

"C-Suite Strategies: Which Works Need Mentoring? The Ones Who Don't Want It."

A study shows that a fundamental flaw of optional mentorship programs is that the wrong people sign up

By SUZANNE OLIVER

Companies have a problem

when they make workplace mentorship programs optional: The workers who would benefit most are less likely to sign up.

That is the conclusion of a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. "Where we might think that those who are likely to benefit the most from mentoring are going to raise their hands and choose to participate, we find that it is actually the opposite," says Jason Sandvik, assistant professor at the Freeman School of Business at Tulane University, and one of the study's four co-authors. "Those who are likely to benefit the most from mentorship are those who opted out."

In the study, researchers followed two groups of newly hired sales agents at a company that markets telephone, internet and television services. In the first group, half of the sales agents were assigned mentors and half were not. In the second group, new hires could choose whether they wanted a mentor. But of those who requested a mentor, only half actually were given mentors.

Mentors were instructed to share product knowledge, discuss their own sales tactics and practice the company's sales protocol with protégés.

When mentoring was required, the mentored employees generated 19% more daily revenue during the first two months than the nonmentored employees, and their outperformance persisted over the six months of the study.

In the group where mentoring was optional, outcomes were markedly different. Simply put, the gains associated with required mentorship all but disappeared when employees were given the option of opting out. New hires who asked for and received a mentor did not perform

significantly better than those who asked for but *did not* receive a mentor. And those who opted out completely performed significantly worse than those who asked for but did not receive a mentor. The weakest performers, as suggested by the results—those who would have likely benefited most from mentorship—

were the least likely to ask for assistance.

The study's authors say the research indicates that those who asked for a mentor had the ambition and skills to succeed regardless of whether they received mentorship.

The takeaway, says W. Brad Johnson, professor of psychology

in the department of leadership, ethics and law at the U.S. Naval Academy, is that managers should set an expectation that *all* employees participate in mentorship programs.

While the study was not able to predict who might opt out of mentorship, there are many reasons people choose not to participate, says Prof. Johnson, who wasn't involved in the study. They may suspect there are no mentors with whom they would feel comfortable for cultural or gender reasons. They may feel that they aren't good enough to be mentored, or that they are too vulnerable in a mentorship relationship, or that they don't have the extra time it might require. They might also think that asking for assistance signals weakness, the study suggests.

That reluctance to ask for help can negatively affect performance and career advancement. Requiring mentorship "lifted people who were otherwise going to fall behind their peers," says study co-author Christopher T. Stanton, an associate professor at Harvard Business School.