

REVERSE MENTORING – WHEN GENERATION Y BECOMES THE TRAINER WITHIN A MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

Victoria-Mihaela BRÎNZEĂ

Faculty of Economics and Law, University of Pitesti, Romania, mihaelabranzea@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Nowadays, the aging of the workforce is an obvious phenomenon, and, at the workplace, the Baby Boomers and the Y generation will have to work together. So, the professionals in the human resources domain are forced to find ways to homogenize, to retain and to keep active the members of these generations. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the literature in the field of reverse mentoring as well as to identify best practices implemented by different successful companies. To achieve this aim, the secondary study was conducted in two directions: (1) an analyze of the reverse mentoring as a mean of transferring knowledge; (2) a presentation of a generational profile. The premise behind this study is that, given the aging of the labor force and the major developments in technology, a viable solution would be to facilitate the transfer of experience and knowledge between different generations of employees. In this study, reverse mentoring is considered as a tool that facilitates the transfer and diffusion of knowledge at the organization level.*

Keywords: Millennials, Reverse mentoring, Knowledge, Multi-generational workforce.

JEL Classification Codes: J24.

1. INTRODUCTION

Demographic data demonstrates that traditional hierarchy at the workplace is going through major transformations, as Generation Y is going to hold in the future a major percentage in the working-age population. New developments in the field of technology and this flow of young workers, who clearly favor digital communication, has put the companies of our days and human resources in the face of a new reality, where it is not unusual for young employees in junior positions to have a better understanding of technology than their superiors, thus enhancing the need for reverse mentoring. In this context, more and more companies resort to reverse mentoring, asking young employees, connoisseurs of technology, to share this knowledge with older employees. Thus, executives become aware of the fact that reverse mentoring is no longer just a whim, but it emerges into a new mode of operation (Satov, 2015), an innovative way of encouraging learning and facilitating the relationships between generations, which can provide significant benefits to any business, being able to help both to disseminate technical knowledge, and to “rejuvenate” senior executives’ perspective (Greengard, 2002).

2. A MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE – WHO ARE THE ACTORS?

For the first time in history, four distinct generations working shoulder to shoulder in a competitive workplace (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002) are distinguished, and even if these four groups share certain traditional values with regard to the mode of operation, each one brings



This is an open-access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

different features to the workplace (Sajjadi et al., 2012). These four generations, found in current working environments, have been classified differently by different researchers (figure 1).

Howe and Strauss (2000)	Lancaster and Stillman (2002)	Martin and Tulgan (2002)	Oblinger and Oblinger (2005)	Zemke et al. (2000)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent Generation (1925–1943) • Boom Generation (1943–1960) • 13th Generation (1961–1981) • Millennial Generation (1982–2000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditionalists (1900–1945) • Baby Boomers (1946–1964) • Generation Xers (1965–1980) • Millennial Generation; Echo Boomer; Generation Y; Baby Busters; Generation Next (1981–1999) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent Generation (1925–1942) • Baby Boomers (1946–1960) • Generation X (1965–1977) • Millennials (1978–2000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matures (<1946) • Baby Boomers (1947–1964) • Gen-Xers (1965–1980) • Gen-Y; NetGen; Millennials (1981–1995) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans (1922–1943) • Baby Boomers (1943–1960) • Gen-Xers (1960–1980) • Nexters (1980–1999)

Figure 1. The actors of the multi-generational workforce in the modern society

Source: Reeves T.C., Oh E., “*Generational Differences*”, p. 296. Retrived from http://www.aect.org/edtech/edition3/ER5849x_C025.fm.pdf.

In so far as every day thousands of Millennials turn 21, while thousands of Baby Boomers retire every day, it can be noted that this generation is catching up fast and is starting to replace the Baby-Boomers generation in the field of work, Y Generation (Millennials) representatives being seen as tomorrow’s leaders. In this context, companies are faced with major challenges, among which there is the effective transfer of valuable knowledge to a younger generation.

The three generations in the workforce have a series of learning characteristics (figure 2).

Rasmus D.W. (2007) says that more and more employees are being required to learn how to use computers, software, communication and co-operation technologies and tools, as well as the practices associated to their use, irrespective whether such skills are intrinsically related or not to their current occupation, and for certain generations, this overlap of technology and practices relating to technology has reconfigured workers’ expectations and perceptions towards work, many times making it seem more demanding and stressful.

Having regard to all these matters and taking account of the fact that Generation Y’s values are the ones to influence the business world over the next period, these young people emerge as the best candidates to teach managers about the latest IT developments, at the same time being the leading actors to lay the foundation of business strategies and to maximize the companies’ potential in the digital world of the future.

BABY BOOMERS	GENERATION X	MILLENNIALS (GENERATION Y)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are taught to be dependent on the teacher; • They want to do it themselves for their own education; • They want a protective environment; • They respond to positive feedback, wanting to fulfill well the duties; • They correlates the learning with the mission, wanting to stay connected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are self-oriented learners, working in teams; • They are not experts in technology, having to develop skills in this field; • They want clear information with practical value; • They use humor, games and activities being an appropriate approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have always experienced the digital media and internet access; • They use mobile devices to access and process information; • They learn and develop by working in a team or group, considering interaction, networking and participation in projects; • They are always "ON", with the connectivity blurring the work and learning time; • They want real working environments similar to those existing in organizations; • They are active learners who seek innovation; • They are multi-tasking; • They like to learn from a Baby Boomer and they even seek mentors that belong to this generation; • They are characterized by the thirst for knowledge, preferring to engage in projects in projects from which to learn, the results and the action itself being more important than knowledge acquired through mechanical learning; • They prefer to develop their soft and hard skills at work, practicing and focusing on lifelong learning.

Figure 2. Learning characteristics of the generations that constitute the current workforce

Source: Arellano K. (2015). “*The Generational Shift in the Workplace: Are WE Ready?*”, 2015. Retrived from <http://integralleadershipreview.com/12937-47-the-generational-shift-in-the-workplace-are-we-ready/>, and Pascaru M. (2014), “*Generatia Y la locul de munca*”. Retrived from <http://blog.ucmsgroup.ro/generatia-y-la-locul-de-munca/>.

3. REVERSE MENTORING – WHEN GENERATION Y BECAME THE TRAINER

The concept of reverse mentoring was officially introduced in 1999 by Jack Welch, the former General Electric Chief Executive Officer who, recognizing the knowledge differences between hierarchical levels, especially in the field of the Internet and current technologies, encouraged about 500 company managers to become students of those in the lower hierarchy, thus enabling mentees to gain new skills, and giving mentors the opportunity to interact to upper level managers (Dunham and Ross, 2016). Thus, reverse mentoring emerges into a type of inverted mentoring relationship whereby new junior employees are paired with more experienced employees or executives to help the more experienced worker acquire new skills, the mentor usually being younger than the mentee. (Chaudhuri and Rajashi, 2012). Reverse mentoring is, on the one side an excellent tool for senior members of an organization, whereby they acquire technical knowledge, learn about current trends and better understand younger generations, and on the other side, it lays a particular accent on junior members’ leadership development, giving them a perspective of the organization’s superior levels, with a view to enhancing business understanding (Marcinkus, 2012).

Reverse mentoring is an innovative way proposing companies to give the floor to young people in Generation Y, placing them at the company’s core, starting from the argument that it isn’t just the older people’s attribute to train the younger ones. Thus, the possibility arises to better disseminate knowledge for the purposes of developing company’s digital skills, whereas, on the one hand young people brings a digital perspective, considerably broadening the field of possibilities, and on the other hand, whether it is about operational or strategic issues,

comparison of all employees ‘opinion will cause future models to develop (Dubout, 2015). Reverse mentoring is made up of a series of features, summarized in figure 3.

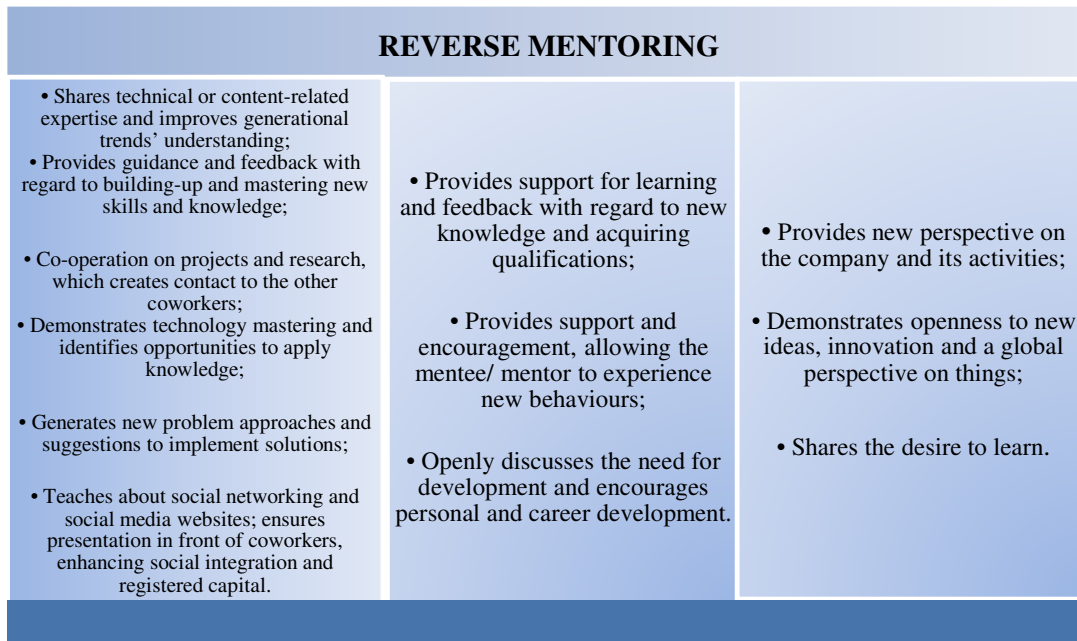


Figure 3. Characteristics of the reverse mentoring

Source: Marcinkus M.W. (2012). “Reverse Mentoring at Work: Fostering Crossgenerational Learning and Developing Millennial Leaders”, Human Resource Management, July–August 2012, Vol. 51, No. 4., p.556

In conclusion, reverse mentoring secures the exploitation of knowledge from both parties involved, facilitates emergence of new leaders and confirms achieving of skills, brings different generations closer together and creates social cohesion.

4. REVERSE MENTORING – A FEW EXAMPLES

The following are among the companies to resort to reverse mentoring technique: General Motors, Unilever, Deloitte & Touche, Procter & Gamble. The reverse mentoring programme called "Mentoring Up" of the company Procter & Gamble, which consisted of pairing older male employees, as mentees, to be trained by their younger female juniors, was created to increase communication between female lower level managers and male upper level executives with a view to determining the reason why female managers were leaving the company, in order to increase the awareness level with regard to the work-related issues affecting women and reduce the number of future resignations in women.(Zielinski, 2000) Another reverse mentoring programme of the P & G Company was created to give senior executives newer perspectives and better understanding of the company’s culture in the field of biotechnology. For that purpose, in the desire to better understand the impact of science and toxicology on operational decisions, Chief Information Officer Steve David was paired up with a scientist, company employee, meeting his mentor regularly to discuss topics, such as DNA structure or complex biotechnology issues. (Greengard, 2002) Internationally, AMP-Pearl has implemented a reverse mentoring programme, by pairing 12 young employees with deputy managers, helping executives understand the changes caused by technology in the business environment. As a consequence, the company has known a positive change in corporate culture.

IBM practices reverse mentoring by pairing freshly employed young people with experienced employees between 2 technicians or 2 merchandisers. IBM managers consult the

training modules available online which initiate them into the characteristics of generators, non-discrimination based on age, the company wishing to completely restart issues, work in dedicated work groups to lead to the new “transgenic” managerial methods (Clairmont, 2014).

According to IBM, a reverse mentoring programme would be carried out going over a series of stages, as per figure no 4.

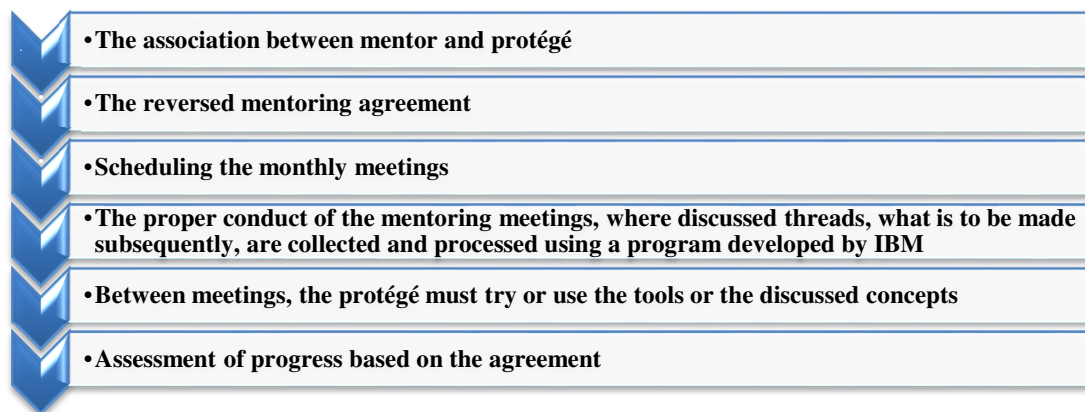


Figure 4. Steps in a reverse mentoring programme at IBM

Source: Carlsson C. (2010). “*Reverse Mentoring for Business Leaders and Executives*”, IBM and Reverse Mentoring, presentation for Odense Kommun, May 10th

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work was to present the concept of reverse mentoring, providing an analysis of the term, its history, features and possible benefits presented by the literature in the field, as well as a few examples of reverse mentoring practices of large companies.

As the papers suggests, in nowadays, the organizations face a new challenge, due to a multi-generational environment. In this context, in order to fill the gap between multi-generational relationships and organizational success, the reverse mentoring emerges like a valuable tool to stimulate learning and bring new challenges.

As we can see in the examples of best practices presented, the reverse mentoring favors a culture in which any employee can become a student, as knowledge and experience are no longer measured into years and everybody can contribute by valuable observations, irrespective of age and status within the organization. As Holliday (2016) states, by removing barriers between generations, reverse mentoring allows executives to get a clearer picture of the staff’s junior members and to discover new talents, and it gives the junior staff the chance to get familiar with what is happening in corporate life and to prepare for a senior executive role, these interactions giving it visibility and the possibility to advance fast in their careers.

Also, considering that the new generations are seen as tech-generations, we can consider that the reverse mentoring is a viable modality to use company resources in order to support adaptation of senior colleagues to the new technologies.

REFERENCES

1. Arellano, K., The Generational Shift in the Workplace: Are WE Ready?, 2015. Retrived from <http://integralleadershipreview.com/12937-47-the-generational-shift-in-the-workplace-are-we-ready/>
2. Bolser, K., Gosciej, R., Millennials: Multi-Generational Leaders Staying Connected, Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 5 Iss. 2, Winter 2015, 2015. Retrived from <http://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/jpc/vol5iss2/BolserGosciej.pdf>.

3. Carlsson, C., Reverse Mentoring for Business Leaders and Executives, IBM and Reverse Mentoring, presentation for Odense Kommun, May 10th., 2010.
4. Chaudhuri, S., Rajashi, G., Reverse Mentoring: A Social Exchange Tool for Keeping the Boomers Engaged and Millennials Committed, Human Resource Development Review 2012, 11: 55, 2012. Retrived from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rajashi_Ghosh/publication/239772131_Reverse_Mentoring_A_Social_Exchange_Tool_for_Keeping_the_Boomers_Engaged_and_Millennials_Committed/links/5437dba0cf2590375c55d3a.pdf
5. Clairmont, L., Comment reussir un mentorat inversé, 2014. Retrived from <http://www.cadre-dirigeant-magazine.com/news/comment-reussir-mentorat-inverse/>.
6. DeAngelis, K.L., Reverse mentoring at the Hartford: Cross-Generational Transfer of Knowledge About Social Media, 2013. Retrived from http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/agingandwork/pdf/publications/hartford.pdf.
7. Dubout, N., Le monde du travail se réinvente, êtes-vous prêts pour votre mutation professionnelle?, 2015. Retrived from <http://www.birdsconseil.com/gestion-changement/le-monde-du-travail-se-reinvente-etes-vous-prets-pour-votre-mutation-professionnelle/#sthash.uH0CmPV8.dpuf>.
8. Dunham, A., Ross, What Can Reverse Mentoring Relationships Contribute to Communities of Practice involving Developed and Rising Economies?, in Buckley S., Organizational Knowledge Facilitation through Communities of Practice in Emerging Markets, IGI Global, 2016.
9. Greengard, S., Moving forward with reverse mentoring, Workforce, 83(3), 15, 2002. Retrived from <http://www.portailrh.org/impression/default.aspx?f=6244>.
10. Holliday, R., Cultivating present and future leaders with reverse mentoring, 2016. Retrived from <https://www.morganmckinley.com/reverse-mentoring-cultivate-present-future-leaders>.
11. Lancaster, L. C., Stillman, D., When generations collide: Who they are. Why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work, New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2002.
12. Marcinkus, M.W., Reverse Mentoring at Work: Fostering Crossgenerational Learning and Developing Millennial Leaders, Human Resource Management, July–August 2012, Vol. 51, No. 4. pp. 549–574, 2012.
13. Pascaru, M., Generatia Y la locul de munca, 2014. Retrived from <http://blog.ucmsgroup.ro/generatia-y-la-locul-de-munca/>.
14. Rasmus, D.W., A People-Ready Business Whitepaper: Evolution of the Workforce. The New World of Work, Microsoft Corporation, 2007.
15. Reeves, T.C., Oh E., Generational Differences. Retrived from http://www.aect.org/edtech/edition3/ER5849x_C025.fm.pdf.
16. Steimle, J., Reverse mentoring – Investing in Tomorrow’s Business Strategy, 2015. Retrived from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshsteimle/2015/05/05/reverse-mentoring-investing-in-tomorrows-business-strategy/#14054d7a666d>
17. Sajjadi, A., Cen S.B., Lkesson Castillo, L.C.F., Generational Differences in Work Attitudes. A comparative analysis of Generation Y and preceding generations from companies in Sweden, Jönköping University, 2012.
18. Satov, T., Le mentorat inversé, 2015. Retrived from <https://www.cpacanada.ca/fr/connexion-et-nouvelles/cpa-magazine/articles/2015/aout/le-mentorat-inverse>.
19. Zielinski, D., Mentoring up, Training, 37(10), 2000.