Reinventing Mentorship: From Traditional One-on-One Mentoring to Self-Mentoring

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ABSTRACT

In an era where traditional mentoring faces challenges such as limited mentor availability, time constraints, and high implementation costs, self-mentoring emerges as a sustainable and empowering alternative for professional development. This concept paper introduces self-mentoring as a self-directed approach that enables individuals to take control of their learning and career progression. Drawing on its origins in healthcare and academia, the paper highlights the adaptability of self-mentoring principles—self-reflection, goal-setting, resource utilization, and continuous reflection—for diverse professional contexts. The proposed framework offers a cyclical process encompassing self-assessment, goal-setting, action planning, and reflection, promoting a flexible, scalable, and inclusive model for continuous development. While self-mentoring empowers employees with autonomy and independence, it also requires high levels of self-discipline and organizational support. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrating self-mentoring into organizational development strategies and identifies avenues for future research to enhance its applicability across various industries. This model holds promise for fostering lifelong learning, resilience, and proactive career management in today's dynamic work environments.

Keywords: Self-mentoring, professional development, self-directed learning, lifelong learning, organizational development

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of professional development, traditional mentoring has long been a cornerstone for skill enhancement and career growth [4], [18], [20]. However, despite its recognized value, traditional mentoring is not without challenges. Many organizations struggle to find enough qualified mentors [6], [8], [14], [25], which can make establishing and maintaining effective mentoring relationships difficult. Time constraints [16], [26] and organizational limitations [16], [22], [25] often stand in the way, while the high costs associated with implementing formal mentoring programs [19], [23] can be prohibitive. Furthermore, in large or fast-paced work environments, the demands of establishing and sustaining a one-on-one mentor-mentee dynamic can seem almost impractical. As a result, many employees may find themselves without the guidance they need, leading to what can be described as mentorship gaps. This issue is further compounded by the mismatch between the availability of mentors and the growing need for mentoring [7], [24], particularly in diverse or rapidly expanding organizations. This makes it even harder to provide timely, individualized support to every employee who could benefit from it.

In response to these challenges, professionals are increasingly seeking new and innovative ways to develop their skills, keep up with industry changes, and pursue career growth [27] without being restricted by the limitations of traditional mentoring. Consequently, self-mentoring has emerged as a fresh and flexible alternative, offering a structured path for self-development and empowering individuals to take control of their own learning and career progression [9], [12]. Unlike traditional mentoring, which relies on finding a suitable mentor, self-mentoring enables employees to steer their growth regardless of access to formal mentoring programs. It fosters self-awareness, independence, and the confidence to face career challenges head-on, encouraging a sense of autonomy and control over one's professional journey [5], [9], [14]. Thus, self-mentoring not only addresses the

gaps left by traditional mentoring but also aligns with the growing need for more personalized and flexible development options.

Building on this, the aim of this paper is to introduce and propose a framework for self-mentoring as a sustainable and empowering tool for professional development, one that transcends the limitations of traditional mentoring. Originally designed to support the continuous growth of educators and university faculty (Carr, 2011), self-mentoring is a versatile model that can be adapted to a variety of work settings and career stages. By exploring the core principles of self-mentoring—such as self-reflection, goal-setting, and maximizing the use of available resources—this paper highlights its potential as a universal tool for employee development. Furthermore, it outlines a conceptual framework for effectively implementing self-mentoring within organizations to promote continuous learning and career advancement. This proposed framework is structured yet flexible, aiming to enable professionals to take proactive steps toward skill-building, career planning, and personal growth.

SELF-MENTORING

A. Clarifying the Concept

Self-mentoring is defined as a self-directed, proactive approach to professional development in which individuals take charge of their learning and growth (Carr, Pastor, & Levesque, 2015; Darling & Ann, 1986). Rather than depending on a traditional mentor-mentee relationship, self-mentoring enables individuals to set their own career and personal development goals, seek out relevant resources, and consistently reflect on their progress. The absence of a formal mentor does not hinder growth; instead, self-mentoring empowers individuals to become both the mentor and the mentee. By encouraging self-awareness, independent learning, and personal accountability (Beckford, 2022), self-mentoring fosters the development of skills and competencies essential for career advancement and professional success. This model particularly benefits those who may not have access to formal mentoring opportunities, offering a structured way to take ownership of one's growth.

B. Origins and Evolution

The concept of self-mentoring has a rich history, evolving to meet the needs of different professional contexts over time. The idea was first introduced in 1986 by Darling and Ann, who saw its value in helping nurses adapt to the rapidly changing demands of the healthcare field. In an environment where mentoring opportunities were scarce, self-mentoring was developed as a practical way for nurses to independently enhance their skills, learn to navigate their complex work environments, and function effectively in challenging situations. Darling and Ann’s work recognized that, in the absence of structured mentorship, professionals must take ownership of their growth to thrive (Darling & Ann, 1986).

Years later, in 2011, Carr expanded on this foundational idea and adapted self-mentoring for the academic context [9]. Faculty members are expected to maintain high performance in multiple areas—balancing teaching, research, administration, and service—all of which require continuous learning and skill-building. Given that formal mentoring programs are often limited or inaccessible, Carr’s model of self-mentoring emerged as a flexible and empowering approach to career development. The model promoted self-reflection, personal goal-setting, and proactive learning, giving educators a tool to manage their professional growth without relying on an external mentor.

Yet, while self-mentoring has been introduced and practiced in both healthcare [15] and educational settings [9], the core principles of self-mentoring extend far beyond these sectors. The key skills involved (i.e. self-reflection, goal-setting, and effective use of resources) [5], [9], [13] are critical for success in nearly any professional environment. Today's workplaces are becoming more complex, whether due to the rise of remote work, fast-paced technological change, or the need to address a diverse and evolving workforce. Employees across various industries, whether in corporate settings, government roles, creative industries, or healthcare, encounter challenges that could be better managed with a self-mentoring approach.

By expanding self-mentoring beyond academia and healthcare, we allow for its principles to be universally applied, offering a tool that can help professionals in any field take control of their own growth and navigate

their careers more effectively. It's about providing a pathway to develop essential skills, address gaps, and seek out opportunities, all while adapting to the individual's specific context and needs [9]. And in a world where traditional mentorship may not always be feasible or accessible, self-mentoring steps in as a dynamic, adaptable, and critical approach to professional development—one that empowers individuals to build their own path to success, no matter their field or stage of career.

C. Core Principles

The three foundational principles of self-mentoring are designed to create a holistic approach to self-driven career and personal development. These principles can be effectively applied across various roles, industries, and career stages:

1) Self-Reflection: At the core of self-mentoring lies the critical practice of regular self-reflection. This process enables individuals to continually evaluate their strengths, areas for improvement, aspirations, and overall progress in their professional journey. Research in various contexts, such as education, healthcare, and corporate leadership, underscores the importance of self-reflection. In educational settings, self-reflection is a foundational element of self-regulated learning, where students are encouraged to reflect on their understanding, skills, and progress to enhance their academic performance [1]. In healthcare, self-reflection is crucial for professionals like nurses and doctors, who must evaluate their practice, decision-making, and patient interactions to improve care delivery [17]. Corporate leadership studies also emphasize self-reflection as a tool for leaders to assess their management style, interpersonal effectiveness, and decision-making processes [3]. This helps in building emotional intelligence, enhancing team performance, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within organizations.

Within the self-mentoring context, these principles translate into a framework for personal development. Self-reflection allows self-mentors to take an honest inventory of their competencies, analyze setbacks, and develop strategies for overcoming obstacles—all without the direct guidance of a mentor. This critical self-assessment supports a proactive and adaptable approach to professional growth, ensuring that individuals continually refine their skills and align their actions with their evolving career goals.

2) Goal Setting and Action Planning: A key aspect of self-mentoring is the ability to establish clear, measurable objectives and to create actionable plans to achieve them. Unlike the traditional mentoring approach where goals may be guided by a mentor, self-mentoring encourages individuals to take full responsibility for their career aspirations [5]. Action planning allows for goals to be broken down into achievable steps, fostering a sense of direction and purpose. In a corporate setting, for example, an employee might set goals for developing leadership skills or mastering a new technology, then plan concrete actions such as attending workshops, undertaking projects, or seeking peer feedback.

3) Resource Utilization and Networking: Self-mentoring promotes an active search for learning opportunities [11], [21] and professional networks. This includes leveraging online resources (e.g., webinars, courses, podcasts), connecting with peers or professional communities, and utilizing in-house development programs. For example, a healthcare professional might engage in self-mentoring by joining professional associations, subscribing to medical journals, or participating in online training. The ability to effectively find and use these resources is a critical skill that enhances one's knowledge and supports continuous learning. Networking, both within and outside one's industry, also allows for gaining diverse perspectives and potential opportunities for career growth.

These core principles enable self-mentoring to be a dynamic, adaptable, and individualized approach to development. While they originated in the academic context, their utility extends to various professional landscapes, ensuring that all employees, regardless of their work setting, can take an active role in shaping their careers and overcoming the challenges that come with self-guided learning.

Expanding the self-mentoring model into different workplace contexts acknowledges the increasingly complex and self-directed nature of modern careers, where traditional one-on-one mentoring may not always be accessible or effective. Self-mentoring offers an inclusive and empowering path for professionals to achieve continuous

development and adapt to ever-changing work demands.

BENEFITS OF SELF-MENTORING FOR EMPLOYEES

A. Empowerment and Independence

Self-mentoring empowers employees to take proactive control over their own development and career progression. This empowerment leads to increased autonomy and self-reliance, which are essential skills in a rapidly changing work environment. By fostering self-awareness, self-mentoring encourages employees to actively reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations, allowing them to set personalized learning and career goals [10]. This approach cultivates a growth mindset, where individuals are motivated to continuously improve and seek out new learning opportunities. The critical advantage of self-mentoring lies in the shift of responsibility; rather than being passively guided by a mentor, individuals become the drivers of their own development. This shift can lead to increased job satisfaction and a sense of ownership over one's career path.

However, empowerment through self-mentoring may not be universally achievable for all employees. It requires a certain level of self-discipline, self-motivation, and confidence, which some individuals may initially lack. There is also the potential for employees to set unrealistic goals or misalign their development efforts without external guidance, underscoring the need for organizations to provide resources and initial support to ensure employees are effectively self-mentoring.

B. Flexibility and Accessibility

One of the key benefits of self-mentoring is its inherent flexibility and accessibility. Unlike formal mentoring programs, which often require scheduled meetings and access to a qualified mentor, self-mentoring is a fluid process that can be integrated into an employee's routine. This makes it particularly beneficial for remote workers, employees with unpredictable schedules, and those working in non-traditional settings where access to mentoring may be limited. Self-mentoring allows individuals to learn at their own pace and on their own terms, adapting their goals and strategies as their needs and circumstances evolve (Carr et al., 2017).

While this flexibility is a strength, it can also present challenges. The absence of structured oversight means that individuals may struggle to maintain consistency in their self-mentoring efforts. Employees must exercise self-discipline and time management skills to ensure they are making regular progress toward their development goals. Additionally, the flexibility of self-mentoring requires a high degree of self-awareness to avoid distractions or competing priorities that can hinder personal development efforts (Addo, 2024). Thus, while self-mentoring offers unmatched accessibility, it demands a level of commitment and structure that not all employees may find easy to sustain.

C. Adaptability to Learning Styles

Self-mentoring is highly adaptable to different learning preferences, which is a significant advantage over traditional one-size-fits-all development programs. Some employees may prefer structured online courses or formal study, while others might learn best through hands-on experiences, networking, or reflective writing. The flexibility to tailor self-mentoring approaches allows individuals to align their development activities with their preferred learning styles (Carr et al., 2017), thereby increasing engagement and the likelihood of achieving their goals.

However, the success of this adaptability depends on the individual's ability to recognize and leverage their learning style effectively (Addo, 2024). Without adequate knowledge of how to learn best, employees may default to less effective methods or fail to explore diverse approaches to self-improvement. For instance, an employee who is unfamiliar with networking may miss out on opportunities to connect with peers and industry experts who could enhance their self-mentoring experience. Therefore, while self-mentoring supports learning style adaptability, organizations may need to provide training or resources to help employees identify and maximize their unique learning preferences.

D. Scalability for Organizations

From an organizational perspective, self-mentoring presents a scalable solution for professional development. Traditional mentoring programs can be resource-intensive, requiring the allocation of time, qualified mentors, and administrative oversight. By contrast, self-mentoring is self-directed and can be adopted by any number of employees simultaneously. This scalability is particularly useful for large organizations or those looking to empower their entire workforce without the limitations of mentor availability.

Nevertheless, scalability comes with its own challenges. While self-mentoring reduces the need for direct organizational intervention, companies must still play a supportive role. Organizations must create environments where self-mentoring is encouraged [10], and employees have access to tools, resources, and support systems that enable their self-mentoring journeys. This may include access to online learning platforms, development workshops, and communities of practice that facilitate peer learning. Without organizational support, self-mentoring may not achieve its full potential, and employees might lack the resources needed to set appropriate goals or access relevant learning materials.

THE PROCESS AND FRAMEWORK OF SELF-MENTORING

A. Step-by-Step Process

1) Self-Assessment: The first step of self-mentoring is self-assessment, where employees take an honest and thorough evaluation of their current skills, experiences, strengths, and areas for improvement. This reflective step not only helps employees identify their development needs but also enables them to understand their work environment and professional context [3]. It is crucial for individuals to explore their interests, career aspirations, and the competencies required for advancement. Self-assessment is also an opportunity to recognize existing skills that can be leveraged for future growth and to pinpoint gaps that need to be addressed.

Critically, self-assessment requires a level of self-awareness and objectivity that may be challenging for some employees. Without the guidance of a traditional mentor, there is a risk of either underestimating or overestimating one's abilities. To enhance the accuracy of self-assessment, employees can use tools such as personality tests, feedback from colleagues, and performance reviews. However, the process demands honesty and openness to critique, which can be uncomfortable but is necessary for meaningful growth. Additionally, self-assessment must be revisited periodically as goals and professional contexts evolve over time.

2) Goal Setting: Following self-assessment, the next step is goal-setting, where employees set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals. These goals should be well-defined, actionable, and aligned with the employee's career aspirations. The SMART framework helps employees break down their development needs into manageable objectives, distinguishing between short-term and long-term goals [2]. Short-term goals might involve improving specific skills, such as communication or time management, while long-term goals might relate to career progression, such as aspiring to a leadership role or acquiring advanced certifications.

The critical advantage of SMART goals lies in their clarity and structure, which can motivate employees to take actionable steps toward their development. However, without external guidance, employees may struggle to set realistic or appropriately challenging goals. Setting overly ambitious goals can lead to frustration and burnout, while setting goals that are too easy can limit potential growth. To mitigate this, employees should seek feedback from peers, supervisors, or industry professionals when setting their goals to ensure that they are relevant, achievable, and aligned with both individual and organizational needs.

3) Resource Identification and Action Planning: Once goals are set, the next phase involves resource identification and action planning**.** This step requires employees to identify the resources and tools they need to achieve their development goals [12]. Resources can be varied and should be tailored to the individual's learning preferences and professional context. For instance, self-directed learners might benefit from online courses, webinars, books, or podcasts, while experiential learners might prefer peer networks, mentorship communities, or hands-on workshops. Practical experiences, such as taking on new projects, attending conferences, or

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4) participating in job shadowing, can also provide valuable learning opportunities.

The development of a detailed action plan is crucial to mapping out the steps required to achieve the set goals. This plan should outline specific tasks, timelines, and milestones to track progress. A well-structured action plan helps employees stay on course and ensures that learning activities are directly linked to goal attainment.

A potential challenge in this stage is ensuring that resources are not only available but also appropriate and effective for achieving the goals. Employees may struggle to find credible sources or may not know how to best utilize certain resources. Moreover, creating an action plan requires strong organizational skills and time management. Without clear timelines and deadlines, self-mentoring can lose momentum, leading to inconsistent progress. Therefore, employees may benefit from developing strategies to hold themselves accountable, such as setting regular check-ins, peer reviews, or tracking their milestones through digital tools.

5) Continuous Reflection and Adjustment: The final and ongoing step of self-mentoring is continuous reflection and adjustment**.** Self-reflection involves regularly reviewing progress, evaluating learning experiences, and determining how well the action plan aligns with the employee's evolving personal and professional goals. This reflective practice encourages employees to critically analyze their development journey, recognizing achievements and identifying areas that require further attention. It also allows for an iterative approach, where the action plan can be modified to better align with any changes in goals or priorities.

Reflection is central to self-mentoring because it reinforces learning and supports adaptive development [3]. However, it is not without its challenges. The practice of reflection requires discipline, self-awareness, and the ability to critically assess one's experiences and progress. For some employees, consistent reflection may be difficult to maintain, especially if they are not accustomed to self-directed learning. Furthermore, there is a risk of becoming overly self-critical, which can hinder progress rather than support it. To combat this, employees should aim to balance constructive self-evaluation with positive reinforcement of achievements.

Additionally, the adjustment of goals and action plans should be strategic. While it is necessary to modify goals to reflect changing circumstances, employees must be careful not to abandon goals prematurely or to alter their action plans too frequently, as this can impede progress and lead to a lack of consistency. Seeking feedback and periodically consulting career development frameworks or role models can provide an external perspective to enhance the effectiveness of the self-mentoring process.

PROPOSED SELF-MENTORING MODEL

Based on the process, this paper introduces a cyclical self-mentoring model designed to guide individuals in their self-directed development journey. The model as shown in Fig. 1 begins with self-discovery, where individuals assess their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This step helps them identify personal aspirations and the skills or competencies required to achieve their goals, forming the foundation for self-mentoring.

Fig. 1 Self-Mentoring Model

The next phase is goal definition, where individuals set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals that align with their professional and personal ambitions. This step ensures a structured and focused approach to self-development. Following this is resource alignment, which involves identifying and gathering the necessary resources and tools, such as online courses, professional networks, or practical experiences, to support the achievement of the goals. This phase reflects the proactive nature of self-mentoring. The fourth step, empowered execution, focuses on taking ownership of the action plan. Individuals implement their strategies, monitor their progress, and practice accountability, demonstrating independence and initiative in their learning. The final stage is reflective growth, where individuals engage in regular self-reflection to assess their progress, learn from experiences, and adjust their goals or strategies as needed. This self-mentoring model is not linear; it is a continuous process that loops back to self-discovery as individuals evolve and set new aspirations. This ongoing cycle ensures that self-mentoring remains a dynamic and adaptable approach to personal and professional growth.

CONCLUSION

Self-mentoring offers a unique and powerful model for individuals to take active control of their personal and professional development, distinguishing itself significantly from traditional one-on-one mentoring. Unlike conventional mentoring, where guidance is often provided by an experienced mentor, self-mentoring places the individual at the center of their growth process. This self-directed approach emphasizes developing self-awareness, proactively setting goals, and engaging in continuous reflection—all of which enable individuals to tailor their development path to their unique needs and circumstances [3], [9], [12]. The autonomy and flexibility that self-mentoring offers empower employees to become agile learners, capable of adapting to changes and challenges in dynamic work environments.

A major advantage of self-mentoring over traditional mentoring is its scalability and accessibility. Traditional mentoring requires finding suitable mentors, scheduling regular meetings, and often navigating hierarchical relationships—all of which can be limiting, particularly in large organizations or rapidly changing industries. Self-mentoring eliminates these barriers, providing a development model that is not bound by mentor availability or rigid structures. Individuals can set their own learning pace, choose resources aligned with their preferred learning styles, and adapt their action plans as their careers evolve. This adaptability not only fosters self-reliance but also encourages a more sustainable, lifelong approach to learning and growth.

However, while self-mentoring provides unmatched flexibility and empowerment, it does come with challenges that require self-discipline and commitment. The absence of external guidance means that individuals must be able to accurately assess their development needs, set appropriate goals, and maintain consistent progress—all of which demand a high level of self-motivation. This makes self-mentoring a model better suited to those who are willing and able to take ownership of their learning journey. Additionally, while it promotes independence, self-mentoring can also benefit from peer support, feedback mechanisms, and access to organizational resources to guide development efforts effectively.

In summary, self-mentoring is an innovative approach to professional development that overcomes the constraints of traditional one-on-one mentoring. Its focus on self-directed growth, flexibility, and adaptability provides a practical and scalable solution for individuals and organizations alike. By promoting self-awareness, proactive goal-setting, and ongoing reflection, self-mentoring empowers professionals to navigate their career paths more effectively, fostering resilience, skill development, and a proactive attitude towards lifelong learning. However, for self-mentoring to be truly effective, both individuals and organizations must recognize the need for support structures that encourage continuous learning and provide resources for effective self-assessment and goal achievement. With the right mindset and tools, self-mentoring stands as a sustainable and impactful model for career and personal development in today's ever-evolving professional landscape.

While the concept of self-mentoring is promising, future research is essential to validate and expand upon its application across diverse work contexts. One avenue for future studies could be to explore the effectiveness of self-mentoring in different industries, such as healthcare, technology, or public services, to better understand how the model can be tailored to meet sector-specific needs. Additionally, longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of self-mentoring on career development, employee engagement, and job satisfaction would

provide valuable insights into its sustainability and outcomes.

Research could also investigate the role of organizational support in enhancing self-mentoring practices. This includes studying how companies can create environments that encourage self-mentoring, the impact of digital platforms and tools on self-directed learning, and the integration of self-mentoring into broader talent development frameworks. Understanding how self-mentoring interacts with formal mentoring programs would also be beneficial, particularly in examining how a blended model might maximize professional development outcomes.

Lastly, future studies should focus on identifying the specific skills and attributes required for successful self-mentoring, such as self-discipline, goal-setting strategies, and self-assessment abilities. Developing training programs or resources that enhance these skills could further support individuals embarking on their self-mentoring journey. By investigating these areas, researchers can contribute to refining the self-mentoring model and developing best practices that make this approach more accessible and effective for a broader range of professionals.

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