

ARTICLE FOR WIIT NEWSLETTER

MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GET YOUR WIRES CROSSED DURING E-MENTORING

In today's frenetic world, the luxury of regular, face to face meetings can be difficult to achieve for many mentoring pairs. So it is OK to resort to telephone, email, maybe even video-conferencing? And can these media be used for the entire relationship, so that pairs who are geographically distant can still work?

The traditional view is that the intensity of the mentoring relationship, where deeply personal issues are often being explored, requires by definition a personal meeting, so that the necessary rapport can be built, using all the active listening and body language techniques that contribute towards human relationships.

However, some case studies and experience have shown that well-managed "virtual meetings" can deliver value. Factors which contribute towards supporting this type of relationship include, amongst others:

- ❖ Well matched personal preferences in communication channels - for example, some people don't express their thoughts well in writing - so for those people, it would be better to conduct telephone discussions. Other people are not comfortable on the telephone, and are well used to chatting about feelings etc on the internet.
- ❖ It is probably better to kick off the relationship with a face to face meeting if at all possible. Try to get creative about finding the opportunity to do this.
- ❖ Experienced mentors - it is advisable for new mentors to develop their skills in face to face mentoring before moving to managing a virtual relationship.
- ❖ Allowing for alternatives in case of need - for example, a relationship may be progressing quite well by email. Email is what is called an "asynchronous" channel - one person writes and sends a mail, to be replied to sooner or later (sometimes much later) by the other person. Sometimes the mentee might feel the need for more immediate reaction to his/her questions and therefore a telephone call might be required
- ❖ Explicit agreement between the parties as to how often and in what form the interactions will take place. Email can be a greedy and addictive medium - many mentors would probably find it difficult to respond to floods of mails from the mentee - especially if they contain hastily written thoughts, sometimes scappily presented. It is probably better to agree that the mentee will prepare the topic for discussion and present it in a fairly structured way up front. Then the pair need to agree how the questioning and reflection will proceed from there.

In the IT industry, it may well be more likely that e-mentoring will be successful, given that both the mentor and mentee will be proficient in the

use of the technology. However, as a word of caution, it might not be so suitable for mentoring young people fresh to the industry, who have many uncertainties and probably a lower level of confidence in themselves and their communication capabilities. The emotional support they are likely to need is not readily available from e-mentoring.