Knowledge Transfer through Diversity Coach and Mentoring Partnerships

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Abstract. Organisations recognise today that it is often difficult to recruit and retain personal with the necessary knowledge and to solve efficiently skill shortage i.e. by employment people with special needs. Mentoring and coaching particularly on the job under consideration of the diversity can be organised to address these aspects.

This article focuses on different aspects of knowledge transfer (KT), coaching and monitoring. The paper gives first a very brief introduction on diversity coaching (DC) and on formal and informal mentoring involving transfer of knowledge from more-to-less-experienced individuals; competences of a mentor in context of personal and professional requirements are also presented. A web-based community service approach by using social media is outlined, which supports KT through mentoring in Communities of Practice (CoPs). They are networks of individuals who share a domain of interest and knowledge about which they communicate (online in the case of Virtual Communities of Practice – VCoPs). In the last parts of the paper examples from two projects are given. The project IBB 2 (http://www.lebenshilfe-guv.at/unsere_dienste/eu_projekte/ibb_2_integrative_behindertenbetreuung) is a European Leonardo innovation transfer project aimed to support people with disabilities to entry and to be successfully integrated into professional life through DC and the mentoring approach. One of the aims of the project Net Knowing 2.0 (http://www.netknowing.com/) is to help SMEs to turn their daily work into a source of corporate learning for all their employees and to support KT by efficient using of informal learning and introducing a mentoring approach.

1 Introduction

Mentoring and coaching are human resources development processes often used to induct, introduce and guide staff into places of employment. Mentoring is considered as an old form of knowledge transfer [5], [20] [23].

Interest in mentoring has varied over time and has been affected by economic and social factors.

Now, also in connection to the economic recession, complex client requirements, rapid development of new technologies, skill shortage in some sectors, more knowledge is necessary as well as flexibility of companies referring to a fast familiarisation with new working environments and technologies.

"The only thing that gives competitive advantages to an organization is what it knows, how it uses that knowledge and how fast it can learn something new" [1]".

That means organizations should develop a strategy of learning, knowledge transfer (KT) [12] and use of it integrated in their work and business environments giving support "just in time" and competitive advantages.

One problem in this context is that if the organisations invest more in KT they risk increasing the job mobility of their employees, as they gain more competencies. So, it is necessary that organisations develop approaches which promote the KT [3], [17], [18] and also support retention of the staff [22] as well as integration of people with special needs into work. But they recognise that it is often difficult to recruit and retain personal with the necessary knowledge to solve also skill shortage problems and to employ people with special needs.

Mentoring and coaching on the job under consideration of diversity can be organised to address these aspects [21]. Many organisations establish mentorships for staff then new ones are hired or as a part of leadership development. Often individuals seek mentors to help them in their career.

Some authors use the terms mentoring and coaching as a single concept. In this paper we regard them as different forms to support training particularly on-the-job and combined mentoring and coaching   as a social KT approach.

Mentoring is commonly used to describe a KT and learning process in which an existing member of staff guides newcomers or less-experienced people in a task to develop professional skills, attitudes and competencies.

Coaching is rather aimed at giving guidance to individuals or groups on the development of specific skills that are needed to be applied in a specific job environment.

Mentoring is a complex process involving not just guidance and suggestion, but also the development of autonomous skills, judgments, personal and professional master ship, expertise, trust and the development of self-confidence over the time [5]. Mentoring can be established for a number of reasons [14], [15]. The nature of mentoring is "friendly", "collegially". Mentoring also has to operate within professional and ethical frameworks. If it is possible it should remain voluntary and subject to mutual agreement. Mentoring is not just about solving problems. However, problems often underline a decision to seek mentoring.

On the job (or workplace) mentoring [16], [20] is the main topic of this paper. This mentoring is a learning partnership between employees for sharing information, transfer of individual and institutional knowledge and insight to a particular occupation, profession, and organisation. It includes the accompanying career advancement and natural support for a selected employee (mentee) i.e. through an experienced colleague (mentor), in order to achieve some present goals of mutual benefit for the mentors, mentees and organisation.

This kind of mentoring as a combination of a guided KT and informal learning process is a powerful experience, but the problem is that it is often only accessible to a few numbers of employees and its benefits are limited only to those few who fulfil the conditions to participate. Later we will present also formal or structured

mentoring which takes mentoring to a next level and expands its advantages and corporate value beyond the mentor-mentee relation.

The mentors consider the mentees' resources and transfer their own workplace related knowledge and experience to the mentees in order to support them continuously in their professional environment and development. This mutual harmonisation also includes aspects of thought, social integration in the organisation and optimal professional resources utilisation of the mentees and their workplace fellows.

This article focuses on different aspects of knowledge transfer, of coaching and mentoring. First, a very brief introduction on DC and on formal and informal mentoring involving transfer of knowledge [4] from a more-to-less-experienced individual is given; competences of a mentor in light of personal and professional requirements are presented. A web-based community service approach by using social media is outlined which supports KT through mentoring in Communities of Practice (CoPs) [10], [25]. They are networks of individuals who share a domain of interest and knowledge about which they communicate (online in the case of Virtual Communities of Practice – VCoPs [2], [14]).

In the last part of the paper examples from two projects are given. The project IBB 2 (http://www.lebenshilfe-guv.at/unsere_dienste/eu_projekte/ibb_2_integrative_behindertenbetreuung) is a European Leonardo innovation transfer project aimed to support people with disabilities to entry and to be successfully integrated into professional life through DC and the mentoring approach. One of the aims of the project Net Knowing 2.0 (http://www.netknowing.com/) is to help SMEs to turn their daily work into a source of corporate learning for all their employees and to support KT by efficient use of informal learning and introducing a mentoring approach.

2   Diversity Coach and Mentoring

The diversity concept originally was developed in America in the context of the civil right movement emerging from Martin Luther King, but was soon broadly adopted by all kinds of bodies, initiatives and enterprise. Today no major company or other initiative should deal without solid Diversity Management in the employment sector.

Utilisation of diversity in the context of mentoring context – as a resource – greatly depends on well-interacting coaches for this topic (called Diversity Coaches, DC). The DC [27] has to identify the variety of relevant external and internal features, processes and upcoming developments influencing the performance of the enterprise and its staff and overall satisfaction. Moreover, in this context 'diversity' does not only refer to disabled people. Diversity is meant to include all kind of personal traits, characteristics, looks, etc. that can be distinctive between people. That means the DC could be responsible for people within the company that have a certain age (very young or very old), foreign people how are about to integrate into society or people with disabilities.

Within the context of our on-going projects, DC should train mentors and have to define an appropriate functional matrix to enable mentors in their dealings with

citizens and individuals or groups of people in special need for support. This functional shaping demand must include various occupations or other outer demands in understandable, acceptable and meaningful terms. It must be in balance with the outer and inner individual settings of the mentor, the mentee, the colleagues at work, the employer and the organisation as a whole.

Mentoring has been used in Europe for a long time. Mentor was the man Odysseus entrusted his kingdom to when he went to the Trojan wars. In classical Greece, young men often lived with more experienced elders to learn not simply knowledge but, in addition, skills and attitudes. Mentoring relationship was also evident in the guilds of medieval Europe and the forms of apprenticeship that evolved from them.

Little research has explicitly explained mentoring as a means by which knowledge is transferred among individuals [6]. Some researchers started to examine the connections between mentoring and knowledge transfer.

In the IBB2 project we use the approach of mentoring on the job where the mentors, which are trained by DC, are companies' employees (see part 3 of the paper).

The advantages are obvious. The companies' employees know the work processes, which knowledge is needed for their efficiency and which the companies' knowledge resources are. They are used to the working environment and can estimate the hazards and situations which could be challenges to mentees or their fellows at the workplace. A further advantage is the development of a situation of mutual trust between the colleagues, which later is the basis in the daily work. In that way, the mentor acts in a twofold role being colleague on the one hand, and being mentor, on the other hand. Such a procedure ensures a smooth transition of the person from mentee to employee and an effective transfer of tacit knowledge acquired primarily through experience, not being easily expressed in words and numbers.
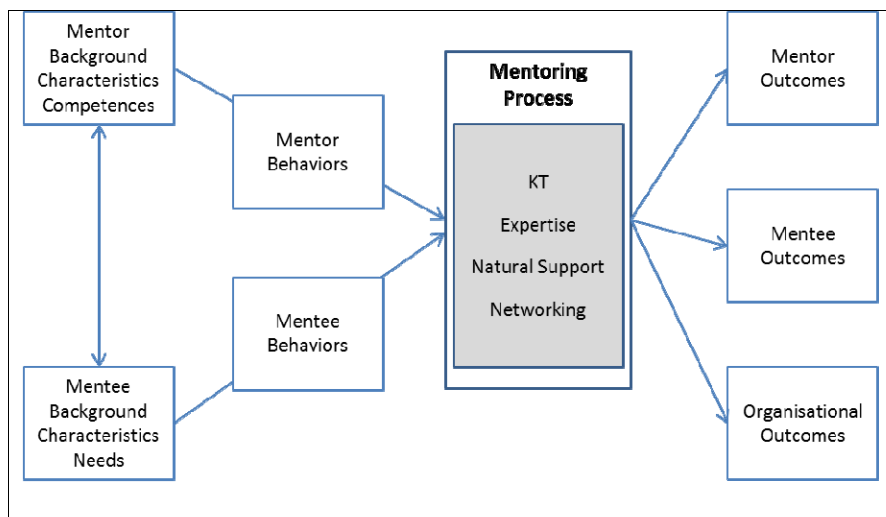

Fig. 1 An efficient mentoring process, Source: Giancola [7], IAT

The mentor on the job acts in the companies by supporting mentee with answering specific workplace-related questions or helping with the accomplishment of practical abandonments.

The following figure shows an example of an efficient mentoring partnership including also KT which we use in our projects.

Experience and expertise is necessary in the mentoring as well as being moderately extraverted. In the relation with the mentee, motivation and responsively is required. The mentee needs to be ready for professional development, open to learn and accept feedback. Time and initiative are necessary too.

The company can have benefits from mentoring by a quick introduction of the mentee into formal and informal company structures and demands, facilitating a deliberate, systematic and smooth transfer of technical or internal knowledge, opportunities to shape the workforce of the future in an international, deliberate way to meet company strategic goals and objectives, training of social competence of the mentee and the mentor.

Mentees have the opportunity:

- to meet with a trusted person to enter into a work place quickly and to cope with initial problems to discuss and resolve emerging job problems of genuine nature and in relation to the individual needs,
- to learn setting realistic goals and achieving them,
- to acquire new skills and enhance their skills and thus their future career opportunities and prospects in the future through the KT from the mentor,
- to build relationships or interactions allowing them to secure, maintain and advance in the job choosing a way that corresponds to the work routines and social actions of other employees,
- to receive (and contribute to) natural support, meaning: booming linked to existing social supports in the work environment.

For the mentors the training means the enhancement of their leading and counselling skills, development of their role within the company, possibility to share their professional experiences with others, exchange with other mentors by using, e.g., a web-based system [19] to support mentoring (WBMCS see part 3 of this paper).

In connection to the workplace fellows (team), the mentor has to inform and actively involve them with regard to the mentee and the various aspects of the mentoring process and its goals prior to the arrival of a mentee and constantly thereafter. Apart from knowledge transfer, communication with the team must include building solidarity, empathy and preparedness to actively take over responsibilities.

Additional duties of the mentor include: informing and actively involving together with the job coach the employer on the outcome of the mentoring process and the performance of the mentees. From the very beginning onwards, it is crucial to actively engage the employer into the mission and the various aspects of the mentoring process and its goals. The role of a mentor should include also building a positive outcome primed relationship between all involved, setting objectives/action plans, supporting organisation innovative changes and retention of

qualified staff, recognising success, empowering/encouraging/motivating people with special needs, formulating expectations for all involved.

In the following, we present the two types of mentoring, informal and formal ones:

Informal mentoring aspects:
- Goals of the relationship are not completely specified
- Outcomes cannot be measured in total
- The process of KT cannot be explicitly described and it is based on the ability and willing for this process
- Access is limited and can be exclusive
- Mentors and mentees are often selected on the basis of personal chemistry, which means an initial connection or attraction between them
- Mentoring lasts a long time
- The organisation benefits indirectly, as the focus is exclusively on the mentee.

Formal mentoring aspects:
- Goals are established from the beginning by the organisation, mentors and mentees
- Outcomes are measured
- Knowledge which has to be transferred is known at the beginning
- Access is open to all who meet the criteria established by the organisation for the corresponding mentoring program
- Mentors and mentees are paired based on compatibility
- Organisation and employees can benefit directly.

Mentors need to be strongly focused, principled and able to develop empathy with the perspectives of others. To be a mentor especially requires having:

A. Social Competences (particularly interest, motivation, awareness, (verbal and non-verbal) communication, aptitude, empathy and engagement skills).
B. Professional Competences (responsibility standards in knowledge and skill).
C. Operating Competences according to ethical and professional standards and to know the boundaries when engaging with mentees.

In Europe and elsewhere, due to internationalisation, intercultural knowledge and competence in social and employment settings become more and more essential [8]. Intercultural competence does not refer to a set of methods and techniques with which one can change the own actions as culturally more appropriate [11]. It refers to a "holistic" aptitude and competence which is realised at all significant levels of the mentoring process and on top pays special attention to features like e.g. language, wordings and modes of expression, traditions, value of tolerance, legislations, religion, gender, nutrition individual time management and others.

The mentor-mentee relationship can be challenged by cultural diversity. Mentors can be trained to face such challenges successfully and with sufficient respect, tolerance and understanding, but avoidance of simple fraternisation and to transfer cultural knowledge to the mentees.

3   ICT Support of Mentoring and KT in a Community of Practice

We decided to support the training, mentoring and the KT process in two of our projects which we will describe in the next part of the apper through an ICT-based approach, a web-based one (WBMCS) allowing mentors, DC and mentees to learn on-line, to communicate and collaborate, and to transfer and share knowledge. Social media, particularly based on Web 2.0, i.e., media which supports social interactions and social KT, can be used to develop such systems. Social media can take many different forms, including internet forums, weblogs and wikis [26].

The technical skills needed to use social media are rather low. Blog software, for example, can replace sophisticated and costly content management systems. It enables content providers (reporters, writers, educators) to concentrate on their content without bothering too much about the underlying technicalities. It is even faster and less demanding to communicate through social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and others. Another important feature of such applications and "spaces" is the decreasing differences, such as the one between teachers and taught, between formal and informal learning processes, between education and knowledge transfer. This gives rise to new integrate and world-wide forms of learning, e.g., in Communities of Practice (CoPs). Here, a community based on shared interests, learns in a community of equals (content wise, experience wise and truth assuring, however, non-equal participants) by exchanging expertise and transferring knowledge without building a hierarchy, because any of the participants is considered expert in a particular field, teacher and taught at the same time. A low-cost and easy access virtual room to accommodate formal and informal learning practices, group collaboration and the gathering and exchanging of learning materials might be realised in an e-Learning environment based on the social media tool TikiWiki CMS Groupware.

Web-based supported mentoring has a number of benefits including:

- Provision of a 24 hour access of saved knowledge, for training material and communication
- Accessible anywhere with internet availability
- Provision of a platform even if face-to-face communication is not possible
- Learning assessment and progress monitoring of the mentor-mentee relationship.

One important activity for the successful management of knowledge transfer within the mentoring process supported by a CoP is to define common goals for this process in advance. The goals have to be identified and agreed by all members. Other aspects are trust and the depth of relationships. Face-to-face interaction and socialisation processes consolidate the relations between members and group membership. Trust is important for knowledge sharing and development in a virtual team or virtual CoP and this develops primarily through face-to-face interactions. So we started the mentoring in our next described projects with face-to-face sessions.

An ICT supporting mentoring approach accounts for the varying learning abilities of students and overcomes the limitations in time or space etc. of traditional training environments which are restricted to rules in order to adequately fine tune a group to pre-defined criteria. The WBMCS, when adequately designed, can reduce the limitations of the classroom and allow the learner to work at his or her own space, speed and depth with structured support from both, the educators and the other learners.

However, for quality reasons and outcome value, traditional elements of monitoring/mentoring have to be affiliated. Experience from other projects demonstrates the need for a constant presence of experienced and qualified mentors in the WBMCS. A trust relationship has to be established online, if the WBMCS will be used in the project on a regular basis by the mentors and mentees. The WBMCS should support the motivation and retain students in the learning process. The WBMCS should be used in a context so that personal issues, which are not suitable for the online environment, do not become accessible for all. The WBMCS should support real mentoring and not be understood as a supervisory tool.

4 Examples

IBB 2 (Integrated Care Taking http://www.lebenshilfe-guv.at/unsere_dienste/ eu_projekte/ibb_2_integrative_behindertenbetreuung) is an European Leonardo innovation transfer project aimed to support people with disabilities to entry and to be successfully integrated into professional life through DC and the mentoring approach. In this project, the main KT process to the DCs will be done by the project partners coming from five European countries and who trained the DC. DCs will transfer their knowledge to mentors during the training in all partner countries. So the task for the DC in the process of mentoring on the job of people with special needs (i.e. disabilities like in the IBB2 project - www.ibb2.com, senior requirements, migration background, etc.) is to transparently instruct and enable mentors acting for

- social inclusion and integration of people with special needs
- active participation of them according to their individual ability, character, temperament and talent development in line with general rights plus sustainable cultural need developments or mission statements (e.g. EUROPE 2020 visions) keeping the awareness of the employers' and employing institution's interests for contributing to social cohesion and respective values in society

The training of DC and mentors supported by a WBMCS prototype takes place by using a blended learning approach, i.e. starting with face-to-face training and using also e-Learning. For mentoring, we will use both methods: informal and formal ones. We use TikiWiki for our WBMCS prototype in the IBB2 project. This WBMCS prototype supports the following processes in a Community of Practice (www.ibb2.com):

- Training of the DC and mentors
- KT from DC to mentors and from mentors to mentees
- Mentoring process including also mentee learning.

The project team encourages the CoP members to use particularly the weblogs and forums supported by the portal which can contribute to transfer also tacit knowledge.
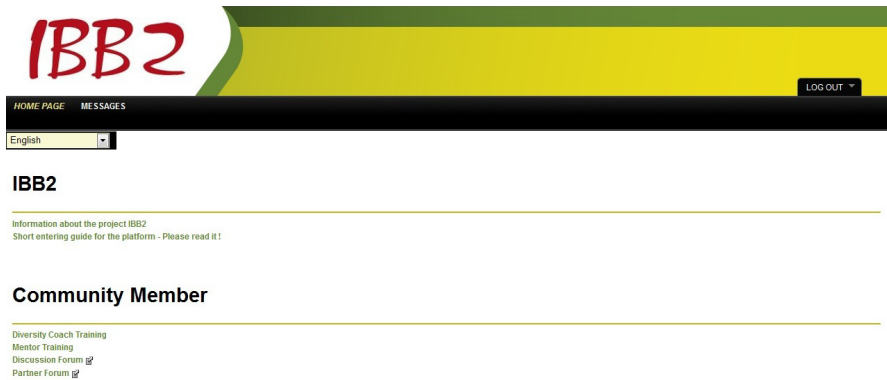

Fig. 2 IBB2 WBMCS
Source: www.ibb2.com

Training material is available online in the WBMCS, but in addition, a discussion forum for each module enables learners and trainers/experts to exchange and add ideas to the environment. This allows learners to provide feedback (anonymously, if desired) to the experts. It also enables them to pose queries to which other participants or the experts can answer. All participants are able to see the initial queries and the discussion stream of answers from other participants and the instructors.

Another EU on-going innovation transfer Leonardo project is Net Knowing 2.0: Web 2.0 Technologies and Net Collaborating Practices to support learning in European SMEs (www.netknowing.com). One of the aims of the project Net Knowing 2.0 is to help SMEs to turn their daily work into a source of corporate learning for all their employees and to support KT by introducing a mentoring approach. The integration of the e-Learning in the daily working life will be facilitated, as well as the opportunity for companies to build their own formative resources including knowledge basis. In the first year the project partners discussed KT elements that can be done from other projects. Then they discussed with SMEs about efficient using of informal learning also within a mentoring process. The goal of mentoring staff from SMEs is to improve job performance by increasing employee's capability to manage their own performance emphasing on trust, experience, and supervision, to facilitate performance and KT in the organisation, to support retention and leadership development. The mentoring approach is not used within SMEs in Germany, so a workshop has been organised to discuss with

representatives of SMEs some tactics for implementing a mentoring program in their companies. One possible approach is that experienced at the Virtual Academy Brandenburg. The coaches and mentors are external persons who should support the sustainable development and advancement of strategic competences of SMEs through informal and organizational learning. Potential learning consultants can be trained to act as mentors. Two SMEs decided to try this concept and another three decided to use mentors which are staff in the company. In this case the KT will be very beneficial for the mentee in the own career but and also for the mentor. The mentor could have same benefits from the mentee and at the same time gains leadership skills by the act of mentoring. It is supposed that both individuals developed skills within this sponsored KT process and the company is providing a way for KT before an employee's retires or leaves the organisation.

At the workshop, SMEs from Germany proposed a route map for the successful deployment of a coaching and mentoring program within the specific context of a SME environment:

- Putting the specific working environment into context.
- Researching the role played by the organisational culture or "climate" in the development, maintenance and success of the SME.
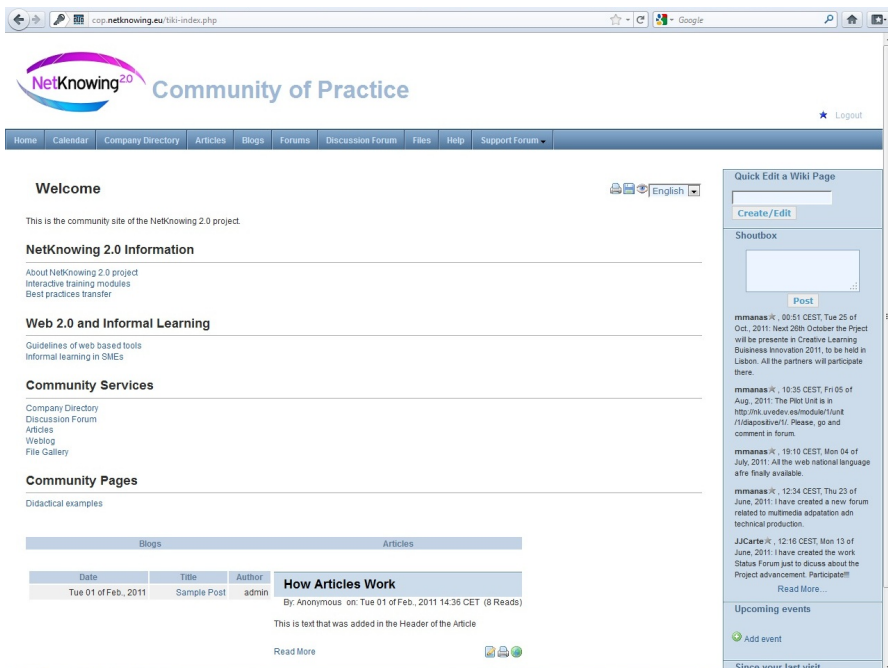- Determining real qualification needs of the staff before starting the mentoring process.

Fig. 3 Net Knowing 2.0 WBMCS
Source: http://cop.netknowing.eu

- Determining the knowledge gaps and which of them can be minimised by a mentoring system.
- Demonstrating that a mentoring intervention has real benefits in this context and not being bureaucratic.
- Being a process based on trust, experience, and supervision and informal learning.
- Identifying barriers to effective mentoring/coaching.
- Determining issues that need to be incorporated within the mentoring/coaching intervention, if it is to be successful.
- Qualifying coaches and mentors for different forms of working and learning.
- If necessary, using big companies for delivering mentors (learning consultants).

A first version of a WBMCS prototype supporting KT and mentoring within a CoP has been developed by using TikiWiki.

5 Conclusions

Mentoring, particularly in combination with diversity can be an excellent tool for retention, progress and integration of staff in a company/organisation if implement appropriately. It is a solution that can meet the needs of individuals of all ages and all levels in their work life and career. Additionally mentoring provides an efficient way for KT particularly supporting skill shortage and as the older generations start in their retirement. By supporting mentoring within informal and formal approaches, ICT methods should be blended with traditional face-to-face ones.

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