

Chapter 7.7

Bridging the 15 Million Person Mentoring Gap

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter introduces the history and evolution of iMentor, a NYC-based youth mentoring organization that pioneered the use of guided e-mail communication to enhance the in-person youth mentoring model, and continues to leverage its model and lessons learned to help other groups improve or start up their own mentoring programs. It illustrates how the organization has effectively used technology to add flexibility and structure in its NYC Mentoring Program, engaging a new “class” of program participants: “busy” professionals as mentors and mentees from some of the most economically and geographically isolated communities. It also describes how the organization transformed itself to meet a national demand for its programming by developing and licensing its own mentoring technology platform, iMentor Interactive. The author hopes that by reviewing the experience of iMentor, more mentoring and youth organizations at-large would embrace a thoughtful infusion of technology to positively impact the lives of people they serve. The author, however, strongly believes that the sector must be diligent about adhering to many of the best practices of a good, in-person mentoring program, including screening and monitoring of program participants, providing structure and ongoing assistance.

BACKGROUND

In 1999, John Griffin, a hedge fund manager in New York City (NYC), was looking at the impact of technology and how access to information was

bringing tremendous wealth and opportunities. He was also thinking about the growing segment of population that was being left out because they didn't have access to technology. Around the same time, he had been providing scholarships to students in the South Bronx, a community he could literally see as he looked outside of his

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offices in Midtown Manhattan, and he began to think how close, yet far away the two neighborhoods were. Not wanting to be just a donor, he was informally mentoring the students he was sponsoring for scholarships, and he was finding himself not able to visit as often as he wanted. To compensate for in-person interactions, he began to email his mentees from his blackberry to check in.

Griffin is over six feet tall, impeccably dressed in dress shirts and suits. Students looked and talked differently from him, but he found that over email they were less intimidated. He also noticed that it was easier to talk online about things that were awkward to discuss in person. They could carry on a conversation in a thoughtful, ongoing manner, over time, as in discussions on college and career plans. He began to see that email communication, if carefully structured and monitored, could become a powerful youth development tool.

Griffin recruited and funded two public interest lawyers, Richard Buery and Matt Klein, to create a pilot program to test his theory about the potential of online mentoring. iMentor first began operation with 49 students at a single school in the South Bronx. Over the last nine years, iMentor has grown to serve more than 1,000 new students annually and has matched and supported over 6,000 mentor-mentee pairs (12,000 participants), partnering with more than thirty schools and after-school programs located in some of the most underserved communities of New York City.

In 2004, ongoing program evaluations of iMentor's NYC program proved that its mentoring model had the same positive impact on program participants as traditional mentoring models, with additional impact on students with regards to academic and career success. With a waiting list of mentors and schools interested in joining the program, iMentor was ready to grow to scale in New York City. At the same time, iMentor was receiving frequent requests from organizations around the country looking to add iMentor's innovative mentoring model to their programming.

iMentor had no effective way of responding to these requests for technical assistance and began to investigate how it could best serve the national mentoring field.

To address the national need for technical resources specific to mentoring and to support its NYC growth, iMentor rebuilt the web-based tools that were originally created for the local program, including the front-end communication tools used by mentor-mentee pairs to structure their relationships and the extensive tools for the staff to effectively manage the program on the back-end. The result was an online platform that is informed by all of the expertise iMentor developed over its first five years, incorporates the best-of web-innovations, and allows any organization to have its own independent, safe and secure mentoring network, providing all the tools and resources needed to run a mentoring program, instantly. iMentor Interactive was launched as a national initiative in September 2007.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Founded in 1999, iMentor developed a new kind of mentoring model, combining mentoring best practices and technology to add flexibility and structure to mentoring relationships. This model allows iMentor to engage a new class of mentors and bring mentoring to the young people who need mentoring the most: those living in isolated, socio-economically underserved communities. iMentor runs two signature programs: a direct-service one-to-one mentoring program in New York City (iMentor NYC) and a national technical assistance program, iMentor Interactive (iMi.)

iMentor's two programs empower each other, providing mutual benefits: 1) iMentor NYC is the laboratory of best practices, as iMentor continues to innovate 2) iMi facilitates the expansion of quality mentoring programs nationally. iMentor continues to deepen its program offerings, develop new curricula and create new support structures

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