Perception of reverse mentoring by the seniors
in Moroccan organizations: An exploratory study.

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Abstract

Nowadays we are living through the biggest technological revolution in history, at all levels. This technology has been the key to the success of the organization, and allows this latter to stand out from the competition. This being said, the organization needs to seek technological competences and retain it inside the company. Taking into consideration the generational diversity existing inside the organization (old and young employees), it is worth exploring the transfer of knowledge from the junior to senior, since the youngest generations (Y and Z gens) are the best manipulators of the technology. This kind of knowledge transfer is called "The reverse mentoring", a trendy HR management tool, that has been defined according to Harvey, McIntyre, Heames, and Moeller (2009) as a valuable instrument for senior employees to learn new technical knowledge, understand new trends and approaches, to realize the generational differences and to reduce their assumptions and negative stereotypes about younger generations. Murphy (2012) states that "reverse mentoring turns traditional mentoring formula on its head". This concept can be defined as a professional development and social exchange tool which includes knowledge and experience sharing. The objective of this paper is to study the perception of reverse tutoring -as an intergenerational knowledge transfer tool- by the seniors who will be for the first time in the role of the mentee. Through this study, we will also explore the acceptance or not of this new practise by the seniors. The adopted methodology is a qualitative study.

Keywords: *Reverse tutoring, technology, intergenerational, seniors.*

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of disruptive technologies highlights the dangers of complacency and reminds the fact that even the strongest companies cannot rest on their laurels forever. The younger generations are generally more aware of technological developments and new digital tools. In an ever-changing world where the volume and speed of information is growing ever faster, new digital recruits can be a valuable resource for companies.

Recently proposed by companies such as the BBC and Microsoft, reverse mentoring allows an older employee to work with a younger one, i.e. an employee belongs to the youngest generations (Y and Z). As a consequence, reverse mentoring is started to be discussed, which turns mentoring on its head (Chandler & Kram, 2005).

The concept is simple: the junior should enable the senior employee to integrate the latest technological and cultural advances more quickly in order to facilitate the integration of different generations of employees within the company and improve competitiveness.

The implementation of this practise needs the involvement of both seniors and juniors. As the rule is reversed with reverse mentoring, it is necessary to explore the perception of this new tool by the seniors of the company. The changing situation might push the seniors to express rejection of this practise. In our research, we are aiming to study and give answers to the question : **"How do seniors perceive the implementation of reverse mentoring within the company ?"**

This problematic leads us to formulate the research questions as below :

Q1 : How do seniors evaluate the coexistence of different generations in the company ?

Q2 : How will seniors behave in a situation of reverse mentoring ?

Q3 : According to seniors, what are the hurdles and key points of reverse mentoring ?

So far, the subject of "reverse mentoring" has received limited attention in the literature. Since it is not a widespread practice, and research in this area is relatively rare, we are aiming through the first part to introduce reverse mentoring and attempt to present a definition of the concept. The second part concerns the presentation of the results of our study.

1- LITERATURE REVIEW : REVERSE MENTORING

In reverse mentoring, in opposition to the traditional one, juniors mentor the seniors (Çelik, 2011). The previous classic qualitative work by Levinson, Darrow, Klein, and McKee (1978), and Kram (1983, 1985) proposed a definition of mentoring as following : "It is a work relationship between an older, more experienced adult (mentor) and a young adult (mentee or apprentice) that enhances career development".

Kram (1985) found that mentors provided both career and psychosocial support resources important for the career success of apprentices. Subsequent studies link having a mentor and the support provided by such a developmental relationship to several positive career outcomes, including salary (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Dreher & Ash, 1990), promotions (Scandura, 1992), job satisfaction (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001), learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002), and organizational commitment (Ragins, Cotton, &Miller, 2000), among others. In addition, mentors themselves may benefit from increased visibility, learning, and a loyal base of support (Allen & Eby, 2003; Ragins &Scandura, 1999).

Reverse mentoring is a relatively recent concept, referred to Jack Welch, now retired CEO of the multinational corporation General Electric Co. (Carter, 2004; Leh, 2005). By applying reverse mentoring, Welch planned to improve General Electric's top executives' internet practices (Greengard, 2002; Murphy, 2012). He demanded that 500 top executives find themselves a mentor and learn to use the internet more effectively (Carr, 2004). Young mentors were at the age of 20's-30's; whereas apprentices were in their 40's or 60's (Biss & Duferene, 2006). Pam Wickham, Welch's mentor, describes General Electric's reverse mentoring program as an informal, fast and easy to sustain the program, in harmony with the spirit of the digital world, shaped between mentor and mentee, focused on mentee's needs. (Madigan, 2000).

This pedagogy is part of a new organization of knowledge that consists in breaking down the barriers between disciplines, working in interdisciplinarity, even in companies to circulate knowledge internally. Driven by the digitalization of business and education, new tools such as MOOCs, Twictées, and inverted pedagogy are making their way into universities and companies. We are reminded that the principle of reverse mentoring is when in a company "a young person uses his or her knowledge of technology to coach a senior colleague in his or her practices" (Baily, 2009: 112).

It brings together the older generation of Boomers and the Millennials or Generation Y, as named by Neil Howe and William Strauss. This generation, born between 1980 and 2001 is characterized by a disposition for technological tools, flexibility in work, high expectations for the future, a desire for rapid advancement, frequent feedback on performance, cumulative experience, flexible work routines and a willingness to engage with their community. Meritocracy is particularly important to them, as they believe career advancement is based on job performance and not on years of work as in the traditional model (Aslop, 2008).

Reverse mentoring is defined here as the pairing of a younger, junior employee as the mentor to share knowledge with an older, senior colleague as the apprentice or mentee. This is the opposite relationship structure from traditional mentoring relationships. Harvey,McIntyre, Heames, and Moeller (2009) suggest that reverse mentoring is an excellent tool for senior organizational members to acquire technical knowledge, learn about current trends, gain a cross-cultural global perspective, and understand younger generations. It also gives junior employees insight into the higher levels of the organization to enhance their understanding of the business (Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

While there is certainly overlap in the content of reverse mentoring with traditional mentoring, there are different strong points due to its structure and purpose.
Reverse mentoring relationships are characterized by several elements, including :
-        Unequal status of partners with the apprentice, rather than the mentor, the senior member in the hierarchy of the organization;
-        Knowledge sharing with the apprentice focused on learning from the mentor's technical or content expertise and generational perspective;
-        Emphasis on professional and leadership skill development of mentors;
-        Commitment to the shared goal of support and mutual learning.

Organizations as well as participants must be aware of these structural and content-based characteristics in order to effectively manage reverse mentoring relationships.

In the most digitalized era of history, technology is the backbone and one of the primary components in an organization. Therefore, technological literacy is considered to be the most important feature for senior employees, top executives or managers in line. However, the level of technical literacy of the leaders is a highly controversial topic (Goldsmith et al. , 2003). On the

other hand, employees belonging to younger generations and those who arise in technology are considered to be digital savvy. Therefore, young collaborators, also called "technology mentors" (Butler & Chao, 2001) who have 2-7 years of experience (Costello, 2000), mentor senior employees about the technological and digital knowledge transfer (Lehto, 2005). At the beginning of reverse mentoring apparition, the focus was mainly on the use of the Internet and e-mail (Biss & Duferene, 2006). However, later, enhancing cooperation and productivity online and trying to improve structures and processes were set as real objectives of these practices (Harvey et al. , 2009, Brennan, 2003). Similarly, more than emails or Internet use, reverse mentoring should focus more on social networks, digital tools, impact of technological development in organizations.

2- METHODOLOGY

In accordance with the purpose of our study, which is to explore how the reverse mentoring is perceived by the seniors, a qualitative research method is followed. One of the essential requirements of the reverse mentoring concept is that the two parts (mentors and mentees) need to be convinced and aware of its importance. Especially for the seniors that may express some socio-cultural hurdles and affect the trust between the participating parties. To analyze this perception, it has been concluded that adopting a qualitative research procedure is fitting for this particular phenomenon. Opposing quantitative methods, qualitative ones provide in-depth knowledge and understanding. By using qualitative research methods, it is possible to analyze organizational processes and particularly to examine the relationships between structures and behaviors (Bradley et al., 2007; Myers, 2013; Patton, 1987).

Among the qualitative research methods, the semi-structured interview method is preferred. It allows a free exchange with the interviewed, while the main thread of the research. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to explore also some new avenues that have not been taken into consideration while drawing the interview guide.

The individual interview, more than any other method, makes it possible to grasp, through the interaction between a researcher and a subject, the point of view of individuals, their understanding of a particular experience, their vision of the world, with a view to making them explicit, to understand them in depth or to learn more about a given object. As the word is given to the individual, the interview proves to be a privileged instrument to bring to light his representation of the world.

The semi-directed interviews have been conducted with 13 senior employees (45 years old and more). The interviewees held different positions* and belonged to companies in different sectors**.

*CEO, Purchasing and Supply chain Managers, Communication and Marketing Director, Chief Operating Officer, Human Resource Director, Human Resource Business partner, Recruitment Manager, Project Manager Officer, Information Systems director, Financial Executive, Subject Matter Expert, Facilities Managers

** Call centers, Insurance, Large scale distribution, Digital agency, Audit firm, Bank

The interviews lasted for 45-50 min. Some of them were conducted directly and other via digital communication tools (Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp Video and Google Meet)

3- FINDINGS

3.1 Co-existence Junior & Senior :

All the respondents agreed on the fact that there is absolutely no problem in co-existing with the juniors in the workplace. "*When I am at work, I delete the "age setting" and behave in the same way with all the employees, young or old"*. Seniors believe that the employees belonging to young generations always have new visions and perceptions, and a fruitful contribution to the company, especially with their mastering of technological and digital tools, that allow them to sometimes solve problems easier and quicker than senior employees.

When asked about the perception of young employees, the seniors answered as following :

- Soft Skills : The Gen Y employees are very talented in the digital field, but they still have a lack of soft skills. "I believe that they need to be managed. By dint of wanting to show their strength in technological tools, they end up derailing". The young employees need tutoring in some soft skills such as *the ability to communicate* with different types of people; "they are so connected on their social media that they look like they forgot how to communicate with people in real life - *laughter*".

- Mastering technology : Senior employees approve that the Gen Y employees are always looking for the simplest, fastest and most effective way to solve problems, to manage a project or simply in their daily work life. They are so efficient thanks to their technological and digital savviness. They are not called "digital native" for nothing. *"These young*

employees really surprise me everytime, with a new solution in Excel, or a new working tool".

- Personality : *"They are the opposite of what we -seniors- are"*. In fact, young employees want to evolve quickly in their career, to stand out, to prove their existence, their difference. However, there are plenty of positive sides in the young employees : they are very collaborative, like to help each other and bring all their knowledge to offer assistance. Indeed, teamwork is their strength ; they face no problem in that type of work organization and practise it effectively.

Respondents also agreed that the presence of young employees within the company refreshes the ambiance, the work style and allows seniors to discover the world of millenials.

3.2 Acceptance of reverse mentoring

In the second section respondents were first asked to talk about their previous experiences in situations of reverse mentoring. While introducing this section, most of interviewees were not familiar with the term "Reverse Mentoring". But once deeply explained, they realized that they all have been in a reverse knowledge transfer situation.

Purchasing and Supply Chain Manager : *"I frequently practise it ! I ask young employees of my team or of other departments to help me find a quick solution to a blockage, especially in technology".*

Chief Operating Officer : *"I recently asked a Gen Y employee to train me in Excel. I noticed that she was mastering it in a brilliant way so I didn't hesitate to ask her and she accepted with joy. I know am more strong on the tool and it simplify a lot of thing "*

The result after experiencing these situations was so fruitful. The senior learns and the junior learns. It allows an intergenerational exchange that strengthens the relationships between the different generations within the company, and breaks the existing stereotypes of each generation. But more than that, refresh the old employees in the company and make them more productive in a digital way.

"Older doesn't always mean wiser"

The senior respondents expressed a high level of acceptance for this new practise and were so interested in the reverse mentoring program as a practise that will have a lot of implications on both professional and personal side :

- Professional benefits : Seniors believe that through reverse mentoring they will be able to learn new technological knowledge that will fluidify their work. It is also a means to keep open to the digital world with all this new and trends. It is clear that today we are tending toward the digitalization of all the processes. So, such knowledge is pretty precious with the company.

- Personal benefits : The practise will widen the scope of the acquaintances, for both seniors and juniors. Also it will allow a certain sympathy between the two generations. Our seniors stated that being initiated in the digital world will make them feel young, fresh and connected.

3.3 Seniors preferences

Despite the acceptance of the reverse mentoring new practise, seniors mentioned that there must be some conditions, especially regarding the profiles of the young employees that will be the mentors. These young employees **must** really master technology. Not every young employee is digital savvy. *"Of course no need to mention to keep the mutual respect between the two parts".* Also, mentors and mentees need to be in accordance regarding the priority topics to be covered.

"The idea is very brilliant, and it has benefits for the employees and the organization. However, it would be better if the program was not too formal". Indeed, most of the respondents mentioned that the place where to meet, the time, the frequency and the duration of the meeting must be free to determine between the mentors and the mentee. The more casual the ambiance it is, the easier the knowledge transfer will be. *"It can be after work, during breaks or before starting work. The most important thing is that we maintain doing it".*

3.4 Hurdles

Young mentors might express a lack of confidence in front of the seniors. The rule says that the older are the ones who always have something to teach. In a reverse situation, it might be difficult for the youngest mentor to admit that they will be the ones to transfer knowledge. That's why they have to be aware and realize that, through their important areas of expertise, they really could benefit older mentees.

Another type of hurdle exists, which is the psychological obstacle. Actually, there might be some seniors who will refuse categorically to be mentored by a younger person or to whom the culture is against this kind of practise.

Other respondents express the potential existence of a communication problem that may dampen the knowledge transfer process.

4- DISCUSSION

The main aim of this paper was to study the perception of reverse mentoring by the seniors of the company and to explore the acceptance or not of this new HR practice by these seniors. The results of our study show indeed that the seniors approve of reverse mentoring. Some of them have been practising it randomly without being aware of it, others were not familiar with the concept but as long as the conversation was going on, detected its importance to both the mentors and the mentees, but also to the organization.

It is true that the implementation of such a process requests a lot of preparation and support, but its success is conditioned by the acceptance and implication of the two parts : mentors (young employees) and mentees (seniors). After conducting the interviews with each of the 13 senior employees, we understood that the implementation of this program must be customized according to the preferences and needs of each group of seniors in the company. As explained above, seniors have drawn some conditions to be found in the mentors and in the program in general.

Although the concept has been accepted by the seniors of our sample, because of its novelty in the world of Human Resource Management, the reverse mentoring will certainly confront obstacles. As mentioned above cultural and generational hurdles must be taken into consideration to not block the process.

Despite the limited studied sample that represents a limit of this research, we have been able to clarify the perception of the reverse mentoring by the seniors, how much it is accepted and what they think about the intergenerational diversity in the company. One of the limitations of the research is that reverse mentoring is not common in Moroccan companies. Furthermore, the data were collected from organizations operating in Morocco and they refer to one cultural circle. Another limitation is closely connected with the nature of qualitative research, as the research findings may be influenced by the personal perspective of participants.

CONCLUSION

In some cultures, younger people are considered to have greater wise reasoning skills, which include understanding the limits of one's knowledge and intellectual humility, the ability to take another's perspective, and finding a higher purpose.

When we think about mentoring, many people envision the old, wise sage passing on hard-won lessons to a younger, less experienced generation. Though, reverse mentoring is a new management principle that reinforces the culture of sharing, facilitates the transmission of knowledge and thus increases performance and efficiency. In concrete terms, the practice consists of asking the company's young employees to train the seniors and help them learn the codes and uses of new technologies.

The reverse mentoring is nowadays a practice that is very important because if the seniors are more experienced and have a technical know-how to transfer to young collaborators, these ones also have their say, especially in digital and new technologies. Moreover, the skills that young employees can easily share with seniors through reverse mentoring will save the company money on training, e-learning and external coaching.

In the digital age, reverse mentoring tends to become important, even essential to facilitate the learning of new technologies by seniors. That is why organizations must seriously consider the project of the implementation of this new tool.

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