



Mentoring and Working Women (Summary)

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Mentoring as a measure for gender empowerment in the workforce

Recently, mentoring has been drawing a great deal of attention as a measure for women's career development and promotion to management positions. Mentoring is continuous long-term support by experienced and knowledgeable mentors to less experienced mentees with the objective of career and psychosocial development.

Mentoring was a much discussed subject in the United States in the 1970s, when many companies implemented mentoring systems. In Japan, we have been familiar with the term for about 20 years. Traditionally, Japanese companies have valued on-the-job training (OJT) systems in which superiors and senior staff instruct their junior colleagues. Supervisors and co-workers tacitly play the role of mentor. Today, however, the expanding implementation of merit-based evaluations and diversified employment systems, creating greater pressure on every employee's individual performance, has attenuated this supportive relationship in the workplace, leading to new challenges in human resource development. As a consequence, career-supporting mentoring systems have regained attention.

One of the objectives of the mentoring system is the promotion of women in the workforce. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has been promoting the introduction of mentoring systems in organizations as a measure for advancing gender equality.

Studies in Western societies

How does mentoring affect working women? According to Catalyst, an American NPO who aims to expand opportunities for women and businesses, mentoring is an effective way for women in senior management positions to break through the glass ceiling. It reports that having a mentor is extremely important for women's promotions and career development. Another study from Australia shows that workers receiving greater support from mentors tend to be more satisfied with their workplaces and careers and are more optimistic about their future. Having a mentor is helpful in understanding job requirements, accessing social networks in the workplace, and taking on more challenging assignments. Mentoring is also known to have a positive impact on organizations, bringing workers closer together and cultivating friendlier cultures in which senior staff are more inclined to advise juniors and assist in their development.

Findings from the author's research

While there have been studies of mentoring for Japanese working women in the health services sector, not many have appeared in other corporate sectors. Therefore, the author conducted a survey of male and female corporate workers in 2012.

Those surveyed were permanent employees of 16 companies in different sectors (most of which are large companies with over 1,000 employees). Of the 1,178 participants, 480 (40.7%) were men and 698 (59.3%) were women, mostly in their thirties and forties. 51% of the men and 43% of the women were in management positions. 80% of the men and 50% of the women were married, suggesting that it is still more difficult for women to pursue their career path while balancing professional and family lives.

30.2% of the men and 48.1% of the women had mentors. This significant difference leads to the assumption that women may be more proactively seeking mentors today, when their importance is being reaffirmed.

How does a mentor affect a worker's life? To answer this question, we studied how job satisfaction, mental health, and conflict between work and other aspects of life could differ between those with and without a mentor. The result was that irrespective of gender, workers with mentors had significantly greater job satisfaction, enjoyed better mental health, and maintained a happier balance between their work and personal lives.

Shown below are positive remarks on mentoring made by female participants.

- A role model who I can talk to
- An opportunity to review my career path
- Someone who helps me regain confidence in making the best decisions for myself
- Important in maintaining my motivation, which is a key to my professional success
- Beneficial not only for our personal lives but also for solving social challenges such as low birth rates
- I need a mentor figure who understands my overall situation, including my family life.

The survey revealed that mentoring covers a diverse range from promotion and transfer to career development, daily task planning, communication, work relationships, and balance between work and personal lives. Some commented that mentor's views different from their own helped them to expand their horizons and attain personal growth in addition to enhancing their motivation, so that working women are in fact gaining guidance in various aspects of life.

On the other hand, mentoring does have negative aspects: some mentees become overly dependent on their mentors, and some mentors try to force their work styles and attitudes upon their mentees. We also need to be aware that cross-sex mentoring exposes participants both to the risk of inappropriate interpersonal conduct and to unwarranted charges of the same by uninformed bystanders. It is important to promote a thorough individual and organizational understanding of mentoring in order to realize its maximum potential.

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Dr. Sakakibara's research focus is stress and health for workers, career development for working women, return to the labour market for housewives, and career support for students.

Ms. Sakakibara began her career at Sanwa Bank (now Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ) in financing and marketing. While pursuing her professional career at Jomon Associates (executive recruitment) and Fleishman-Hillard Japan (global communications consulting) she shifted her attention to creating a healthy workplace where employees are motivated to develop their careers and contribute to the profit of the organization.

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