Chapter 3
Mentoring Programs as a Basis for Creating Communities of Practices in Tourism

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ABSTRACT

The connection between educational institutions and tourism organizations is of great importance in the time of a turbulent and competitive labor market. The labor market requires employees with knowledge and high skills that can be used in everyday work. Human capital is a building block of a sustainable, competitive, and innovative tourism organization. Retention of employees with key knowledge, experience, and skills and the transfer of that knowledge to new employees, when resources are limited, is becoming of great importance. Mentoring is a learning mechanism where a process of social participation results in the transfer of knowledge and skills. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to suggest a mentoring framework, taking into account the different interested parties: educational institutions, tourism enterprises, mentors, and students. The results of this chapter could be used for improvement of the existing mentoring practice.

INTRODUCTION

The connection between educational institutions and tourism organizations is of great importance in the time of a turbulent and competitive labor market. The labor market requires employees with knowledge and high skills that can be used in everyday work. Human capital is a building block of a sustainable, competitive, and innovative tourism organization. The organization strives to become a knowledge organization, focusing on implementing a variety of projects, methods, and tools to manage knowledge

so that its employees may become so-called knowledge workers. If the goal is to have workers who continuously contribute to the value of the organization, a system of continuous education must be in place.

Knowledge workers have to acquire new key knowledge for their organization. But it is not only about acquiring new knowledge. It is also about obtaining knowledge and skills and being able to use them in everyday work for resolving problems and creating added value.

Experience that is collected through practice and personal development plays a key role. Two situations emerge in tourism organizations. First, employees that work in the organization are faced with a fast-changing environment, new technology, and new processes. The knowledge and skills they have are getting old faster than they did before. The higher intensity of work leaves employees with less time for acquiring new knowledge and experience. Second, after finishing their studies, a large number of students have knowledge but no experience or training. The process of acquiring experience is influenced by many factors, among which time plays a key role. There is a need to find a way to resolve problems faster, and obtain skills and experience in a shorter time. These facts emphasize the importance of a community of practice.

The community of practice is not a new phenomenon since the learning practice has existed for a long time. People have always been learning and sharing their experience through communication and contact with other people. Today communities of practice have become a synonym for sharing and transferring knowledge as well as transferring explicit expertise knowledge into tacit knowledge. They have an impact on different areas of organizational performance such as: decreasing the learning curve of new employees, responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries, reducing rework and preventing the "reinvention of the wheel," and spawning new ideas for products and services (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Educational institutions in the field of tourism have a strong need to ensure that their students will find a way of acquiring practical knowledge and skills from the formal educational systems. This, in turn, has boosted the need to create a community of practice of mentors in tourism organizations. The implementation of mentoring programs has a great impact on the formation of a community of practice where different relationships are formed: mentors-mentors, students-students and students-mentors. Among themselves, mentors share the best practices coming from their work experience, thus improving their own knowledge. The mentor-student relationship results in couching conversation, reflection on students' learning, and development of new knowledge and skills. The student becomes more competent and ready to enter the labor market straight away, creating a high added value for the tourism organization.

To ensure a cohesive and efficient mentoring system it is advisable to have a framework for the implementation of mentoring activities in the tourism enterprise. The framework should take into account activities such as educating mentors on the subject of student mentoring, developing guidelines for students, and analyzing program results and the satisfaction of all interested parties. Introducing such a system could yield the following benefits: shared way of doing things among mentors and students, rapid flow of information among them, transfer of knowledge and experience that is not captured in the formal procedures, and shared awareness of each other's competences, strengths, shortcomings and contributions.

In developing this framework special emphasis should be placed on measuring the quality and effectiveness of such mentoring programs by focusing on certain indicators that measure the success of activities in the mentoring process and its outcomes. The feedback provided by these indicators can be used for improving the mentoring programs – its processes and outcomes – and for benchmarking with other similar projects.

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