which is a continuous work. The knowledge of our colleagues is differentiated by the fact that they are aware of the local conditions of the country where they work.’

The special knowledge especially strengthens the value of human capital. The elder colleagues on the side of the employers could define the added value mainly in the tacit knowledge coming from their experience, while the younger employees basically could feel their strengths in theoretical knowledge:

‘There is mutual work between me and my employer. At present I am better in the theoretical part as I still have the theoretical background, but my boss is smarter in the practical field. Thus together we could create really good things for our company.’

The participants of the research studiously highlighted that the market value of the knowledge can only be preserved with the continuous development of the new and the already existing human capital, and securing this development is mainly the task of the employers. This expectation was significantly strong in the interviews from the side of the employees (there is coincidence between this and the result of the research made by Bácsné (2013) about studying the labour-market situation of mothers with small children). They believed that apart from acquiring experience the developmental solution and the actualization of knowledge can be achieved by securing educational and training opportunities provided by the organizations. One of the organizations had the following opinion about the tasks of the organization as regards strengthening the knowledge value of human capital:

‘Training the fellow-workers and the leaders are of course equally important and necessary. Each organization has to keep up with the changes. The training of the employees is usually solved with different trainings and courses (language courses). We believe that continuous training is essential for certain positions. But of course there are positions which do not require additional trainings.’

The respondents viewed mentoring as an opportunity and tool to acquire new knowledge, where there is chance for individual professional development within the framework of a confidential connection between the mentor and the mentored person. This connection also provides a secure environment for the participants in order to be able to debate the professional challenges and uncertain situations with an experienced colleague. Defining the mentoring process from the side of the respondents basically showed the classical interpretation. Therefore the following definition was given for this method of knowledge-transfer from the side of the employers:

„If I need to summarize, I would say that the most important tool of training is the everyday work. It is the task of the mentored person to continuously polish his knowledge during work and consequently the task of the mentor is to help his mentored person with proper attention, and with frequent and qualitative feedback.“

Mentoring process was observed in the following way from the side of the employees:

„The substance of mentoring manifested in the field of our enterprise is to help the entrants arriving here with no professional experience and also to help the trained fellow-workers with less experience in certain fields. I think that the public opinion supports the mentoring practice as acquiring knowledge this way is quite satisfactory for everybody. Although in case of some positions I have already encountered such reactions, which refused this kind of developing possibilities – perhaps because of being proud.“

For the majority of the respondents and based on the opinion of both sides, the mentoring system is mainly realized in voluntary form, which means that it is available in flexible forms if the mentored person thinks that he needs the support of a more experienced colleague. However these mentoring programs basically do not happen spontaneously, but rather in a formal way and they are processes guided and operated along with appropriate protocol. This especially showed strong influence where mentoring of the entrants was obligatory. In these cases processes are guided and controlled by the management. One of the employers had the following opinion about mentoring experience, where mentoring was not voluntarily chosen:

„At our company, cooperation was given from the very beginning. On entering the company I was not asked whether I wanted mentoring system or not. I was given mentoring system and as it was new to me I felt rather uncomfortable in the situation, but I accepted that. After some days, the previously experienced uncomfortable feeling completely disappeared. And now, after two years, I can turn to my mentor any time I need his help without feeling any shame or being accused of not being able to work alone. So mentoring practice is always there in the background, and it only depends on the mentored person whether he needs it or not.“

Of course the fact that something is obligatory or not largely influences the success of mentoring, but the personality of the mentor and the mentored person and their connection have a significantly determining influence on the positive outcome. The respondents on both sides said that the mentor is an experienced, charismatic person, whose loyalty towards the company is quite strong while he has high intellectual and emotional intelligence.

The mentored person has an open personality, he asks and is brave enough to ask, he is aware of his weaknesses while the strong learning motivation and strong knowledge-sharing willingness characterize both personalities. Their connection is basically featured by trust, openness and communication based on common language. One of the employees described the characters of the participants in the process and the type of their connection the following way:

„Based on my own experiences, patience is really necessary with a mentored person, mainly in the first training phase. We should not let him feel that, he is not good at certain things“, in case he does not understand something we do. We should not treat him as being inferior. I always tried to hide hierarchical obstacle between us from the very beginning. The mentored person at the same time has to be flexible and adaptive. He has to be able to take in new things and to apply them later. He should not be stubborn and obstinate if support is offered to him.“

The participants of the interviews agreed that the connection between the mentor and the mentored person is basically built on learning and although the respondents did not phrased concretely, but it turns out from the mentioned examples that learning from both sides –based on mutual feedback- is realized during the process of mentoring. But at the same time the interviews revealed that the mentor shares mainly his explicit knowledge, and sharing tacit



knowledge is rather a long process and might not be an organic and effective part of the mentored person's human capital despite the long and persistent work. One of the companies defined the circle of knowledge, which cannot be shared the following way:

„We can talk about knowledge, which is hard to express in words and which is based on experiences, therefore it is different in case of each individual. This knowledge can be for example the knowledge in the business relations, which could deepen in years. Debating tactics are also body-tailored; if somebody has a very different personality it can be really hard to transfer knowledge to him.“

Independent from the fact that we are talking about explicit or tacit knowledge, it is a fact that mentoring process influences daily work. Its success can be reflected well in the individual work of the employee as well. The respondents however agreed that the mentoring process can have stimulating effect on the work of the employees, but all the participants have to know to what extent and until when mentoring help is necessary and when the employee will be completely independent during work. Finding this balance can have a cardinal effect on the positive outcome of the mentoring work.

This question of harmonization determines the length of the mentoring processes also. The respondents said that there were processes lasting for some months, while other processes lasted for years. However more respondents emphasized that the mentored people required not only the continuous keeping of the connection, but it was more important for them to know that they could count on their mentors any time:

„I cannot say exact dates; I think it changes from person to person. As far as I am concerned, the presence of the mentor was the strongest in the beginning and by now he has gone backwards a bit; he is in the background and always makes me feel that he is there and any time I can turn to him. The policy of the company can also be an influencing factor such as the fact how many mentors a company has or what personality the mentored person has. There are people who require somebody supporting them from the background in their work and telling them what to do. This means that he is not really independent. In such cases the time of the mentoring process will be longer, but it is good to know that there is always somebody in the background.“

In the last part of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to determine the position of the mentoring system and its connecting points to the operational fields of the company. From the interviews of the companies it can clearly be seen that basically they can imagine the work of a mentor at any fields (for example HR, IT, finance), which does not only bring knowledge-sharing, but may contribute to the development of a positive working environment. Although during the research there was an organization, which could imagine the differentiation possibilities and also the grounds of mentoring processes on horizontal level:

„In case of lower positions it can easily happen that there is no obligatory mentoring program, but even though there is a kind of mentoring for people getting their first position. This was useful as they could get to know the rules and regulations of the organization and it helped their integration.“

Finally, it is a fact that in case of certain organizations, where there were tasks still to develop as regards the mentoring program, the mentoring process could not be an active and inbuilt part either of the corporate culture or the knowledge-management practice. It is also true that there is no guarantee for a symbiosis between mentoring and knowledge-management in institutions where there was an already operating formal, documented knowledge-transfer process.

With regard to the employers' side, the respondents thought that mentoring could only be part of the knowledge-management system of a company if the mentor follows the company's principles during his work and he also supplements it with his own persuasion. However the mentoring process can only be and remain successful within an organization if it happens in a corporate culture, the values of which can be adapted into the mentoring practice and are in line with the requirements of mentoring work, where open communication, trust, innovation, strong knowledge-sharing willingness and democratic managing principles drive the culture. Fulfilling the above mentioned can help the mentoring process to become an active part of the company's knowledge-creating process, which was summarized the following way by an employee:

„A good mentoring work is one of the foundation stones of the company's future success. It is not enough to acquire knowledge; it has to be shared as well. And only a good mentor is able

to do that. The precisely chosen mentored person will take on the knowledge and profession, which is essential for the future operation of the company.’

## Conclusion

The study demonstrated the results of in-depth interviews made with Hungarian organizations and employees. It also summarized the main features of mentoring practice in the dimension of Hungarian practice. From the answers it can be seen that both the employers and the employees basically have the same opinion about the role of mentoring, the characters of the participants and the place of the process in the operation of the company. All these answers are in accordance with the researches published in specialized literature. (Kram, 1985, Arogundade, 2000, Harvey, McIntyre, Heames, 2009).

According to the authors the most important message of the study is that this knowledge-transfer process does not constitute an organic system with the company’s knowledge-management process due to its novelty and its not yet widespread application, even in companies where there is active knowledge-management in operation. Consequently organizations cannot really utilize the additive values of this cooperation, which could support the strategic and value-creating process of a company. Based on the interviews the development of system-like cooperation and synergies is still a task for the Hungarian companies to be solved.

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